Interaction Dynamics in an Online Community:
A Longitudinal Analysis of Communication Genres

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ABSTRACT

The growth of online communities has created borderless and virtual spaces where geographically dispersed consumers can participate in informational and commercial exchanges. While the importance of these communities is undeniable, consumer researchers, public policy makers and marketers do not have a full understanding of the relationship dynamics in these communities. This article departs from traditional life-cycle community development models, by using rhetorical genres repertoire as an analytic apparatus for investigating online communities’ dynamics. In this nethnography, we analyzed the discourse of bulletin boards hosted at BabyCenter.com. Our findings show how periods in the life of a community correspond with changes in the nature and expression of specific communicative genres, themselves a consequence of members’ contrasting struggle between community involvement and personal independence.
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LONG ABSTRACT

The growth of online communities has created borderless and virtual spaces where geographically dispersed consumers can become participants in informational and commercial exchanges. In developed economies, online communities play an important role in the social and economic life of consumers. For instance, 40 percent of Americans participate in online communities (Parker, 2004) and one-third of visitors to ecommerce sites used community features such as chat rooms and bulletin boards (Brown, Tilton & Woodside, 2002). While the importance of this phenomenon is undeniable, consumer researchers, public policy makers, and marketers do not have a full understanding of the relationship dynamics in these communities. Although we can build on insights from research with traditional communities, there are some dissimilarities between real/traditional and virtual communities (e.g., anonymity, nature of relationship etc.) that must be acknowledged. One such key difference (and also research opportunity) is that online communities are an environment in which member-generated content is encouraged and can be captured (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997). The emerging question is how to explore and understand the social interactions within a community and the ways interactions evolve and change over time?

This article seeks to depart from traditional life-cycle community development models, by using rhetorical genre repertoires as an analytic apparatus for investigating a community’s communicative practices. Accordingly, in order to understand a community’s communicative practices, we must examine the repertoire of genres that are routinely enacted by members of the community. A classification of community’s interactions will be rhetorically sound if it contributes to an understanding of how communicative practices work – that is, if it reflects the experience of the people who create and interpret the communicative practices (see Miller, 1984).

In this nethnography (Kozinets, 2002), we analyzed text data from the discourse of bulletin boards hosted at a selected Internet community, BabyCenter.com (a website for new and expectant parents). The unit of analysis was the verbatim thread transcript, which was operationalized as a post (seed) with all of the replies. During the initial phase of data collection, messages were collected for a one-month period from five different bulletin boards (cross sectional) at two points in time (semi-longitudinal, September 1999 and November 2000). Across the five boards and two periods, these data reflected different community life stages (as communities are organized by pregnancy due-dates). In the second phase of data collection, a full longitudinal study was conducted. The complete text of all messages of one bulletin board was captured for a nine months period starting with the inception of the community.

This analysis highlights the role that communicative genres play in a community’s evolution. The tremendous variety of communicative genres observed in the data called for a deeper understanding of the sources of shifts in communicative genres, and of the ways in which these dynamics inspire communities’ transformational processes. Based on analysis of communities’ communicative practices, we developed a two-dimensional typology of communicative genre repertoires. This typology enabled us to develop a deeper understanding of the sources of shifts in communicative genre, and of the ways in which these dynamics inspire communities’ transformational processes. The two dimensions are: (1) identity orientation (i.e., the focus of the communicative genre) and (2) patterns of interaction (i.e., the functions that communicative genres serve). First, we show that the expression and nature of communicative genres change as a result of members’ contrasting struggle between social identity and personal identity. Online communities’ communicative practices are co-determined by the simultaneous and dynamic forces of members’
desires for involvement (i.e., social identity or commitment) and independence (i.e., personal identity or individualism). Second, we propose that communicative genres reflect two overarching and conceptually distinct interaction patterns: (1) an informational/instrumental/task-oriented communicative act, and (2) a symbolic/expressive/socio-emotional communicative act.

Our analysis of the longitudinal data collected in phase 2 uncovered eight periods in the life of this community, demonstrating that community’s development is a continuous process of reciprocal social construction. As such, this novel perspective provides guidance on the interplay between a community’s development and circumstantial events, on triggers of change, and the mechanisms that cause a community to remain in any stable period. This analysis calls attention to the fact that complex systems like online communities never settle on a fixed state. On the contrary, these systems are subject to constant perturbations, which drive bursts of transient behavior. The netnographic account demonstrates that change events encompass both macro-level forces such as periods in a community’s life span (e.g., acquaintance period, first trimester of pregnancy, etc.) and immediate situations (e.g., a specific thread) that form the context for the community’s interpersonal communication processes. Our findings illustrate that events have a dynamic and relativistic meanings and that “a same event can evoke different responses from different groups or from the same group at different times” (Arrow, McGrath & Berdahl, 2000: 195). Thus, a particular event (e.g., a debated topic), at different times, has different implications for group’s communicative practices because the group and the context will have changed.

Through this study, it is hoped that consumer researchers will realize that there are many opportunities to leverage the unique assets of member-generated content, and that future research can advance our theoretical and practical understanding of this rich consumption arena. Also, we hope that future inquiries on how communities operate and the ways in which they can be improved in order to serve and protect consumers’ interests more efficiently will provide guidance for practitioners and policy-makers who create, manage and regulate these online communities. Understanding the detailed dynamics of a community’s interactions can provide directions for better managing and facilitating consumer-to-consumer interactions. This is critical because different types of communication within social groups can have very distinct and often unintended impacts on a group’s sense of satisfaction. It is assumed that the more satisfactory the experience, the less likely consumers are to switch to a competing community, and the more likely they are to spend more time on each visit, and hopefully getting benefits for themselves, their families, and society as a whole.
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The growth of online communities has created borderless and virtual spaces where geographically dispersed consumers can become participants in informational and commercial exchanges. In developed economies, online communities play an important role in the social and economic life of consumers. For instance, 40 percent of Americans participate in online communities (Parker, 2004) and one-third of visitors to ecommerce sites used community features such as chat rooms and bulletin boards (Brown, Tilton & Woodside, 2002). Furthermore, these users are nine times as likely to come back to a site, and twice as likely to make a purchase (Brown, Tilton & Woodside, 2002). While the importance of these communities is undeniable, consumer researchers, public policy makers, and marketers do not have a full understanding of the relationship dynamics in these communities. Although we can build on insights from research with traditional communities, there are some dissimilarities between real/traditional and virtual communities (e.g., anonymity, nature of relationship etc.) that must be acknowledged. One such key difference (and also research opportunity) is that online communities are an environment in which member-generated content is encouraged and can be captured (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997). The emerging question is how to explore and understand the social interactions within a community and the ways interactions evolve and change over time?

ONLINE COMMUNITIES - VIRTUAL VERSUS ‘REAL’

At the onset, one might wonder if we can apply the meanings and concepts implied in the word “community” to patterns of human interactions that develop in cyberspace. The term community has mutable definitions that are both functional (e.g., Tonnies, 1957; Mercer, 1956) and symbolic (e.g., Cohen, 1985). Traditionally, studies and definitions of communities have emphasized the concept of a physical place where social scientists can engage in participant observation (Jones,
1998). Clearly, this place-centered notion of community does not seem readily applicable in cyberspace. While a few scholars have questioned the appropriateness of imposing the community metaphor onto the social relations emanating from cyberspace (e.g., Lockard, 1996, Foster, 1996), others believe that if “we embrace the symbolic form of community (that is, not the physical manifestation of the term community but, rather, a community of substance and meaning), concerns of the ‘real’ juxtaposed against the ‘virtual’ are of less importance” (Fernback, 1999: 213). Moreover, it has been argued that any sizeable community is to a large extent imagined, since each community member owns a mental image of his or her connection with the group (Anderson, 1983). Therefore, a community’s reality should be evaluated based on how it is imagined and not on the space in which it exists (Anderson, 1983). In this research, we adopted the symbolic term community for characterizing bulletin boards within BabyCenter.com. Our observations of this community illustrate that consumers form relationships in cyberspace and believe that they have found real communities. This is vividly illustrated in the following quote:

Thank you very much. I feel like your Web site saved my life [...] until today I was feeling very alone in my pregnancy. My husband is amazing but just can’t understand what I’m going through [...] but after using your chat room and posting my concerns on the bulletin boards, I have talked to a lot of women who feel the same way as me. It is so nice to know that I am not alone. I plan to visit your site daily and tell everyone I know about it. You are doing more than you will ever know for me and I am sure tens of other women. [Babycenter.com feedback archive]

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Across disciplines, various conceptual frameworks have been proposed to capture the dynamic nature of community development and the reasons for growth and change. Most of these theories have adopted a life-cycle conceptualization or what Brent (1984) refers to as the levels-by-stages model. A variety of such models have been proposed in the interpersonal relationships literature (e.g., Scanzoni, 1979; Levinger, 1983) and in the organizational behavior literature (e.g., Tuckman, 1965; Lacoursiere, 1980). While these models are appealing due to their parsimony and linear structures, one should keep in mind that communities are complex and dynamic systems.
Although groups may follow some of the same stages or periods, the exact composition, number, and ordering of stages require more particularity (Poole, 1981; Cissna, 1984). Indeed, “every group is like all groups in some respects, like some – or even most groups in some respects and like no groups in other respects” (Cissna, 1984: 25).

Furthermore, understanding relationship dynamics is particularly challenging for researchers studying online communities. Even though, there is a general agreement that online communities can be conceptualized as having a “sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold, 1993: 5), researchers and practitioners are “left in the dark as to when feelings will be sufficient to form webs of personal relationships and about the processes by which such communities will develop” (Wilber, 1996: 7). Moreover, analyses have to be based on “asynchronous textual production, with none of the verbal or visual cues that are so crucial to traditional notions of subcultural formation” (Tepper, 1996: 45).

Considering these unique features, and recognizing that any interpersonal communication “is not only representative of the relationship, but also constructs and performs the relationship” (Sahlstein & Duck, 2001: 373), we suggest the use of genre analysis as a framework to analyze and understand online communication. Accordingly, in order to understand a community’s communicative practices, we must examine the repertoire of genres that are routinely enacted by members of the community. Rhetoricians since Aristotle have used genre as the basis for classifying types of rhetorical discourse. Applying genre repertoires to communities’ communication behavior has precedent in the organizational and rhetorical literatures (e.g., Erickson, 1997, 2000; Miller, 1994; Orlikowski & Yates, 1994). Miller defines genre as “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations” (1984: 159). A classification of community communicative genres will be rhetorically sound if it contributes to an understanding of how communicative practices work – that is, if it reflects the experience of the people who create and interpret the communicative practices (see
Communicative genres may be perceived as a means to regulate and stabilize the life of a community, adjust its internal interactions, maintain its group ethos, and restore a state of harmony after any disturbance. Communicative genres do not simply restore social equilibrium, they are part of the ongoing process by which a community is continually redefining and renewing itself. As such, they provide a window on the dynamics by which members make and remake their interactions. It is important to note that a genre-oriented analysis shifts the focus from issues such as the nature and degree of relationship among community members (typical concern in levels-by-stages models) to the communication purpose and its regularities of form and substance (Erickson, 1997). As Erickson (1997) emphasizes: “online discourse may be useful and engaging to its participants even if the participants form no lasting relationships … What is important, in many cases, is the communication itself - the shared informational artifact that is created by the participants.” Thus, a genre-oriented analysis is useful because it shifts the focus from the participants and the relationships among them to their shared artifacts (that is, instances of the genre) and the way these artifacts are typically interpreted and used (Erickson, 1997).

**METHODOLOGY**

In this study, we employ the nethnography technique: “a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications” (Kozinets, 2002: 62). In this study, text data was used from the discourse of bulletin boards hosted at a selected Internet community, BabyCenter.com. This is a website for new and expectant parents. The unit of analysis was the verbatim thread transcript, which was operationalized as a post (seed) with all of the replies. During the initial phase of data collection, messages were collected for a one-month period from five different bulletin boards (cross sectional) at two points in time (semi-longitudinal, September 1999 and November 2000). Across the five boards and two periods, these data reflected different
community life stages (as communities are organized by due-dates). Data collection resulted in an archive of 12,830 messages. In the second phase of data collection, a full longitudinal study was conducted. The complete text of all messages of one bulletin board was captured for a nine months period starting with the inception of the community. 12,162 threads were captured and reviewed, and 1,076 threads were archived for further analysis.

TOWARD A TYPOLOGY OF A COMMUNITY’S COMMUNICATIVE GENRES

The tremendous variety of communicative genres observed in the data calls for an attempt to organize them in some meaningful way. Based on our analysis of the communicative practices, we developed a two-dimensional typology (see Table 1). The two dimensions are: (1) identity orientation (i.e., the focus of the communicative genre) and (2) patterns of interaction (i.e., the functions that communicative genres serve). The main advantage of this typology is that it enables us to develop a deeper understanding of the sources of shifts in communicative genre, and of the ways in which these dynamics inspire communities’ transformational processes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communicative Genre Function</th>
<th>Personal Identity Salient</th>
<th>Social Identity Salient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Task-oriented Interaction</td>
<td>Self-centered</td>
<td>Group-centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>Instrumental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-emotional Interaction</td>
<td>Self-centered</td>
<td>Group-centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>Relational</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 1
A Typology of Communicative Genres

Communicative Genre Focus

Of special interest to our conceptual framework is social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and self-categorization theory (Turner, 1987). The central tenet of these theories is that belonging to a group is largely a psychological state which is distinct from being a unique and separate individual. As such, it confers social identity, a shared, collective representation of who one
is and how one should behave (Turner, 1982). The notion that social identity and group belongingness are inextricably linked is based on the perception that one's identity is largely composed of self-descriptions in terms of the defining characteristics of social groups to which one belongs (Hogg & Abrams, 1998). Social identity and self-categorization theories provide the foundations for the above genre repertoire typology in advocating that the self is in not a fixed entity, but is instead contextually defined. Community members achieve a social identity that is manifest in: (1) a cognitive component self-awareness of membership), (2) an affective component (attachment or feelings of belongingness), and (3) an evaluative component (collective self-esteem, Ellemers, Kortekaas & Ouwerkerk, 1999). Participants can assume different identities within the same interactive context. The ways in which people use identity during discourse in interaction show that identity is occasioned (i.e., the specific context shapes the way participants choose to negotiate their identity) and indexical (i.e., participants choose to give salience to specific aspects of the self based on their goals in that specific interactive moment) (Sacks, 1992).

Social identity and self-categorization theories assume that there are two types of self-regulation: as a group member (social identity salient) and as an individual (personal identity salient) (Reicher, 1987). The extent to which a categorization is applied at a particular level is referred to as its salience. Importantly, salience relates not only to the general relevance of a group membership, but also to selective changes in self-perception whereby people actually define themselves as unique individuals or as members of groups. When they define themselves as group members they perceive themselves to be interchangeable with members of that group, and distinct from members of other groups. Further, the nature of behavior changes when different self-images become salient (Hogg & Abrams, 1998).

In fact, it has been suggested that the Internet represents a kind of “middle landscape” where individuals can exercise their impulses for both separation and connectedness (Healy, 1996).
As such, online communities operate as sites where centrifugal and centripetal forces meet (see Miller, 1994). An important technical reality of the Internet is that although it connects people, it also isolates them physically. This duality has interesting and contradictory effects. It has been suggested that de-individuation caused by immersion and anonymity in the group may not result in a loss of identity or reduced self-awareness (as proposed by classical de-individuation theory), but rather in a shift of self-focus from personal to group identity (Spears, Lea & Postmes, 2000). In the same vein, we argue that the expression and nature of communicative genres in Internet communities change as a result of members’ contrasting struggle between social identity and personal identity. Online communities’ communicative practices are co-determined by the simultaneous and dynamic forces of members' desires for involvement (i.e., social identity or commitment) and independence (i.e., personal identity or individualism). The dynamic characteristics of these contradictory desires contribute to the dynamic nature of communicative genres, and consequently it is through these forces that communities develop and transform.

Communicative genres that focus on the individual (i.e., personal identity salient) are concentrated on the individual’s emotions, needs, and goals. Examples of such communicative genres include confessions, sharing secrets or word-of-mouth (WOM) messages. Typically, these communications will be initiated by some problem/report statement from one member, followed by responses by other participants. Individuals’ intentions within these interactions may be viewed through efforts to achieve private goals (e.g., cleanse one-self, or obtain some information/advice). By contrast, communicative genres that focus on the group (i.e., social identity salient) serve as a means for regulating group’s interactions. Generally, communicative genres belong to this group when they (1) demarcate or celebrate a community's deepest values, (2) assert and invoke particular norms, standards and values, and (3) foster and re-invigorate attachments to social groupings. Following the conceptualization of social identity and self-categorization theories, we suggest that,
when individuals define themselves as members of a group (i.e., social identity salient), they form a social entity and a world of meanings of and for themselves. These practices provide members that act in line with this shared organization of meanings, with a sense of security and common understanding as to their belongingness to a particular and distinct group. Examples of these communicative genre practices include the establishment of certain signals and symbols that differentiate the community from others (e.g., creation of a community web page). These symbols aim to promote community pride, a sense of collectivity, and cohesiveness. Additional examples are interactions that are concerned with intra-community relations and with the formalization of rules, norms and procedures.

**Communicative Genre Functions**

Although communications in Internet communities do not have formal scripts, we were able to observe evidence of emergent/implicit scripts. These reoccurring interactions tended to be posted with virtually the same content type and structure each time they appeared and served as symbolic community markers. As such, communicative genres can be conceptualized as social knowledge structures that are organized and stored in memory in the form of particular scripts. These communicative genre scripts may be viewed as “shared social schemas” that contain expected sequences of communicative practices in order to reach certain goals (e.g., a roll call may be conceptualized as a script for the creation of acquaintance between members of an Internet community). Since members of online communities may create or use communicative genres for specific functions, these genres reflect important social and personal needs and goals.

Drawing on Bales’ seminal work (1951, 1970) on regularities in group interaction, we propose that communicative genres reflect two distinct interaction patterns: (1) an informational/instrumental/task-oriented communicative act, and (2) a symbolic/expressive/socio-emotional communicative act. Bales believed that groups have a natural tendency towards
equilibrium and, therefore, tension reducing behaviors come into play, with groups moving through cycles of instrumental (e.g., gives or ask for suggestions, opinions, or information) and expressive (e.g., shows solidarity, friendliness, tensions or antagonism) behaviors.

Following Bales’ interaction process analysis (IPA), we suggest that communicative genres are instrumental or task-oriented to the extent that they attempt to accomplish something and serve as means for gaining information about the world (see also Katz, 1960; and Smith, Bruner and White, 1956). The information can be aimed either at individual needs (i.e., means for organizing individual's personal life) or at community needs (i.e., means for organizing community life). For example, instrumental communicative acts can be found in the first period of a community life cycle – the creation of the online community. In this period, we observed communicative genres, such as roll calls, that aim to generate and increase the acquaintance between members. Different types of roll calls are part of the genre, including generic roll calls (e.g., “Who's who?”), more detailed roll calls (e.g., “What kind of weather you are having?”), or even personal and intimate ones (e.g., “Where did you and your significant other meet?”). Roll call messages tend to be short and focused and can serve multiple instrumental purposes (e.g., getting to know each other, allowing members who lost track for a while to catch up, and giving newcomers an opportunity to become part of the community). Additional examples for instrumental communicative genres (e.g., joint-creation of a community web page or photo album) are concerned with the establishment of an organized community with its own differentiating signals and symbols. While roll calls typically fit into the self-centered instrumental quadrant (personal identity salient), establishing a community’s symbols typically fit into the group-centered instrumental quadrant (i.e., social identity salience).

Communicative genres are relational to the extent that they act to sustain or weaken interpersonal relationships within the group, or in other words: “create the social fabric of a group by promoting relationships between and among group members” (Keyton, 1999: 192). These
communicative genres include interactions that show solidarity, release tension, or indicate acceptance, or, alternatively, interactions that show disagreement, tension, and antagonism (see also Katz, 1960; and Smith, Bruner and White, 1956). For example, some messages invoke symbols of unity via implicitly increasing intimacy between members of the community (e.g., relating to other members as close friends or sharing personal secrets). Although this genre of messages serves to align oneself with other members of the community, the communicative genre here concentrates in the individuals' emotions, needs, and goals and not in the group's concerns per se. Hence, these communicative genres typically fit into the self-centered relational quadrant. Conversely, communicative genres that use symbols and symbolic actions to depict a group of people as a coherent and ordered community based on shared values and goals are examples of group-centered relational quadrant. Examples include interactions that are concerned with intra-community relations and with formalization of rules, norms, and procedures. This genre of interactions consists of fairly long postings, typically in the form of short essays.

**Typology of Communicative Practices – Concluding Remarks**

Throughout the preliminary analysis of the data (period 1 of data collection), for each conversation that appeared on the bulletin boards, we analyzed its regularities of content and form. We confirmed that there are different communicative genres which have different foci (i.e., self-oriented versus group-oriented) and support different functions (i.e., task oriented versus socio-emotional). These observations support the claim that individual conversations – even though carried out by the same group of people, in the same organizational context – can have very different structures, foci, purposes, and dynamics and, thus, be aptly characterized in terms of communicative genre (Erickson, 2000). Table 2 provides a summary of the major communicative genres that were observed in the various bulletin boards, illustrating the characteristics of each genre according to the typology that was presented in Table 1.
TABLE 2
Communicative Genre Expression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communicative Genres</th>
<th>Communicative Genre Focus</th>
<th>Communicative Genre Function</th>
<th>Overall Communicative Genre Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Getting Acquainted</td>
<td>Social Identity Salient</td>
<td>Task-oriented</td>
<td>Group-centered Instrumental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint Activities</td>
<td>Social Identity Salient</td>
<td>Task-oriented</td>
<td>Group-centered Instrumental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting Intimate</td>
<td>Personal Identity Salient</td>
<td>Socio-emotional</td>
<td>Self-centered Relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intra-group Relationship</td>
<td>Social Identity Salient</td>
<td>Socio-emotional</td>
<td>Group-centered Relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking/Generating Advice</td>
<td>Personal Identity Salient</td>
<td>Task-oriented</td>
<td>Self-centered Instrumental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Games, Polls</td>
<td>Social Identity Salient</td>
<td>Socio-emotional</td>
<td>Group-centered Relational</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We would like to emphasize that the purpose of employing the above typology is not for the sake of theorizing. Instead, this typology became a key orienting device for the analysis of the longitudinal data collected in period 2. This real longitudinal inquiry brought new insights concerning the evolution of communication within the community, proposing a new way to conceptualize group development.

**NINE MONTHS WITH THE NOVEMBER BULLETIN BOARD**

In this second period of data collection, the complete text of all messages on one bulletin board was captured for a nine-month period. Our analysis uncovered eight periods in the life of this community. We showed that community’s development is a continuous process of reciprocal social construction. As such, this novel perspective provides guidance on the interplay between a community’s development and circumstantial events, on triggers of change, and the mechanisms that cause a community to remain in any stable period. Table 3 provides an overview of the major
periods that were observed, summarizing the focus and the pattern of interaction of the communicative genres, according to the typology that was presented earlier.

**TABLE 3**
Features of the Eight Major Periods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Communicative Genre Focus</th>
<th>Communicative Genre Function</th>
<th>Communicative Genre Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Train</td>
<td>Personal identity salient</td>
<td>Task-oriented</td>
<td>Getting acquainted (e.g., roll calls)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social identity salient</td>
<td>Task-oriented</td>
<td>Joint activities (e.g., photo album)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prompting Intimacy</td>
<td>Personal identity salient</td>
<td>Socio-emotional</td>
<td>Intimacy (e.g., confessions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social identity salient</td>
<td>Task-oriented</td>
<td>Joint activities (e.g., voting)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal Sense</td>
<td>Social identity salient</td>
<td>Socio-emotional</td>
<td>Intra-group relationships (e.g., conflicts, norms)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Splintering</td>
<td>Social identity salient</td>
<td>Socio-emotional</td>
<td>Intra-group relationships (e.g., involvement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social identity salient</td>
<td>Task-oriented</td>
<td>Joint activities (e.g., subgroups)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alienation &amp; Debates</td>
<td>Personal identity salient</td>
<td>Socio-emotional</td>
<td>Intra-group relationships (e.g., conflicts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal Again</td>
<td>Social identity salient</td>
<td>Socio-emotional</td>
<td>Intra-group relationships (e.g., building norms)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Us vs. Them</td>
<td>Social identity salient</td>
<td>Socio-emotional</td>
<td>Intra-group relationships (e.g., identification)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finish line</td>
<td>Personal identity salient</td>
<td>Socio-emotional</td>
<td>Intimacy (e.g., confessions)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important to understand that although in the following netnographic investigation, we have arbitrarily separated genres of communicative practices into several periods; the actual process is fluid and unpredicted. At any moment, the group can reverse direction and move back into a previous communicative genre, or suddenly switch to a whole new communicative genre. Yet, for the purposes of simplicity and clarity, throughout this netnographic account, we concentrate on the major periods in the community’s interaction processes. Periods emerge from the data, reflecting the dominant communicative genres at different times.

**Period 1 – Train**

March 200X was the inception date for the November 200X birth club bulletin board since this was the month when most members found out that they were pregnant and due in November 200X, thus, participants started to join the board. In the first period, which corresponds to an
approximately one month, there were around 30 members, and it was characterized by communicative genres that aimed at generating and increasing the acquaintance between community members. Specifically, roll calls were a dominant genre:

**[Getting to know the November 200X Board – 1]** Name, Age, Dh [dear husband] Name, Age, were you live, Are you married, how long have you been married, hobbies, Pets, TTC# [number of times trying to conceive], do you work […] Family web-site, EDD [expected due date] or Test Date.

At this early period, members tended to write mainly about themselves with no evidence of being interested or of even reading others' messages. Thus, although roll calls were initiated as a group activity, in fact, the communications were focused mostly in the individuals (i.e., personal identity salient).

At the same time members of the community were starting to organize some daily routines:

**[List of daily threads - 5]** Here's a list of the November 200X Board daily threads:

- “Getting to Know the November Board” -- a “getting to know everyone” thread
- “Roll Call,” includes a QOTD [question of the day]
- “BFP [big fat positive] HPT [home pregnancy test]” -- A list of BFPs sharing their testing info […]
- "Daily Tester" -- a testing-buddy thread

As part of these organization and coordination activities a board’s web site was created. The web site included features such as: a due date calendar, individual photo albums, biographies, ultrasound photos, gender guesses, and other games. Participants organized further with the nomination of a community's host and the creation of threads such as “getting to know the November board thread,” or a “Tester thread” (where pregnancy test results could be reported).

Since during the first two months of the community, members were finding out whether they were pregnant or not, many messages were initiated by new comers who “just discover that they are pregnant,” or with current members who “have to say goodbye” because they are not pregnant. Hence, in the first month or two, the bulletin board seemed to be like a train, with people coming onboard and leaving regularly. Most of the messages at this period focused on individuals’ needs and experiences (i.e., personal identity salient). Otherwise, when messages did focus on the
group, they were mainly instrumental (i.e., concerned with the community organization). This should be rather expected since during the first trimester of pregnancy, odds for miscarriages are quite high, thus, expecting mothers might be reluctant to forge deep attachments to the group. These concerns are evident in the next couple of threads which were concerned with the creation of a system “secret mommies.” Many members had requested to postpone the activity for a few months, so that participants would feel more secure and confident with their pregnancies, and thus, would be more motivated to participate and commit to the board’s joint activities:

[Secret mommies sing up - 1] The idea is kind of like secret pals…You will have a secret Mommy for the next 7 or 8 months - During This time you need to […] be in contact with her at least weekly via email or cards etc. anniversary, Christmas […] you need to COMMIT to at least 3 a month […]

[A secret mommies suggestion - 2] […] I am in no way ready to make a pregnancy-long commitment to someone at 7 weeks along, but I don’t want to have to miss out on this altogether. My proposal is this: Those who are confident […] to go as Secret Mommies should take advantage of Maria’s generosity in organizing right now. Then, in a couple of months when we’re all in our second trimesters, those of us who are a little more hesitant and more concerned about m/c [miscarriage] can organize a second list […]

To sum up, in this first discontent period (see Worchel’s, 1994 cyclical stage model for a similar conceptualization), members were still feeling alienated from the group, and centrifugal forces were dominant. Nevertheless, members were also able to counter the forces that pull participants away from the group by maintaining a minimum of group cohesion through group-focused, task–oriented interactions (i.e., organization and coordination of group activities).

**Period 2 – Prompting Intimacy**

By April, the number of participant members was 120. Most members already had their expected due dates and the number of participants joining or leaving the board had decreased significantly. Appropriately, the community’s host acknowledged this landmark and leveraged it in order to initiate new ideas for joint activities:

[Ideas for the board - 1] […] I promised I would get back to a few ideas for the board once the majority of us have EDD’s [expected due dates] and know we are here to stay […] since we are there I am […] broaching this subject again. […] #1 please do not respond here …… email me directly […] #4 Board Majority rules! […] Splitting into sub groups (based on EDD or # of children expected) […] Having email pals […] Having a mommy of the week […]
Feeling more assured and relaxed with their pregnancies, members started to feel more comfortable with being part of the community. Hence, besides task-oriented interactions (i.e., organization and coordination initiatives), this period was also characterized by interactions that were socio-emotional in nature. Particularly, members use the board for confessions and sharing personal secrets, thus demonstrating intimacy:

**[Telling my Baby’s Father – 1]** Hi, I just found out I’m 5 weeks pregnant. My dilemma is that my baby’s father and I are not dating or anything (In fact we never have). I want to tell him ASAP, but I am worried that he will think it’s not his child and reject us both. I don’t know what to do […]

As was previously emphasized, although this genre of messages serves to align oneself with other members of the community, communicative genres here concentrate on the individuals' emotions, needs and goals (i.e., personal identity salient) and not in the group's concerns per se. Therefore, self-centered relational genres became more dominant over the course of period 2.

**Period 3 – Communal Sense**

Considering that this was still the first trimester, there were still occasional communications dealing with miscarriages and with members saying goodbye. These goodbyes were very intimate, focusing on individuals’ personal experiences and emotions (i.e., personal identity salient). Nevertheless, these intimate interactions have lead to initial signs of socio-emotional interactions that focus on the group, thus fitting into the group-centered relational quadrant. The triggers for these communicative genres were a few messages that had raised some questions and doubts with regards to the board’s role as a support group:

**[Scared when reading posts - 1]** I was just wondering if anyone felt like I do. I come on here a lot for support so i understand this IS a support board. However i see on this board a lot about m/c's [miscarriages] […] is there anyway other board people can get support? […] I do not mean to sound negative […]

**[Signing off for a while - 1]** […] I sat here for the last few days really just getting depressed when I read this board. […] So, I am signing off of here for a while […]

These posts sparked off a number of threads that were focused on the community’s intra-relationships, thereby allowing members to discuss the community’s essence. This was accomplished
through messages that showed solidarity, released tension, or indicated acceptance, or alternatively messages showing disagreement, tension, or even antagonism:

[Scared when reading posts - 2] *I* can understand your concerns. However this IS a support board. Support is great when everything is going well, but even more important when things aren’t […] My advice to you is that if these things bother you, wait to read anything else until your u/s [ultrasound] […]

[Boards are for support - 1] *I* don’t mean to be rude but when i came on these boards i loved all the support that every-one gave each other […] i didn’t expect there to be any problems but found out there are and i once again turned to my new found friends for support. Am i wrong or is what they are for? After a few comments that have been made about m/c posts, i am sick […]

Despite their conflictual nature, these messages were essentially focused on the community, its importance, and its goals. This genre of communication set out in motion a whole new atmosphere and resulted in a much more cohesive community. At this time, the centripetal forces were getting stronger and members’ attention was focused on their relationships with the community:

[You are all the best - 1] *I* just want to compliment my fellow posters (and lurkers!). I surfed over to a board I used to post on in my previous pregnancy. Those ladies there are vicious! One person asked for directions to a website that had instructions on how to make your own carseat. Not only did people point out that was a bad idea, they called her names like Troll and Moron. […] So thank you all for creating such a warm and inviting place […]

From that point, community-focused relational messages became habitual communicative practices. In the following months, participants discussed many community’s intra-relationships issues (e.g., the appropriateness of certain conversation topics, procedures for participation in conversations, ways to prevent conflicts, community’s hosts’ role in monitoring conversations, and numerous reaffirming statements on the importance, value, and uniqueness of the board). Apart from transforming the community’s atmosphere, these group-centered relational communications also affect individual members (see Keyton, 1999). Accordingly, when group members communicate about their relationships with one another, intra-group concerns are primed, providing relevancy for participants to identify where they fit within the network of intra-group relationships, and, ultimately, affecting participants’ identity orientation and triggering social identity salience in other interactions.
Period 4 – Splintering

Approaching the second trimester of their pregnancies, participants started to organize several new joint activities, which were concerned with the creation of more profound and intimate relationships in the community. For instance, participants organized a MOTW (mother of the week) thread as “a great way to get to know all of the new mommies we have around here:”

[Information on MOTW - 1] MOTW is a great way to get to know all of the new mommies we have around here. A new mommy will be featured each week, for an entire week (Mon - Fri). On Monday the MOTW will receive a standard list of questions and then anyone may post new questions throughout the week. […]

In addition, this period also revealed cracks in the overall community cohesion, and witnessed the creation of several subgroups (e.g., the community was divided into subgroups based on members’ due dates). The splintering initiatives revealed differences in viewpoints, disagreements, and tensions:

[Idea for getting to know each other - 1] I saw on the May board they must have divided up into groups based on due date […] I think it would be easier to know people if we did that, maybe 10-15 in a group so we could keep tabs on other mommies due around our due date […] Feedback?

[Idea for getting to know each other - 4] We voted on this awhile back and majority voted against it. I for one think it’s better as a big group. I wouldn’t change anything. But that’s just my opinion.

[Little punkins - 3] I completely agree. What is the big deal […] Why did there need to be a vote in the first place? I think this is just a way of getting to know a smaller group of ladies even better. I don’t feel that it keeps us separated from the rest of the group […] [our emphasis]

[Little punkins - 4] I agree – I’d like to keep the group on this board as well I feel that this is a public forum and as such we should be allowed to post with as little or as much frequency as our group wishes. If people don’t want to participate in the sub-group that’s fine, but I don’t think that should prevent those that do, from doing so. I also don’t feel that having sub-groups takes away from the board as a whole. Obviously, others disagree […] [our emphasis]

While community’s cohesion became threatened, it is the resulting discussion of this risk that held it together and arguably strengthened it. During this period, communicative genres became very dynamic, interactive, and connected. The centripetal forces became stronger and participants regularly demonstrated their attentiveness to other members’ posts. Even confessions and other previously self-focused communicative practices became more interactive, and dynamic.

Period 5 – Alienation and Debates
During the second trimester, the number of members on the board grew significantly (120 members in June to 269 in July). In response, the board was divided into various subgroups, which resulted in many threads being aimed at different sub-communities. These circumstances lead many participants to complain that their messages went unnoticed, and to express feelings of alienation, disengagement, and disconnection. The following thread illustrates this pattern:

[Leaving the board – 1] […] I feel like I just can't connect to anyone here lately. I try to reply and post but hardly ever get any feedback or my threads just get hidden so fast […]

[Leaving the board – 2] I know how you feel. I only got one response to my thread about my ultrasound […]

[Leaving the board – 3] I can relate with you. Most of my threads go unnoticed. It makes me feel the same way. But, I can't complain because I don't respond to all the posts either […]

[Leaving the board – 4] […] As for the u/s [ultrasound] posts, I only got a couple of responses too, but I believe it's because there were so many around the same time. It's hard to post to them all!! … This board is much slower than it used to be. Let's all stick together!! We've been through the hardest part […]

[Leaving the board – 5] […] daytimes are not as busy now for a couple reasons: People are out doing things, or we just don't have any ??'s [questions] or concerns in the 2nd tri [trimester]......1st tri [trimester] m/c [miscarriage] threat is over and 3rd tri [trimester] aches and pains haven't kicked in full-on yet

While some participants offered logical and rational reasons for the board’s difficulties (e.g., members don’t have as many concerns as earlier), it seems that the splintering lead to a general malaise. Outside of some specific subgroups, participant felt like they were “falling between the chairs”, and reverted to a focus on personal identity. Feelings of disconnections were evident in conversations concerned with both community and intimate matter.

Interestingly, the events that brought the community to overcome these feelings of disconnection were a series of conversations on sensitive and controversial topics, which rekindled the community flame and dialogue. These topics triggered tensions and conflicts, and some even became “locked” by Babycenter.com. The following messages about things that pregnant women should give up during the pregnancies (the full thread had 43 posts) capture the emotions, passions and conflicts in these conversations:

[Am I the only psycho? – 1] I have given up everything that could potentially be harmful to my unborn child. From eating all fish (mercury scare), to caffeine […] I figure, it is only for 9 months why not create the best environment for my
child. It totally freaks me out that you guys all indulge in these things! I am not telling you to stop, I am just curious why you would do them […] Am I alone here?!?!

[Am I the only psycho? – 13] I AM LIVID! I tell you what, when you are ready to pay for this child in it's entirety, take care of it after it's born, all of that, then you can pass judgment on me. Until then, mind your own damn business! […] don’t attack other people for not following the same psychotic routine you do […] I thought this board was all about not being judgmental? ARGH!

[Am I the only psycho? – 29] This was my point about this medium being difficult to get your point across, if we were talking face to face we would probably see that we agree more than we disagree. I certainly respect that you see most, if not all, of the things you listed as indulgences. My point is that not everybody does, and that by using the word indulge it **seems** like you are saying that moms that aren’t avoiding those things are deliberately trying to hurt their children or just don’t care […] [our emphasis]

[Am I the only psycho? – 36] I am going to forward this thread to the BabyCenter Community for consideration. I am not sure that any good is going to come out of this thread if it continues in this vein. It is one thing to share opinions on topics such as these, but it is entirely different to attack other board users or to perpetuate a thread for the sake of "shaking things up." […]

Soon after, a number of threads about circumcision caused the greatest conflicts the community had ever experienced, thus, dividing the community into opposing camps. This created high levels of discussion on that topic (59 posts in June, 13 in July, and 39 more in August) and elicited negative and hurtful comments from various members. It caused much tension and could have led to significant member defection, since in-group focus was reduced and members’ individual opinions were made more salient:

[Are you going to circumcise? – 39] […] I’m really trying to keep it nice here. Excuse any raging pregnancy hormones. I would strongly suggest that your dh [dear husband] read all the information you have read and do the research himself[…] My dh tried this argument on me when I was expecting my ds [dear son]. Our baby is just that - ours. He doesn’t exclusive rights to any decision, because he doesn’t have exclusive rights to our child.

[Are you going to circumcise? - 45] I’ve known I’m having a boy for over a week now and this hasn’t even crossed my mind until now!! No way am I having my son circumcised. I have a lot of male friends I’ve talked to and I’ve read all of the "pro" and "anti" material and I decided NO! […] As for the women saying it is hard to clean a boy’s foreskin ?????!! GIVE ME A BREAK! You obviously don’t have a little girl to clean! […]

[Please stop negativity - 1] Okay - I have noticed in a thread some negative comments about the original thread that I started about circumcision - I did NOT have a "bring it on attitude" - I was merely stating that I expected to get some negative posts. I find that comment rude & offensive - I have tried to apologize for my part but really have gotten back no response from those people - that’s fine. I am letting this go & wish others would do the same […]

[Please stop negativity - 10] […]This board is not a free for all where anything can be said without repercussions. It’s not acceptable to say "if you don’t agree don’t post" and then have people posting gross things that can and DO offend other posters […]
Like a pp [previous poster] said we're all individuals and are bound to have differing viewpoints, the key is to accept each other and to be ok with our differences. [our emphasis]

I just wanted to say good luck to everyone with the rest of their pregnancies. I am not looking for sympathy or anything but my feelings are really hurt & I have been on here a while now & never said a rude, hurtful or mean thing to anyone before this thread. I felt like mean things were said to me as well [...] I don't think I will be visiting this site any longer & wanted to thank all the nice people that have given me their opinions & support - it's been really appreciated!

Although the circumcision threads triggered disagreements, simultaneously, they demonstrated an extremely connected and multidirectional interaction pattern. Participants were paying attention to others’ posts and arguments, thus, forming their answers in relation to these arguments. Interestingly, although the debates over circumcision emphasized individual opinions, views and values, at the same time they have served as triggers for discussions on group values, norms, strategies for conflict resolution, and other group-oriented matters (i.e., social identity salience). Eventually, these conversations generated multidirectional socio-emotional conversations that were focused on the group (i.e., fit into the group-centered relational quadrant).

Period 6 – Communal Again

The conflicts of the second trimester brought the community to reconsider some core aspects such as norms of interaction. In this subsequent period, specifics around communal issues got defined and reaffirmed. Members proposed new protocols or rules, and a significant conversation ensued on the nature of these community processes.

I have always been under the impression that the purpose of this board was to get opinions and support. When I respond to a poster, my response is to them alone. Obviously we can see each other's posts and it's not uncommon to say we agree with a PP [previous poster] [...] What boggles my mind is why someone would quote a posters' response and try to pick a fight [our emphasis].

In the above example, the participant wished to advocate for a one to one communication style, as opposed to the multidirectional practices that we have already discussed. Others however reiterated that multidirectional communications were part of the conversation practices in the community:
I agree, it is a support board [...] in this kind of forum where you are not face to face, people are more likely to say exactly what they feel without thought of how it will make other posters feel [...] [our emphasis]

The astute observation in the above message echoes research findings that have shown that participants in online communications are “isolated from social rules and feel less subject to criticism and control, … [and] less inhibited in their relations with others” (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991: 48). Also, this freedom and lack of control allowed participants to make attempts to specify rules or norms for discussions on the board. Most group norms are a result of in-situ communicative linkages among members (Festinger, Schachter & Back, 1950). Conflict-handling norms tend to be developed “on the fly,” typically through trial and error, and often, as a result of and through considerable turbulence (Arrow, McGrath & Berdahl, 2000). These regulations “generally develop slowly, often implicitly, and typically unconsciously from social pressures exerted in group interaction” (Keyton, 1999: 206). In the following messages, members attempts to agree on group norms by specifying ways to present claims or views to the group:

[Confused about purpose of this board - 5] I usually try to be as supportive as possible, and if I disagree with what another poster has written, I often try to tell them without attacking them. It’s hard to tell someone you don’t agree without it coming across meaner then you meant it to be... because, again, these replies are in writing and tone of voice cannot be conveyed. With that said, I agree with Christine in that, if you can’t say something supportive, maybe you should just move on to the next topic [...] [our emphasis]

[Confused about purpose of this board - 4] There always will be and always have been ladies on every board that tend to be a little more aggressive with their posts then others [...] I think baby center in general has done a pretty good job in keeping tabs and assigning hosts who they hope will do the same. It’s not easy ... sometimes it’s very frustrating when you have to watch so closely [...] [our emphasis]

[What is the mission of the group? - 1] [...] i do notice that at times though that we as a group can (perhaps this is something to do with our hormones) get wound up quickly and sometimes we can all be insensitive. (including me).[...i am the only one who lives in a non democratic country and let me tell you ladies, it sucks!) censorship is not perhaps the way to go on the board but instead having an agreed set of goals within our group may well be. for example: what is the mission of the november 200X babies club? [...] why don’t we as a group come together and at least decide on what is our mission and purpose [...]

Eventually, discussions on such matters as the boards’ norms, goals, and mission prompted feelings of cohesiveness, thus, priming further social identity salience. Correspondingly, new messages reiterated the significant role that the board played in members’ life:
I have been off of my Paxil for over a week now, and even though I should hit a slump as I usually do, I haven’t really. I think I finally realized why. Even though I popped onto this board abruptly, and don’t get to chat or participate as much as I would like, you have all made me feel welcome. I don’t know if you realize how much that means to someone like me, but it does mean quite a lot. I don’t feel as scared or negative as I did before I joined this board. My df actually enjoys hearing me talk about all of you.

Just wanted to note that this board makes pregnancy so much better! I was laughing as I read through some of the threads about exhaustion, crap food days, moodiness, weight gain. As a few months ago it was more about when will m/c end, how many more sleeps till my u/s, are you showing yet . . . It’s always nice to read that others are suffering/enjoying similar things at similar times. I predict that once the summer heat goes away, our threads will read more like. "I’m not moving from this couch, I’m beyond huge, I live in a moomoo as no clothes fit and I’m not spending another penny of fat, I mean mat wear, and finally, WE HAD OUR BABY! The countdown is on.

I like that every time I think I’m crazy or experiencing something strange, I can look on here and see 5 other women going through the same thing! Wheee!!! I like that any questions i may have, whether silly or not, i can always find an answer on bc. I just like the feeling i get to know that i am not alone.

I think that it is amazing that there are over 400 women who have posted to this board with babies due in November, and we are all from different walks of life, backgrounds, religious, political beliefs, education levels, geographical locations, etc., and for the most part, we get along and support each other. that is a really amazing feat. (yes, there are times when things get heated, but that would happen anywhere eventually, so it just needs to be looked at as a growing pain and moved through.). since i am more or less the first in my real life group to have a baby, i love that there is a place i can go to rejoice and complain about pregnancy, and all of its issues without boring my real life friends to death. i love that i’ve learned a lot about different parenting styles, diapering choices.

This last message used dramatization as a means to create a common social reality for a group (see Bormann, 1996). Bormann’s symbolic convergence theory (1996) posits that when members are releasing tensions, they also tend to remove themselves from the “here and now” through the mechanism of fantasy themes. As evidenced the data above, these communicative genres (e.g., jokes, stories, imaginary situations, metaphors) might make references to the group's past, speculate on its future or even comment on issues outside of the group (Bormann, 1996). For example, in the above messages some members project themselves and others into imaginary situations (e.g., "I predict that once the summer heat goes away, our threads will read more like “I’m not moving from this couch!”), others make jokes (e.g., “but if I didn't have you ladies, I would be making him miserable”), tell stories (e.g., “I have been off of my Paxil for over a week now, and even though I should hit a slump as I usually do, I haven't really”), and otherwise engage in acts of imagination. When members of a group exhibit common emotional responses to the imagery used,
this creates a process of symbolic convergence that transforms a collection of people into a true community (Bormann, 1996). When symbolic convergence occurs, it creates a shared group consciousness, based on “a symbolic climate and culture that allow people to achieve emphatic communication as well as a ‘meeting of the minds’” (Bormann, 1996: 89). Moreover, this also creates new relational dynamics for members’ future interactions.

**Period 7 – Us versus Them**

By September all members were in their third trimester. This new period was characterized by a relative “quieting down”, especially after the conflicts of the previous months:

[Board post slowing down - 1] Has anyone else noticed that as we have been getting closer to November there just aren’t as many people posting anymore or answering threads? It seems like there’s a whole batch of new people whose names I don’t recognize - there are tons of people who I haven’t seen in a while! […]

[Board post slowing down - 4] Yeah, I’ve noticed too. I was going through the Nov. website (because I was bored from not much to read here!) and I noticed alot of names that haven’t been around for awhile. I wonder what’s happened to them. I was looking at the photo albums and it says when they became members, and so many from march and april have just disappeared. I guess when we went through the "miscarriage" time, maybe we forget? […] We also had some pretty good debates...maybe some got pissed? As for the new people, I’m glad they are here. I love to see "old" regulars post though! I went through a period, second trimester, where I didn’t post much, but still read everyday. I guess people are just really busy trying to get ready for baby, some are still working, and some chasing toddlers too. Hopefully everyone will come back to post pictures and stories about their precious little ones.

As participants’ due dates were approaching, it seemed that members were more likely to identify with their salient sub-communities than with the community as a whole. This tendency might be a direct consequence of the conflicts of the previous months, as during periods of conflict and threat, which are often associated with group change, sub-groups membership become highly salient (Callan, 1993). The following message illustrates this process:

[What is the mission of the group? - 1] […] me personally - i love the sub-thread that i regularly post within in 'little blessings' we have fun and we have been developing some great friendships. for example, here is an overview of us: Lisa - she is luckily now having a nice holiday in aruba, […] Mimi who have saved her ante-natal class notes in pdf format to send to us because she has rightly figured out that some of us first timers are really going to need all the help we can get […] now, if i don’t post on the little blessings thread for a few days...i have twenty plus new friends wondering if i have gone mia? […] i do believe the reason why our sub-thread has been working so well is that we do have mutual respect and we do really try to support each other […] The advantage with the sub-threads is that they have a sort of small town feel to them, everyone knows your name and you pretty soon learn the rules of posting! the main board is something like being in the big city - with a big city attitude! people come and go, the posts move much more quickly and somehow everything switches a pace. and right now i think sometimes the main board, needs some help setting its path. […]
However, in October an unexpected series of threads infused new blood into the community’s veins. The first thread that started to set the community on this new course was posted by a man named Mark, who had posted a few times in the past about his wife’s condition. However, this time Mark’s thread was calling for the girls on the board to use him as their “male perspective:”

[Come one, come all!! ask the all knowing Mark - 1] If you are seeking the "male perspective" on your pg or anything else that might be going on or any of your gripes about your db [dear husband], df [dear friend] or dbf [dear boyfriend]. Feel free to vent at me, I'm a big boy, I can take it. So go ahead, give it your best shot. I'm listening.

Interestingly, this message generated over 100 replies, resulting in a very connected, multidirectional, and intimate conversation. This passionate and intimate conversation got eventually locked because it contained “some sexual content that may be offensive to some.” This in turn energized the community even more, and soon there were hundreds of posts related to the original thread and its content, censorship, the participation of men on the community etc.

[Dear Mark - 1] Good Morning Ladies. I was very saddened to have seen my thread locked. I was also very shocked to see we had 117 posts. WOW!!! I wanted to let all of you know how much I enjoyed our conversations. To anyone that may be reading this first post and thinking about reading on, there may be some sexual content that may be offensive to some. So please read on at your own risk. Also, someone made reference that I was actually a pg woman trying to get a laugh. I assure all of you, that I am all man. Although, I have had people think I was gay. Far from the truth, I am madly in love with my beautiful wife […] [our emphasis]

[About Mark what's the deal? - 11] […] As far as a man posting here they are more than welcome at any time. We have had a few pop in and out from time to time to ask questions but I think realizing this is an almost all women forum has made it not become a regular thing. BUT if they wanted to it is fine […] [our emphasis]

[About Mark what's the deal? - 12] […] YES, some guys are like Mark. And yes, I totally believe that he's more than just popping in here to spy on us. He showed up a while back with some legitimate concerns over some complications that his wife was having ~ bleeding, etc. […] I'm sure some of our pg hormones have built Mark up in our minds as some gorgeous, model husband […] [our emphasis]

[About Mark what's the deal? - 18] My name is Mark, my wife is Martha […] My wife is due on Nov. 19th with my first child[… I have always gotten along with women better than men. Men have too much testosterone, always trying to be the Alpha male. […] And, last time I looked, the Title to this board is NOVEMBER 200X BABIES, nothing about females only. And since my WIFE is due in November, I thought I qualified. But I didn't read that part of the rules that said you must have a vagina. That's fine, I'll stay off the boards from now on. I've heard numerous women say that occasionally men will drop in here and usually leave right away. Are you sure it's not you pushing them out. Your all a bunch hypocrites, bow dare you judge me! I never passed judgment on any of you […]

The presence of a man on the board had definitely triggered issues of identity, self-categorization and other-categorization. We have already emphasized that the self is not a fixed
entity, but is socially defined within a context. Hence, by discussing gender-related issues, (e.g., “As far as a man posting here they are more then welcome”), members of the group have actually utilized a categorization process to define the self in terms of relevant group memberships - in this particular context according to gender. Moreover, by categorization of self and others as members of the same category (i.e., women) self and other become stereotypically interchangeable concerning cognitive and affective reactions (Hogg & Abrams, 1998). In turn, this reinforced group belongingness by making community identity more salient.

**Period 8 – The Finish Line**

Throughout November, most members of the boards were delivering their babies and thus, several threads were focusing on organizing new activities (i.e., task-oriented):

[Meet our 80 November babies - 1] Can you believe it? At least 80 November babies have already made their appearance (that's over 35 more babies in the last week, alone)! Here are the stats as of 3:00pm ET on 11/03/03 […]

- Number of babies born: 80
- Number of boys born: 41 (51%) Number of girls born: 39 (49%)

**KEY TO DETAILED INFORMATION BELOW:**

- **Line 1:** EDD Mom’s Screen Name (Mom’s First Name) U/S Sex (or surprise) – Location
- **Line 2:** If Mom Made Predictions (otherwise, see Line 3): Predicted Sex; Predicted b-day; Predicted Length […]
- **Line 3 – in bold/italics:** Actual Sex; Actual b-day; Actual Length […]

Yet, the dominant genre of messages in this period was intimate and self-centered delivery stories that were focused on members’ personal experience. The following message illustrates this pattern:

[Matt is here – 1] Matt as born on November 9 at 8:20 am. He was 7lbs. 8 ozs. and 21” long. They had to use the vacuum to get him out and I only got to hold him for a few seconds that day […] The hospital staff was wonderful and gave me a room to stay in without charge. He is home and as healthy as can be […] He has been eating and pooping so hopefully if its not all gone yet it will be soon. […] Good luck to all the ladies still waiting.

Typically, a number of participants (usually 5-10) would reply to this type of messages by congratulating the mother or praising the pictures of the new baby. We have already emphasized that, although these self-centered relational messages serve to align oneself with other members of the community, they focus on the individuals' emotions, needs and goals (i.e., personal identity salience) and not in the group's concerns per se.
DISCUSSION

Through our observation and analysis of the communicative practices in the babycenter.com communities, we have been able to demonstrate how community conversation genres are linked to the fluid and often chaotic dynamics of community development and change. We believe that this netnographic analysis is original in emphasizing the role that communicative genre practices play in a community’s evolution. Moreover, this analysis calls attention to the fact that complex systems like online communities never settle on a fixed state. On the contrary, these systems are subject to constant perturbation, which drives bursts of transient behavior. Definitely, change events vary in how much and how directly they perturb a group’s communicative genre.

The netnographic account also demonstrates that change events encompass both macro-level forces such as periods in a community’s life span (e.g., acquaintance period, first trimester of pregnancy, etc.) and immediate situations (e.g., a specific thread) that form the context for the community’s interpersonal communication processes. It is important to acknowledge that group experiences occur in the context of the life course of its members (i.e., in the context of the life course of individuals; see Socha, 1999). Thus, developmentally speaking, communication in a birth club community will not only reflect evolutions in identification, belongingness, and cohesiveness, but also will be affected by changes in needs, tensions, and individuals’ experiences related to the fact that pregnancy itself is a developmental process. It is therefore important to recognize that this has had a direct impact on our findings and therefore future research should attempt to investigate the role of communicative practices in other types of online (and off-line) communities.

Furthermore, it is important to understand that “groups do not respond to change as a generic event. Different kind of change has different meanings to group members and different implications for group coordination and development. The same event can evoke different responses from different groups or from the same group at different times” (Arrow, McGrath &
Berdahl, 2000: 195). Thus, a particular event (e.g., a debated topic), at different times, has different implications for group’s communicative practices because the group and the context will have changed. Accordingly, in our context, the responses to a second circumcision thread would depend on a group’s experience with the first debate over this subject.

Through this study, it is hoped that consumer researchers will realize that there are many opportunities to leverage the unique assets of member-generated content, and that future research can advance our theoretical and practical understanding of this rich consumption arena. Also, we hope that future inquiries on how communities operate and how they can be improved in order to serve and protect consumers’ interests more efficiently will provide guidance for practitioners who create and manage these online communities. Understanding the detailed dynamics of a community’s interactions can provide directions for better managing and facilitating consumer-to-consumer interactions as it appears in online communities’ interactions. Moreover, this analysis may provide marketers with tools to make the experience in an online community more compelling for members, and in particular realize the diversity and importance of the community communication genres. This is critical because different types of communication within social groups can have very distinct and often unintended impacts on a group’s sense of satisfaction. It is assumed that the more satisfactory the experience, the less likely consumers are to switch to a competing community, and the more likely they are to spend more time on each visit. Also, marketers will be able to leverage member-generated content by facilitating personal relationships and a sense of belongingness. Accordingly, by designing sites that incorporate the psychological and social meanings that characterize consumer-to-consumer interactions within a community, marketers will be able to promote the salience of the community for its members.
REFERENCES


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