

Summer 6-27-2016

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## Recommended Citation

Cai, Crystal Xiaofang and Chau, Patrick Y. K., "MOTIVATING IDENTITY-RELATED BEHAVIORS IN ONLINE COMMUNITY – A BROADEN-AND-BUILD PERSPECTIVE" (2016). *PACIS 2016 Proceedings*. 180.

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# MOTIVATING IDENTITY-RELATED BEHAVIORS IN ONLINE COMMUNITY – A BROADEN-AND-BUILD PERSPECTIVE

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## Abstract

*With the pervasiveness of online community, people expand their identities by acquiring memberships of different online communities. Online community not only provides contexts and tools for people to build up and manage new identities, but also evokes people to have emotional experience. This research aims to understand how member's emotional experience induced by different community artifacts (contents or other members) will influence the participation behaviors through the understanding of their relationships with the online community. This research proposes that emotional experience changes how one identifies with the community, hence influences the behaviors that relate to the self-definitions, e.g. self-disclosure, knowledge contribution, self-presentation and social interaction. Taken the perspective of broaden-and-build theory and social identity theory, this research proposes that positive emotional experience promotes open-minded coping, and consequently expands the self-concepts and become more social inclusive.*

*Keywords: Broaden-and-Build Theory; Social Identity Theory; Identity-related behaviors; Online Community*

# 1 INTRODUCTION

Online communities are online websites where people share same goals or interests can get together to interact and share with other strangers. Member participation and contribution is the source of online community to be unique and success, however, how to promote and sustain online members' engagement has been a challenge to community managers and marketers. Engaged online members invest their time and efforts in different behaviors, e.g. making knowledge contribution to help others(Meng et al. 2007), designing avatars to manage positive and desired self-image(Kim et al. 2012a), disclosing personal information to be known. Such behaviors are influenced by how a member defines herself as a members, that is, her social identity in the online community.

In order to understand why and how people are motivated to participate in online community, prior researchers have applied different theories, such as the theory of planned behavior (TPB,(Ajzen 1991)) and social capital theory(Nahapiet et al. 1998). Yet these theoretical lenses do not place importance on the social and emotional factors in driving community participation(Tsai et al. 2014). Life in online community is more than exchange of information, reaching goals or entertainment: along these activities, members also experience different emotions. For instance, negative emotions may intensify later discussion on issues in news forum(Chmiel et al. 2011) Emotional contents and artifacts in the online community provide a diverse pool of emotional stimulus for members to evoke emotion responses. Motion pictures are more vivid and individual evokes emotional response. Besides, as most of the communication in online community are text-based and accessible to other community members, such emotional-laden communication may continue to have influence on other community members.

This research explores how emotional experience influences online community behaviors by changing online community identification. By applying the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson 1998; Fredrickson 2011) and social identity theory(Tajfel 1982; Tajfel et al. 1986), this research supplements the research of online community engagement (Meng et al. 2007; Ray et al. 2014) in three-folds: First, this research introduces emotion as antecedent, rather than outcome, of how members identifies with the community. Second, this research takes a finer look at community identification by further conceptualizing it based on social identity theory and online community contexts. Third, this research aims to synthesize the active behaviors (self-disclosure, knowledge contribution, self-presentation and social interaction) from an identity perspective.

## 2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Social identity theory and identity-related behaviours

Social identity theory is a social psychology theory proposed by Tajfel et al. (1979), which explains how and why individuals exhibit individual or group-level behaviors subjected to their identity conception in group contexts, that is, their social identity. Social identity is defined as “that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership”(Tajfel 1978). Social identity theory assumes that people strive to maintain their self-esteem by acquiring positive social identity, in another word, by being a member of a positive group and integrating the membership into self-definition. Positive social identity is inferred by making favorable social comparison, which the in-group performs better than out-group in terms of relevant attributes.

Online community has emerged as an important and pervasive context for people to stay, enjoy group life by acquiring the membership. Online community provides a different set of collective identity extensions for individual to identify. Online community identification is defined as the extent to which a member defines his or her-self as member to the online community. Community identification has

been introduced to prior online community research for its positive effect on online community attitudes (e.g. satisfaction, engagement and intention to continuously stay) and behaviors (knowledge contribution)(Kim et al. 2011; Ray et al. 2014). There are indirect evidences show how design features influenced the way community members learn about the community, thus, changed how they feel bonded with the community. Ren et al. (2012) found that with salient visualization of group identity, online members were better supported in learning online community identity, thus, become identified with the community. Besides the design of community, other social attitudes toward the online community also influence online community identification. For example, perceived dissimilarities between members negatively influences their identification over the community(Pan et al. 2014). Positive community identity and ease to get social support are found to motivate community identification in Kim et al. (2012a)'s research on virtual community.

Online community identification not change the attitudes toward the community, but also influence how members behaviors. Identity-based perspective is becoming an important lens to look at what motivates online community behaviors (Meng et al. 2007; Ray et al. 2014; Tsai et al. 2014). Identity related behaviors include what online community members do according to their social identities when communicating or sharing in the online community. Types of identity related behaviors in online community: self-disclosure, self-presentation, knowledge contribution and social interaction. IS researchers have been interested in looking at how socio-psychological factors motivate these behaviors and integrate such findings to the design of online communities(Ren et al. 2012).

A simple review reveals how one's identity is involved in different types of online community behaviors. Self-disclosure behavior concerns about what types of identity related information a person would share with the platform or other people. Self-disclosure refers to a person publish personal information to increase interpersonal awareness among members in the online community (Lowry et al. 2011; Posey et al. 2010; Yu et al. 2015). Self-presentation, as defined by Leary (1996), is the "process of controlling how one is perceived by other people". Compared with self-disclosure, self-presentation concerns what and how identity information is intentionally displayed to other members in order to attain desired image of self. Typically, self-presentation involves community artifacts include user name, signature, avatar or nickname, profile customization, personal page design, and other interactive tools that allow other community members to get access to the focal person (Meng et al. 2007). Whereas use of self-presentation is a static and one-directional way of communicating identity image, social interaction is more dynamic and bi-directional, which promotes the focal member to expose in interpersonal communication(Preece et al. 2009). Social interaction refers to interpersonal communication or interactions among members in online community. In online community, members interact with other members by replying to, clicking likes or dislikes on others' posts. Knowledge contribution, compared with the above behaviors, refers to a member gives out his or her knowledge resource and make substantial content contribution to the community in order to help other members (Cheng et al. 2015; Wasko et al. 2005) .

## 2.2 Emotions in online community and Broaden-and-build theory

Members in the online community evokes emotions when they are engaged in different activities in the online community. Prior research have been looking at how positive affective evaluations, such as satisfaction and enjoyment (Meng et al. 2007; Ray et al. 2014) as the desirable outcomes of the community success. Yet it is less investigated how affects and emotions can play a motivating role in community participation(Yu et al. 2015). There are two general types of motivators in readers-to-leaders framework of participation according to (Preece et al. 2009) the usability issues and sociability issues. According to Zhang (2013)'s review of affect research in ICT contexts, there is a need for clear definition of emotion when investigating the role that affect concepts are introduced. In Zhang's paper, she proposed a taxonomy of affect response model(ARM) , which identifies 5 dimensions to categorize affect concepts: residing stimulus ( within a person, within a stimulus and between a person

and a stimulus), temporally constrained or unconstrained, behavior vs object –based stimulus, general stimulus vs particular stimulus, and process vs outcome –based stimulus. In the following, two dimensions in the ARM framework will be applied to understand the key phenomenon of interest in this study: categorizing by stimulus/person or temporal constrained/unconstrained. This study focuses on temporally reduced emotional experience of online members when he is staying in the online community. Emotions refer to induced affective state, it includes the discrete emotion types that is temporally constrained. This study particular looks at this conceptualization of emotion concepts and the role it plays. There are two reasons why this study chooses this category of affective concepts as focus: For one thing, based on broaden-and-build theory, the positive emotions are referring to short-term emotional stated induced by particular stimulus For the other thing, the contents of online community which get widely exposed to audience are emotion-induced. People are more willing to share contents that evokes high positive (awe) or negative (anger or anxiety) emotional arousal(Berger et al. 2012) which indicates that online members pay attention to contents that promotes high emotional arousal and such contents are more likely to reach more online members. Thus, this study is dedicated to find out how such temporally induced emotions can produce effects on the social-cognitive judgement towards the online community, and consequently, motivate behaviors that can bring long-term benefits to the community. Broaden-and-build theory provides a lens to understand how social cognition can be motivated by positive or negative emotions, and consequently motivate them to engage in online community activities.

*Broaden-and-build theory* of positive emotion is proposed by Fredrickson (1998) on how positive emotions can broaden the scope of attention and thought-action repertoires and consequently build up one's personal or social resource. Compared to discrete emotions theory(Frijda et al. 1989), broaden-and-build theory further differentiates that although positive emotions such as joy, happy and interest are phenomenally distinct, they do not lead to a narrow set of action tendency like negative emotions. This theory begins the thread of research on positive psychology and focused on how positive emotion can bring well-being to human life(Fredrickson et al. 2002). The theory posits two main effects of positive emotion: the broaden effect and build effect. The broaden effect of positive emotion means that positive emotions can increase the scope of cognitive resources, including attention, memorial and thinking process, which leads to a wider range of action tendencies (Fredrickson 1998). Positive emotions not only broaden general task cognition, but also have impacts on social cognition, such as self-expansion(Waugh et al. 2006) and social categorization (Johnson et al. 2005). On one hand, positive emotions increase people sociability and involvement in developing relationship (McIntyre et al. 1991), and motivate them to become more likely to include others in his or her sense of self. With the wider attention and cognition scope, positive emotions promote individual to adopt a more flexible and creative ways of processing social information(Conway et al. 2013). On the other hand, Johnson et al. (2005) found that people become more inclusive in categorizing themselves into specific social groups when they are in positive emotions.

The build effect posits that positive emotions promote an upward spiral dynamics in one's life well-being (Fredrickson 1998; Fredrickson et al. 2002; Kok et al. 2013). Such upward spiral dynamics between positive emotions and life well-being means that short-lived, fleeting emotion can have long lasting effect over long period of time. There are three parts to unfold the build effect, First, as noted in the broaden hypothesis, positive emotions can temporarily alter individual's cognitive processing patterns and coping strategies. Such temporal changes in cognitive appraisal, e.g., social judgement of relationship, motivates individual to engage in actions and behaviors (Fredrickson et al. 2008). Second, individual builds up long-term personal resources, for example, individual well-being and resilience(Conway et al. 2013)after they continuously engage in actions and behaviors guided by positive emotion mindset(Vacharkulksemsuk et al. 2013). Third, people experience more positive emotions with accumulated personal resources and increased life well-being. Such positive reciprocal relationships between broaden cognition and personal resource constitute the build hypothesis. Kok et

al. (2013) conducted a longitudinal experiment and found that positive emotions increase positive social connection reciprocally.

### 3 RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESIS

#### 3.1 Conceptualization of online community identification

When a person identifies with an online community, what and how member acquire knowledge of the online community, and form their definition of membership to the online community. Identification refers to a perceptual cognitive construct that an individual perceive him- or her-self as group member(Ashforth et al. 1989). In another word, to what extent one is adopting the collective identity into his or her self-concepts. Table 1 describes the basic components of identification in online community context.

Dimensions	Definitions and explanations	Source of the dimension
We-ness	The extent to which a member integrates the collective identity into his or her self-concept	Definition in social identity theory(Turner 1982): level of identity
Perceived similarity	The perceived similarities between the focal and the online community members	Similarities among people of the same group become accentuated (Tajfel 1981; Turner 1978)
Self-enhancement	The extent to which the online community member perceives the positive characteristics of the online community	The need for positive self-esteem on group behavior(Turner 1982)
Community Stereotype	The extent to which the online community member understand the shared characteristics of the online community;	A simplified mental representation of a group or category(Tajfel 1981)

*Table 1 Dimensions of Online Community Identification*

Forming the group prototype is central to development of online community identification. Group-prototype constitutes fuzzy sets of features that represent the group(Hogg et al. 2000). Such sets of features are either represented in the forms of typical members, or in an ideal abstraction. Group prototype is the cognitive representation of groups. According to social identity theory, a person acts align with the in-group prototype when the group identity is salient. In the context of online community, community prototype is a critical referent for a member to assimilate. Learning about the community prototype means learning about what an ideal community member is about and how to act upon it.

Self-enhancement is one of basic motive of identification, which guides the social categorization process(Ashforth et al. 2008; Hogg et al. 1985). People tend to identify with a collective that is positively valued or of high social recognition. By identifying with such collectives, people incorporate the definition of the collective into part of their self-concepts. By acquiring a membership to a valued online community, one associates him- or herself with the positive attributes of the community. People achieve the goal of self-enhancement by either experiencing the collective identity or becoming a distinguished member of its focal category or group. In online community context, a person can join communities of different themes and adopt the values and beliefs in the collective identity enables its members to achieve an extension of personal self. Online community provides different digital modifications for members to reconstructing self, which allow them to enhance how others perceive them(Belk 2013).

#### 3.2 Hypothesis Development

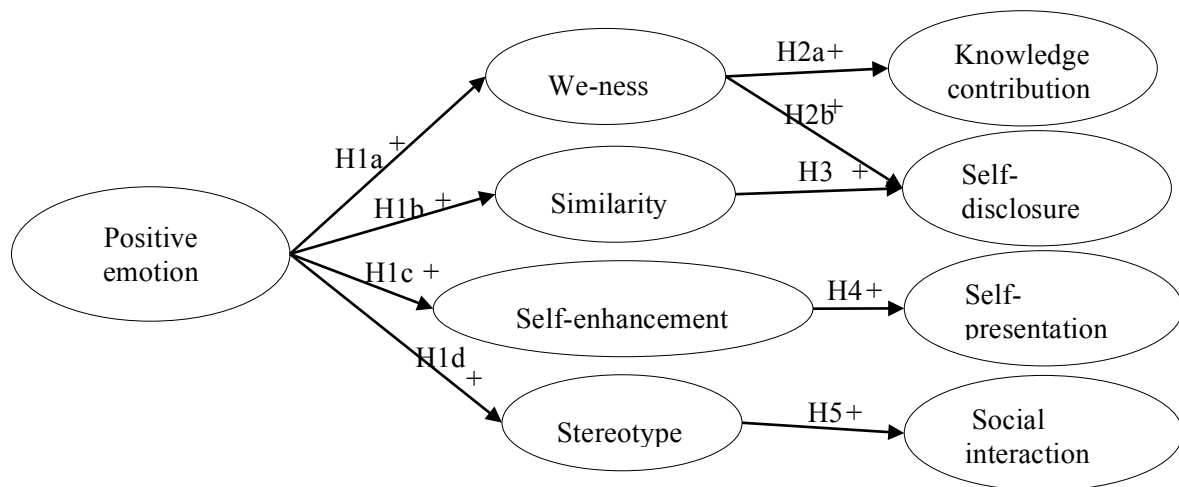


Figure 1 Identity-based Online Community Engagement Model

Taken the perspective of broaden-and-build theory and social identity theory, this research furthers the understanding of emotional experience in motivating online community engagement. Here an identity-based engagement model is proposed: positive emotions broaden one's social cognitions and thus motivates one's identification with the community, whereas negative emotions predict distinct coping strategies and have different effects on one's understanding of the community. The level of community identification changes how a member engages in online community behaviors, which will builds his identity and social resource.

### 3.2.1 Broaden Effect on Identification

When online community members are attracted to read more contents in the online community, they are likely to discover and understand other members and consequently, the community as a united entity. Positive emotion is evoked when they find reading content in the online community is rewarding and pleasant. Online community identification happens even when the community member start to read the content in the online community. User profiles and text-based interaction among members provide information about what the community is about, the norm of membership as well as what is appreciated by its members.

As proposed by broaden-and-build theory(Fredrickson et al. 2005), positive emotions change individual's social cognitive patterns to become more inclusive in categorizing people into social groups. Such broaden effects of position emotions promote the likelihood that online community members to identify with the online community. People join online communities out of voluntary motives. For example, peripheral members are involved with reading interesting and high quality contents presented in attractive and well-structured layouts (Preece et al. 2009). Contents in the online community are user-generated, which reveals their values, beliefs, and interests. With positive effects, people tend to form more inclusive group representations and feel members of two distinct groups as a one(Dovidio et al. 1995). Thus with positive emotions, even when a member found different beliefs in the community, he or she can still take a more systematic view and adopt a superordinate community identity consisting of heterogeneous sub-groups. Thus, this research proposes that *H1a: positive emotional experience is positively related with level of we-ness in online community identification.*

Online community consists of heterogeneous population. Positive emotions trigger more flexible and inclusive thinking patterns(Bolte et al. 2003). Inclusive thinking lessens the negative influence of

perceived dissimilarity among group members on identifying with other group members. With a more inclusive mindset motivated by positive emotions, online community members are more likely to accept and tolerate the difference among members. The level of inclusiveness is a key determinant of the need for uniqueness and similarity. Inter-group comparison enables effective sub-group identification (Ren et al. 2012). Thus, this research proposes that *H1b: positive emotional experience is positively related with perceived similarities in online community identification.*

Positive emotion broadens one's attention and expand self-other overlap (Vaughn et al. 2006), which motivates people to be more likely to incorporate positive attributes of the online community to personal self-concept. Thus, this research proposes that *H1c: positive emotional experience is positively related with level of self-enhancement in online community identification.*

Positive emotions predict more complex understanding of others (Vaughn et al. 2006). Community stereotyping refers to what extents a member understand the online community. When one experience more positive emotions in the focal online community, he or she may develop complex understanding of other online community members. *H1d: positive emotional experience is positively related with the level of community stereotyping in online community identification.*

### 3.2.2 Build Effects: Participating in Identity-related behaviours

According to social identity theory, when a member identifies with the community and adopts his/her identity as a community member, he or she is more likely to conduct pro-social behavior towards the community (Tajfel et al. 1986). People decide whether to disclose personal information based on the calculus of benefits and cost (Hann et al. 2007; Hui et al. 2001). Cost of disclosing personal information is out of personal level concern, such as personal privacy, whereas the benefits are oftentimes dedicated to other members, such as altruism (Hui et al. 2001). When a member is highly incorporating the community identity into self-concept, he or she is more likely to make disclosure decision based on the collective identity level. Thus a collective identity perspective motivates members to publishing personal information for the benefits of other members. *H2a: The level of we-ness is positively related with self-disclosure.*

Knowledge contribution is a seemingly paradoxical behavior as the contributor lose his or her unique expert value by giving away personal knowledge and efforts, and gain different forms of social capital (cognitive, structural and relational) at the same time. Relational capital is accumulated when a member is building up positive relationship with the collective, including identification with the collective (Lewick et al.) The more a person perceives himself as a de-individualized member, the more he will think and act on behalf of the collective benefits of the community. For example, research found that when a person perceive his or herself as part of organization, he may voluntarily perform extra role activities the welfare of the whole community (Blader et al. 2009). When members adopt the collective identity of community into their self-construe, they internalize the collective belief, goals and values in reasoning their actions. Tsai et al. (2014) found that the extent to which a member forms intention based on group identity influences their knowledge contribution quality and quantity. *H2b: The level of we-ness is positively related with knowledge contribution.*

People tend to categorize themselves with people who share commonality with them. Knowledge contribution is way a member help current or future members to address their information or knowledge needs. On one hand, people feel more certain about the reciprocity to those who alike themselves. Helping those who are similar to his or herself will meet his expect that other's will act similar like him in the future. Faraj et al. (2011) found that direct reciprocity is one of the dominant knowledge exchange patterns in online community. Such direct reciprocity is more likely to happen because people want to help and interact with similar others in knowledge (Kankanhalli et al. 2005). *H3: Perceived similarity is positively related with knowledge contribution.*



Self-presentation is motivated by maintenance of self-esteem (Leary 1996). People involve in self-presentation online to communicate an identity of value, in order to influence how other online members interact with them. When a person identifies with the online community or specific group within the online community, he or she places values and forms positive impression of the community image. Such positive values motivate online members to engage in self-presentation activities. Thus, he or she is willing to engage in two ways to self-presentations. First, online members are more willing to adopt the self-presentation norms provided in the online community to communicate their identities as one of its members. Second, when one perceives the community is of positive value, he or she will care about the evaluation of other members, that is, whether he or herself is positively verified by others members in the community. Self-presentation is motivated by a communication intent to an imagined audience in mind and desire to attract people alike (Schau et al. 2003). People increase their chances of meeting people they want to attract and communicate their desired identities in online platform by self-presentation. Self-presentation behaviors include many different forms based on the contexts: for instance, creating personal website (Schau et al. 2003) and buying digital goods (Kim et al. 2012b). Thus, this research proposes that *H4a: self-enhancement is positively related with self-presentation.*

When people identify with the group, people are regulated behaviors to evaluate the group in a positive way (Ashforth et al. 1989). Positive identity can be reassured in favorable social comparison with other members within the in-group. With such positive identity, a member is more likely to gain favorable comparison outcomes with members they encounter. Thus, a member will be more likely to engage in social interaction with other members to increase the chances of making favorable social comparison. However, if a member expect there may be negative evaluation of self when comparing with other members, he may try to avoid such unfavorable comparisons. Thus, this research proposes that *H4b: Self-enhancement is positively related with social interaction.*

When a person forms identification with the group, he or she tend to perceive his or herself as a member of the group. Such perception or assigning to group activities have both inductive and deductive aspects (Turner 1982). Deduction means that a person is assigned some characteristics according to the membership. Induction refers to that the attributes of a group is inferred based on the typical or exemplary members. In online community, peripheral members visit the site, read and browse the contents, and get familiar with active members and activities (Preece et al. 2009). By following important members or keeping updates with content in online communities, online members develop understanding of the attributes of the community members. Along with these activities, online members come up with sets of reputable or favorite members they have already known or would like to learn about. People tend to interact with those who have understood and formed closer social relationships. Thus, this research proposes that *H5: Prototype understanding is positively related with social interaction.*

## **4 RESEARCH DESIGN**

This research will use survey methodology. A questionnaire will be designed and distributed to online communities to invites participants. Besides the above key constructs, there are several or variables constructs introduced to control for latent effects. Mentioned in previous research, identity verification is another important identity related process in online community (Ray et al. 2014). Other personal attributes may also influence the level of identification and behaviors in online community. Tenure refers to the duration of a person's membership of an online community. The longer a person has been a member of community, the more likely he or she has experienced understood the meaning of community identity. Knowledge self-efficacy refers to the belief that one perceive his or herself has the ability and expertise to contribute to the discussion, address the problem or make difference (Kankanhalli et al. 2005). Other affective constructs that relates to individual-community

bonds are also included as control variables, such as community trust (Hsiao et al. 2012) and commitment (Bateman et al. 2011).

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