

The Mixed Effects of Participant Diversity and Expressive Freedom in Online Peer-to-Peer Problem Solving Communities

Stefânia Ordovás de Almeida ^{a,*} & Utpal M. Dholakia ^b
& José Mauro C. Hernandez ^c & José Afonso Mazzon ^d

^a Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul, Faculdade de Administração, Contabilidade e Economia, Av. Ipiranga, 6681, Prédio 50, Sala 1101.18, Porto Alegre, RS 90619-900, Brazil

^b Rice University, School of Business, 6100 Main Street, Houston, TX 77005-1892, USA

^c Centro Universitário da FEI, Rua Tamandaré, 688, 5º andar, São Paulo, SP 01525-000, Brazil

^d Universidade de São Paulo, Faculdade de Economia, Administração e Contabilidade, Av. Prof. Luciano Gualberto, 908, Sala E-187, Cidade Universitária, São Paulo, SP 05508-010, Brazil

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Abstract

Online peer-to-peer problem solving (P3) communities provide a cost-effective and reliable means of delivering education and service support to customers of complex, frequently evolving products. Through a multi-disciplinary conceptual framework, we examine the roles of diversity perceptions and expressive freedom in affecting learning and social identification of online P3 community participants, and in turn, their effects on the participants' relationship with, and future intentions towards the brand. We test our hypotheses via a structural equation model with survey data obtained from 555 active members of the two largest XBOX online P3 communities in Brazil. Our results reveal that greater perceived diversity facilitates learning but hinders social identification, whereas expressive freedom has positive effects on learning, but no effect on social identification. Social identification fully mediates the effects of the antecedents on outcomes. We also discuss the theoretical contributions and the managerial implications of our findings, and suggest opportunities for future research.

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Introduction

On XBOX 360 Forum, an online community of Microsoft's XBOX video game console, members debate the merits of the newest XBOX features, provide suggestions to Microsoft's designers, and share gaming strategies with each other. Through their participation, they learn how to use the XBOX and play its games more effectively. A 24-year-old online gamer named Ashley joined this online community. Soon after joining, she introduced herself to other members, including her

portrait photograph in the post. Within a few minutes, a fellow Forum member responded, "Why post a picture in your first post? It makes you seem like an attention whore." In response, Ashley posted, "listen dan, not my problem you have issues with women and feel the need to put me down. it's not my fault you don't get laid. didn't your mom ever teach you, if you don't have anything nice to say, STFU." Dan's answer was:

"I was giving your stupid ass advice. It wasn't friendly, but it certainly was helpful. You're posting as if it's special to be a girl. It's not. Just post as a gamer and you'll be fine. You're the one creating the gender segregation here."

Online communities such as the XBOX 360 Forum have proliferated in recent years as consumers spend more and more

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: stefania.almeida@puers.br (S.O. de Almeida), dholakia@rice.edu (U.M. Dholakia), jmhernandez@fei.edu.br (J.M.C. Hernandez), jamazzone@usp.br (J.A. Mazzon).

time online, and interact socially with each other (e.g., Mathwick, Wiertz, and de Ruyter 2008; Seraj 2012). Companies, especially those selling complex, evolving products like the XBOX, have recognized that consumers can and cheerfully do provide high-quality and low-cost service support to their peers, and willingly collaborate with the company's employees to create and test innovations through interactions in online communities (Dholakia et al. 2009; Füller 2010; Mathwick, Wiertz, and de Ruyter 2008; Moeller et al. 2013; Nambisan and Baron 2007). Participation in these so called online peer-to-peer problem solving communities ("P3 communities" henceforth; Mathwick, Wiertz, and de Ruyter 2008) not only provides various functional benefits to consumers such as learning through solutions to immediate service-related problems or assistance in making purchase decisions, but it also gives them the opportunity to express their admiration and enthusiasm for a particular brand, product, or topic, and to interact with a like-minded social group (Dholakia et al. 2009).

Yet, as the exchange between Ashley and Dan illustrates, when throwing together diverse consumers within a single online P3 community, there is potential for conflict. Differences between participants can result in negative outcomes for the online P3 community. In recent years, consumer researchers have recognized that in social settings, consumers influence one another significantly, and perceived differences between consumers not only matter, but affect their decisions and actions in meaningful ways (e.g., Berger and Heath 2007). Not surprisingly, despite the potential of online P3 communities, many organizers have reported challenges with coordinating and engaging their members (e.g., Jarvenpaa, Knoll, and Leidner 1998; Worthen 2008).

Does perceived diversity (i.e., members' perceptions of their differences from other members) have a negative effect on the degree to which they identify with the P3 community? What is the role of expressive freedom in affecting social identification? For instance, in the case of Ashley and Dan, should the XBOX 360 Forum's manager have cut off the acrimonious exchange by deleting their messages and closing down the discussion thread? Or, should the exchange have been allowed to continue, giving Ashley and Dan the freedom to speak their minds and hash out their differences? Furthermore, how do perceived diversity and expressive freedom influence members' learning, a key functional benefit from participating in the online P3 community? In the current research, we seek to address these questions and better understand the roles of these two key community features.

These questions are widely relevant because most online P3 communities tend to be diverse collectives of consumers with few or no requirements for membership. Furthermore, many discussions reference extant differences between members, making diversity perceptions consequential for participants. Theoretically, organizational psychology research has shown that diversity perceptions within physical groups can produce potentially negative effects (Jackson, May, and Whitney 1995; Milliken and Martens 1996; Williams and O'Reilly 1998); however, relatively less is known regarding effects in online settings. Thus, our study has the potential to make a significant theoretical contribution to this literature. Finally, from a

managerial standpoint, most online P3 community managers are interested in influencing their members' opinions and behaviors (Algesheimer and Dholakia 2006). They would benefit from understanding the effects of perceived diversity and expressive freedom because these issues go to the heart of the main challenges that P3 community managers face, namely, which users to recruit into the community, and to what extent to moderate their interactions (see for example, Porter, Devaraj, and Sun 2013).

Accordingly, in the present research, we seek to contribute to the understanding of online P3 community success factors in two significant ways. First, drawing upon recent multi-disciplinary research, we discuss the critical roles of *learning* and *social identification*, the key user benefits from P3 community participation. Second, we develop a conceptual framework that theorizes the influences of *perceived diversity* and *expressive freedom* on learning and social identification. Our results reveal that both perceived diversity and expressive freedom have positive effects on consumers' learning in the online P3 community. However, their effects on social identification are mixed: whereas diversity perceptions affect social identification negatively, expressive freedom has no significant impact. We also hypothesize, and find, that social identification fully mediates the effects of perceived diversity, expressive freedom, and learning on two important firm-relevant outcomes: *relationship with the brand* and *future intentions toward the brand*.

Another strength of our study is that it was conducted in Brazil, a dynamic emerging economy where relatively few published marketing studies have been done to date. Specifically, we test our hypotheses through an empirical investigation conducted with 555 active members of the two largest XBOX online P3 communities in Brazil: *Portalxbox*, the largest fan-organized P3 community, and *XBOX Brasil*, Microsoft's official online community.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In the next section, we begin by describing learning and social identification, two key benefits users derive from online P3 community participation, and the relationship between them. This is followed by an in-depth consideration of the roles played by diversity perceptions and expressive freedom in influencing these benefits and their influences on firm-related consequences. Next, we discuss the method and results of the empirical study conducted to test the research hypotheses. The paper concludes by highlighting the key findings, discussing the theoretical contributions and managerial implications of the research, suggesting future research avenues and describing the study's limitations.

Conceptual Framework and Research Hypotheses

Our proposed conceptual framework draws upon ideas and research from knowledge management theory (Brown and Duguid 2002; Gray and Meister 2004), social identity theory (e.g., Hogg and Terry 2000; Tajfel 1972), work group diversity (Van Knippenberg and Schippers 2007; Williams and O'Reilly 1998), customer co-creation (Füller 2010; Nambisan and Baron 2007), and studies of brand communities (e.g., Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann 2005) and P3 communities (Dholakia et al. 2009; Mathwick, Wiertz, and de Ruyter 2008). The framework

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