

Workshop Trust and Cooperation in Online Interaction

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Social Control and Relational Signals in Online Groups

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Questions

1. How to stimulate membership participation in online groups?
2. What types of social control fit with what type of online group?

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Typical Problems of Interaction in Online Groups

- Free Riding
- Problems of Trust

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Case Studies / Proposed Solutions

Shafer (2001)/Kim (2000):

Description of product community

- Members' evaluations of products
- Members receive for contributions points that have a (small) monetary value
results
- Stimulation of members' contributions

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Case Studies / Proposed Solutions

Hafner (1997):

Description of activities of moderator of 'The Well'

- Strategic use of behavior of deviating members
- Discussion about norms and rules of the group
- Decision: no direct punishment, but...
- ...members are encouraged to show their disapproval of deviating members by applying "soft" sanctions in the public

results

- emphasis of common rules and norms
- diminishment of free rider problems

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Case Studies / Proposed Solutions

Suler (2000):

description of a gaming online community

- Stimulation of helping behavior towards newbies
- New group manager introduces rewards

results

- Most enthusiastic members protest
- Some members leave the group

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Theory of Relational Signals

- Two levels of goals:
 - a) common goals of the group
 - b) individual goals of the members
- The realization of the common group goals and the individual goals can sometimes be in harmony; at other times the realization of the one goal goes at the expense of the realization of the other goal
- Members have to make a decision: active participation in group activities: yes or no?
- Bounded rationality: the decision situation is dominated by one goal that structures the situation (**decision frame**): Is the realization of the common group goal or the realization of the individual goal the member's frame?

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2 types of goals

- material goals: social interaction is not necessary for their realization
- example: attainment of information
- relational goals: social interaction is necessary for realization
- example: development of new contacts

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functional interdependencies among the members

- effects of the member's own actions are dependent on the actions of others (and vice versa)
- whether a member reaches his individual goals or fulfills the goals of the group is not only dependent on his own actions

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3 kinds of relational signals

- online behavior of ego gives information that signals to other members how ego evaluates his relationship to the other members and to the group
1. bilateral exchange: long-term friendly relationship or just short-term instrumental exchange?
 2. (lack of) participation in group activities: Is the member's decision frame in accordance with the group frame?
 3. behavior of moderator: What kind of behavior is expected from the members (egoistic behavior versus behavior that takes into account the interests of the others and the group)?

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two dimensions of online groups

1st dimension: embeddedness (density of network in offline world)

	1st dimension	“Pure” (nonembedded) Online Groups	Embedded Online Groups
2nd dimension: multifunctionality	2nd dimension		
	Single Common Interest Online Groups	online forum for people interested in exchanging information about a specific product, created by a commercial company	company online community of practice for employees with different listserves and BBSs for the sending of advice seeking messages
	Multiple Common Interest Online Groups	online group for handicapped people, containing an anonymous chat-group for provision of <i>support & information</i> , a listserv for non-anonymous discussion	self-help group: provision of <i>information & social support</i> ; some users are members of a pressure group for representing interests in the <i>public</i>

three types of social control tools

1. *direct control of the members*: manipulation of the payoffs of the choice alternatives (active contribution: yes or no)
example:
 - usage of logfile-data to publish a ranking of the members according to their posting activities
 - promotion of the ranking: status can be attained by posting activities

2. *indirect monitoring*: provision of opportunities to the members that make possible the sending of signals that show accordance with the group frame and rules
example „The Well“:
 - group manager uses crisis strategically for discussing how to deal with deviant members => mild sanctioning by members is wished, the opportunity to take the low costs of sanctioning gives members a means to signal accordance with the group frame

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three types of social control

3. *frame stabilizing tools*: increase the cognitive relevance of the common group frame, reduce the relevance of competing individual frames, and thereby also reduce the subjectively perceived costs of neglecting the individual goals

examples:

- usage of group specific symbols
- definition of the group in sharp distinction from other outgroups
- emphasis of group specific rules

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effects of the three tools

- **the tools do not work for all types of online groups**
- **they form a hierarchy of tools that presuppose an increasing degree of relational interests among the members**
- example: usage of direct control tool assumes that members participate in group activities because of the direct benefits that they gain for *themselves*
- example: usage of frame stabilizing tools (e.g., symbols that emphasize the common group frame) supposes that members do not focus only on the short-term optimization of their cost-benefit-ratio
- tools send different signals about what is expected from the members
- application of frame stabilizing tools signals that a high degree of relational interests is expected, application of direct control tools signals that a low degree of relational interests is expected

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Influence of Group Characteristics on the degree of relational interests

- high multifunctionality increases functional interdependencies between members
- the more a member is dependent on another member the more likely that he develops an interest in the maintenance of satisfying relationship with him
- in the same manner works a high degree of embeddedness
- Embeddedness and multifunctionality increase the degree of relational interests

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Hypotheses: What type of social control for what type of group?

- H1: In online groups with a high degree of *embeddedness* frame stabilizing tools show a larger effect on the stimulation of members' activity than in online groups with a low degree.
- H2: In online groups with a low degree of *multifunctionality* direct control tools show a larger effect on the stimulation of members' activity than in online groups with a high degree.
- H3: In online groups with a high degree of *multifunctionality* indirect monitoring tools show a larger effect on the stimulation of members' activity than in online groups with a low degree.

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Summary & Conclusions

- material versus relational goals
- online behavior sends relational signals
- different tools of social control (direct, indirect, frame stabilizing)
- Effect of type of social control depends on the type of online group (multifunctionality, embeddedness)