

The Creation of Online Communities and Social Networking Sites based on Constitutive Elements of Identity

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter employs theories of nationalism that define identity and its contributing elements that connect people together to offer an interpretative tool for examination of online communities and social networks. The sense of belonging or the sense of community may contribute to the structure of networks where online communities are created. Concepts which are employed in the creation of nations -the existence of the ‘significant other’ with whom one differentiates him/herself, the use of specific symbols such as language, the role of mechanisms for preserving such a sense of community-, may well account for the way networks and online communities can be created and maintained bringing together members. These members can be consumers of e-retailers. Marketing managers may benefit from the creation of online brand communities based on these concepts in order to establish strong relationships with loyal customers for their e-commerce activities.

Among the first authors who defined online communities was Kozinets (1999) who argued that online communities allow communication among “affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities” (Kozinets, 1999, p. 254). Different communities exist online and offline and interact with one another. These communities share common characteristics whether they are small-group brand communities, virtual communities and people identify with such groups and smaller ones within these communities; they create interconnected relationships based on the sense of belonging; members are included, outsiders are excluded, setting in that way, boundaries and promoting cohesion (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2011; Dinhopl, Gretzel, & Whelan, 2015; Haron & Razzaque, 2015; Zaglia, 2013).

It is interesting to explore ways that members of these communities engage and bind with each others. Gruzd, Wellman, & Takhteyev (2011) argued that although people get together and exchange messages on the physical and virtual environment, this does not mean that they feel they belong to a community. That is, we argue, the emphasis on the sense of community is necessary and how it takes place.

From a theoretical viewpoint, this chapter aims to examine and synthesize the literature of nationalism into a set of propositions about how the processes seen in the evolution of nationalism may help us understand the creation and maintenance of online communities and the structure of networks. We argue that both online communities and networks base their existence on the concept of identity and its constitutive elements. This takes place from a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach, since social and behavioral sciences but also computer sciences are brought together. An online community can have strong bonds among its members if it takes into consideration the

1. The sense of belonging,
2. The presence of the 'significant other' that allows the community to define itself and set its boundaries,
3. The use of symbols and association of ideas among members,
4. The existence of specific people who play the role of experts, have a high degree of connectivity within a network and may lead the online communication. These are concepts from the social and behavioral sciences which may be combined with
5. The degree of 'centrality', that is, how close one is to the others within a network, to borrow the concept from networks and computer sciences.

Marketing managers who aim to attract potential customers and retain existing ones, may create loyal groups of people who consist of their brand communities and are able to participate in the online communities for products and services. There are numerous opportunities that online retailers have for their e-commerce activities (Haron & Razzaque, 2015) based on the economic and social issues that emerge from the implementation of social media platforms. Online communities may be useful for companies and authorities in order to effectively allocate their economic resources but also to create loyal communities (Kavoura & Stavrianea, 2014). The number of people using social media platforms is continuously increasing; the active users on Facebook, a social media platform, were 1.393 billion in February 2015 (<http://expandedramblings.com/index.php/by-the-numbers-17-amazing-facebook-stats/>). As of the third quarter of 2014, Twitter had 284 million users (<https://investor.twitterinc.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=878170>).

DEFINITIONS

The chapter aims to relate concepts associated with theories of nationalism initially set to bind people together with online communities and networks existing on cyberspace. The identification of the sense of community in both online and traditional community groups is found to be quite similar (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2011; Lee, Reid & Kim, 2014). The concept of the sense of community was developed in the 80s (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) and has been employed for nationalism to account for the creation of nations and identity with Anderson and "the imagined communities" to be among the main advocates (Anderson, 1983). We argue that it may also bring people together in online communities and networks. The sense, feeling or spirit of belonging to one group and having membership, explains the participation in online communities, a concept that is still underresearched (Abfalter, Zaglia, & Mueller, 2012).

Online communities in a virtual environment are platforms that incorporate groups of people who share similar interests, beliefs and values. These people share common information and communication (Keng et al., 2015). Such groups are communities that have common characteristics since they are real and at the same time, imagined, bringing a sense of proximity (Mulligan, 2014). Their group members may have never met, yet, this does not prevent them from feeling of belonging together.

The sense of community is a relatively new research field in regard to cyberspace and the relation with an online's community's members; a virtual group bases its communication on the one to many approach and can be transformed to a community if the sense of community is cultivated (Keng, Pao, Ting, & Chang, 2015). Nonetheless, Keng et al. (2015) do not further examine how these concepts, sense of community and cultivation can be combined. Active communication among members can lead to a sense of belonging (see for example, people's participation in communities with shared travel

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