When Stuff Happens: A Narrative Theory Perspective on Moderator Intervention in Brand Communities

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Abstract

Grievance redress is central to organizations’ duty to act in an ethical and socially responsible manner. In this era of Web 2.0, customer grievances are often posted to the online brand community forums. Addressing grievances posted in brand communities falls to moderators, who must respond carefully in order to enhance positive emotion within the community, decrease negative emotion, and encourage community continuance. This is particularly challenging given the neutrality and negativity effects of computer-mediated communication. In this paper, we adopt a narrative theoretic perspective to explain qualities of moderator’s communication that may be effective in addressing community grievances. We analyze data gathered from the Kraft Food Cooking Community (KFCC). Our findings provide modest support for narrative theory, but suggest that managing community emotion and managing community continuance may not be complementary goals.
Introduction

Stuff happens. Things go wrong; problems occur. Organizations make mistakes – faulty products are released to the public, shipments are delayed, websites crash. Even when organizations do not make mistakes, stuff happens – things get broken during distribution, retailers reorganize their stores, natural disasters hit. When problems occur, customers often seek redress from the organization. In the past, customers seeking redress would contact an organization via phone or email technology. However, the spread of Web 2.0 technology has changed the way organizations and customers communicate. Specifically, online brand communities are now a popular platform for such organization-customer service-related communication.

Forum moderators are the voice of the organization within online brand communities. Williams and Cothrel (2000) identified five things effective moderators at Kaiser Permanente did: clarified, but did not edit; understood participants’ needs; put members “at center stage”; showed their human side; and let participants vent. Beyond this anecdotal information though, little is known about the role moderators play in brand communities, what constitutes effectiveness criteria and how moderators can be more effective. We focus on the messages moderators craft in a specific type of thread in brand communities – the grievance.

A grievance is a complaint customers have against an organization; grievance redress is the ex post effort to rectify the situation about which the customer has a complaint (Gauri, 2013). When customer complaints lack legitimacy, moderators may simply delete or ignore them. However, understanding and addressing legitimate grievance complaints is central to organizations’ duty to act in an ethical and socially responsible manner. Despite a desire by most organizations to fulfill this ethical obligation, there is little research to guide organizations
as they attempt to address grievances in the context of online brand communities.

Organizations seeking to address grievances in an online brand community face unique challenges related to the neutrality and negativity effect of text-based, computer-mediated communication (Byron, 2008). Neutrality and negativity effect theory explains that audiences interpret messages as more neutral or negative than intended by the author due to the lack of nonverbal cues available in lean media, such as email or online community forums. When grievances are posted to public, online community forums, there is potential for negative emotional contagion due to the lean nature of the media as well as the broad audience the Internet provides. It falls on brand community moderators to address grievances posted within the community and keep negative emotions from spreading across the community. Unfortunately, the neutrality and negativity effects of lean media make it difficult for moderators to introduce positive emotion to the community, much less stop negative emotions from spreading.

The goal of this paper is to further understanding which dimensions of communication have the greatest effect when moderators attempt to facilitate positive emotion and prevent negative emotional contagion within online brand communities and the subsequent effect of emotional contagion on members’ community continuance. To do this, we apply narrative theories from management science to understand which dimensions of communication are most effective in preventing negative emotional contagion. Then we conduct an empirical test using data from an online brand community to discover whether narrative theories hold in light of the neutrality and negativity effects found in lean media, online brand community environments.

**Participation in Brand Communities**

From a corporate perspective, brand communities create and sustain customers’ passion for
the brand, enhancing downstream buying behavior. This anticipation has been substantiated by empirical work, which found that customers’ participation in brand communities enhanced customers’ affective commitment to the community (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalfú, 2007), increased the frequency and dollar value of their purchases (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006), improved their brand commitment (Kim, Choi, Qualls, & Han, 2008), increased their likelihood of adopting a new product from the brand and decreased the likelihood of them adopting a product from a competing brand (Thompson & Sinha, 2008), improved their perceptions of the brand image and increased their recommendation of the brand (Woisetschläger, Hartleb, & Blut, 2008). We now explore various literatures that explain why individuals initially participate in communities and why they continue to do so over time.

**Initial Participation**

Research in social psychology and communication has found that individuals join groups based on various motivations, e.g., need for affiliation, desire for information, or a match between the group identity and the individual’s self-identity (Flanagin and Metzger, 2001, Ridings and Gefen, 2004). The online community literature has found similar motivations for participation in online communities (e.g. Jin, Park, and Kim, 2010; Ridings and Gefen, 2004; Shen and Khalifa, 2008; Ridings and Gefen, 2004). In addition, this literature has found involvement with online communities also to be motivated by reputation and status concerns (Li and Kim, 2010). Those passionate about the focus of the online community are most likely to feel a commitment toward joining, participating in, and promoting the future success of the community (Faraj et al, 2011). For instance, joining an online community associated with a certain brand provides an opportunity for members to learn about new products, trends, and potentially contribute to the success of the company (Nambisan and Baron, 2010). Newcomers
to social networks tend to associate with individuals offering the most resources (Faraj and Johnson, 2011).

Brand communities represent a special case of online communities. Initial participation in brand communities has been found to be a function of individuals’ brand identification and their desire to participate in brand-related activities (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). Because brand communities also fulfill a customer service function (Qualman, 2009), one key type of communication in brand communities is the grievance. In this case, participation in brand communities is also a function of what Jasper (1998) terms “moral shock”, i.e., an individual’s outrage upon encountering an event or piece of information that provokes contentious action. In large and small collectives, this highly emotional state has been found to result in mobilization of collective action, where the outraged actors transmit that sentiment to others (Yang, 2000). When individuals have low expectancy of redress though, they adopt a posture of resignation (Jasper, 1998).

**Community Retention and Turnover**

Research has looked into why individuals continue to engage in online communities or opt out. One explanation suggests that individuals value the benefits they receive from the community: useful information (Lampel and Bhalla, 2007; Gu et al, 2007, Wasko and Faraj, 2005), improved reputation or status (Lakhani and von Hippel, 2003; Hall and Graham, 2004), the ability to expand their social network (Agarwal et al. 2008) or receive emotional support (Maloney-Krichmar et al, 2005). Others suggest altruistic motives, i.e., an orientation toward helping specific individuals or the community in general (Bateman, Gray, and Butler, 2011). Evidence further suggests continued engagement is a function of the development of attachment (Ren et al., 2012) or commitment (Bateman, Gray and Butler, 2011) to the community.
Consumers’ ongoing participation in brand communities has been found to be a function of identification with community, satisfaction with community, and members’ perceived degree of influence (Woisetschlager et al., 2008).

Researchers have posited that a commitment-based approach helps understand why members continue to participate in online brand communities (Bateman, Gray, and Bulte 2011). Organizational commitment represents a psychological bond between an individual and an organization, in this case, the online brand community (Meyer and Allen, 1997). Commitment is conceptualized as a three-part construct, consisting of continuance, normative, and affective commitment (Bateman, Gray and Butler, 2011). Continuance commitment refers to recognition of the costs of leaving an organization (Meyer and Allen, 1991). Individuals may remain within an organization in order to receive benefits not available through alternatives. On the other hand, normative commitment results from a sense of obligation or loyalty to the organization. Individuals choose to remain within an organization due to a sense of duty toward the organization. Affective commitment can be described as emotional connection to and caring for the online community (Ren et al. 2012). Individuals who demonstrate affective commitment to an online community generally feel emotional attachment, belonging, and identification with the community, which in turn lead to helping behaviors (Bateman, Gray and Butler 2011).

In an empirical study, Bateman and colleagues (2011) found that of the three types of commitment, affective commitment was the only type of commitment to impact member retention in terms of posting behaviors. Additionally, affective commitment was significantly related to informal moderating behaviors, suggesting that affective commitment may influence behaviors beyond that of the other types of commitment. Understanding affective change in a community is therefore important to understanding member continuance, which is essential to
sustaining a vibrant online community.

**Emotions and Emotional Contagion**

Emotions such as frustration, anger, or excitement are intense, relatively short-term affective reactions to a specific person or event (Barsade, 2002; Bartel & Saavedra, 2000). Emotions also include more “permanent feelings” often labeled affect or sentiment. Examples of such enduring sentiments include love for family, loyalty to group members, and hatred for a class of people (Jasper 1998). These moods, which may not be triggered by a specific event, can linger within a community (Barsade & Gibson, 2007; Cheshin et al., 2011).

“Emotions do not merely accompany our deepest desires and satisfactions, they constitute them, permeating our ideas, identities, and interests” (Jasper 1998: 399). Emotions provide goals and motivation, thereby inducing action (Jasper, 1998). The affect infusion model theorizes that people’s mood states are inextricably linked with their cognitions and behavior (Forgas, 1995). Empirical work demonstrated that people in a happy mood are more cooperative and less competitive than are people in a sad mood; are more likely to make attributions of internal than external causes when faced with simple problems, but of external rather than internal causes when faced with serious problems; are less polite and elaborate when making requests (Forgas & George, 2001). People in a happy mood tended to judge their own and others’ behaviors less critically than people in a sad mood and were more likely to attribute success to internal causes and failure to external causes (Forgas, 2006). Positive mood was related to lower absenteeism at work (George, 1989). Positive affective states increase pro-social behaviors (George, 1991). Happy people have also been found to be more likely to use information technology (Beaudry & Pinsonneault, 2010). Research also found that people tend to spend more time processing mood-congruent, rather than mood-incongruent information (Forgas, 2006), resulting in biased
information processing.

“In the constructionist view, then, emotions are constituted more by shared social meanings” (Jasper 1998: 400). Common meanings result in shared emotion, i.e., individuals’ common dispositions toward a target, which is different from reciprocal emotion, i.e., individuals’ dispositions toward each other (Jasper, 1998). Shared emotion in collectives also emanate from a process termed “emotional contagion”, i.e., when emotions expressed by one person are assumed and displayed by another (Barsade, 2002). Emotional contagion is so vital to group formation and identification, that some have suggested that without some level of emotional contagion, groups are nothing more than a collection of individuals (Barsade, 2002; Sandelands and St. Clair, 1993). The reciprocal form of emotional contagion occurs when an expressed emotion toward another evokes a mirrored response (Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson, 1994). Emotional contagion “evoke[s] or alter[s] sentiment in such a way as to cause the redefinition of a situation” (Donnellon et al., 1986: 50). Cohesive groups have greater tendencies toward collective mood convergence (Totterdell, 1998). When positive emotions spread across communities, community members are more likely to experience group identification (Buck, 1984), whereas negative emotional contagion can isolate individuals.

Both positive and negative affect seem equally susceptible to contagion effects in collectives (Barsade, 2002). Positive and negative affect are not conceptualized as two ends of the same continuum; rather, they represent two different dimensions, each of which vary in the intensity of the affect communicated.

**Positive Affect and the Neutrality Effect:** Not surprisingly, literature on affect and emotion almost universally demonstrate positive outcomes culminating from positive affect. Positive affect has been found to enhance use of peripheral cues (Schwarz, Bless, and Bohner, 1991). A
positive affective state (mood) is positively related to cooperative behavior (Barsade, 2002; George, 1991). Positive affect enhances creativity, cognitive flexibility and problem solving skills (Estrada, Isen, and Young, 1994; Isen and Means, 1983). Particularly germane to this research on brand communities, research has demonstrated that when an individual “receives” a happy emotion from a “sender”, they also “receive” any favorable product attitudes that “sender” has (Howard & Gengler, 2001).

Researchers have also noted that such positive affect is more difficult to generate in online settings. Termed the “neutrality effect” of electronic media, Byron (2008: 312) described the tendency for receivers to “perceive emails intended to convey positive emotion as more emotionally neutral than senders intend”, thereby muting the positive affect transmitted.

**Negative Affect and the Negativity Effect:** In contrast, research has found that communicators in online settings were likely to “cushion the blow” or positively distort bad news than individuals delivering the news face-to-face (Sussman and Sproull, 1999). Further, Byron (2008: 313) posited that “receivers perceive emails as more intensely negative than senders intend”, a phenomenon she termed the negativity effect.

Research has demonstrated cognitive advantages to negative affect states: they enhance systematic message processing (Schwarz, Bless, and Bohner, 1991), lead to more systematic and realistic information processing (e.g., Schwarz and Bohner, 1996), and, when coupled with positive affect and a supportive supervisory environment, heightens employee creativity (George & Zhou, 2007). But negative affect erodes trust and causes withdrawal (Kiefer, 2005); emotional exhaustion has been robustly related to turnover (Chau, Dahling, Levy, & Diefendorff, 2009; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). These latter consequences are inimical to the welfare of brand communities.
Narrative Theory and the Moderator’s Message

Narratives are messages that serve as boundary objects in communication, facilitating persuasion and meaning convergence within organizations (Bartel & Garud, 2009; Feldman & Skoldberg, 2002). Persuasion and meaning convergence are most effectively accomplished when narratives appear credible to the target audience (Lewis, 1987). Narrative theory identifies message qualities that contribute to message credibility. These qualities may be understood in terms of four message dimensions: materiality, voice and perspective, plot, and targeted audience (Barry & Elmes, 1997).

Materiality

Narrative materiality refers to the tangibility of the message being communicated, and enhances message credibility (Barry & Elmes, 1997). Qualities that imbue a message with materiality include message length, level of abstraction, and use of repetitive motifs (Barry & Elmes, 1997). Long messages (in terms of word count, physical space used, or amount of time taken to communicate the message) are considered more material than short messages. Message concreteness is also associated with message materiality: where concrete messages rely primarily on facts, more abstract messages use symbols and metaphors in addition to facts. Use of repetitive motifs, i.e., recycling some message content in different contexts using repetitive language or symbols, also imbues a message with materiality. Repetitive motifs can be used to enhance recall and add emphasis to important points. They increase materiality by adding to the permanence and enduring nature of the message.

Voice and Perspective

Voice speaks to whether or not the narrator is a character in the story and whether the speaker invokes his own authority in to explain a situation or that of an external authority, e.g.,
experts, scapegoats (Barry & Elmes, 1997: 436; Genette, 1980; Hatch, 1994). While Barry and Elmes dichotomize the issue of voice as being either the speaker’s voice or that of an external authority, it is possible for messages to do both. Specifically, it is possible for a speaker to tell a story about herself, i.e., be a character in the story, and invoke an external authority.

Perspective relates to the language used in the message. Use of professional language, i.e., formal terminology commonly accepted in business contexts, increases attributions of credibility by projecting competence and neutrality (Barry & Elmes, 1997). Whereas emotional language decreases attributions of credibility by projecting bias, dispassionate language can foster credibility.

**Plot**

The narrative literature has defined plot in a variety of ways (Boje, 1991; Giora & Poole, 1984; Pentland, 1999). For consistency, we use Barry & Elmes’ (1997) conceptualization of plot as binary categories: Epic Hero’s Journey versus Romanticist plots. The Epic Hero’s Journey plotline paints a picture of an organization that was antagonized by situations or events beyond its control, which forced the organization to respond in a specific manner. Narratives with an Epic Hero’s Journey plot never admit fault or weakness, but promote the virtue of the organization in responding heroically to its environment. In contrast, Romanticist narratives admit fault; they concede to a fall from grace, but promise to win back the affection of those spurned by regrettable actions in an effort to return to the organizations’ true self (Barry & Elmes, 1997).

**Targeted Audience**

Messages are generally fashioned with a target audience in mind. Understanding the knowledge and cultural influences that shape audiences’ interpretations of meaning can aid
communicators in connecting with their target audience (Bartel & Garud, 2009; Leonardi, 2011). For example, professionals writing to shareholders, who likely possess a level of business knowledge, can gain legitimacy by using accepted terms and models to frame arguments (Barry & Elmes, 1997). The rhetorical device underlying such argumentation is the *enthymeme*, which is an argument in the form of a syllogism, i.e., a deductive argument, with one of the parts missing; the missing portion of the deductive argument is a premise that the target audience – and possibly only the target audience – would understand (Feldman & Skoldberg, 2002; Feldman et al., 2004). By this implicit reference to common knowledge the speaker at once gains credibility with the audience by signaling his own possession of the knowledge and co-opts the audience by signaling his expectation that the audience too possesses the knowledge.

**Research Model and Hypotheses**

We propose that a narrative model of moderator communication in brand communities will explain continued participation by community members. We further propose that this relationship is partially mediated by the change in the emotional tenor of the community following a moderator’s intervention. This model is summarized in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Research Model**
Explaining Change in Emotion within a Community

Narrative theory suggests that message materiality enhances credibility. Messages low in credibility will heighten readers’ arousal (e.g., Buller & Burgoon, 2006). Constructivist or appraisal theories of emotion suggest that this arousal will then be interpreted relative to the context in which it occurs (Lazarus, 2001; Jasper, 1998). Since the communication context is a grievance, which has negative connotations, readers will attribute their arousal to a negative emotion. Thus, message qualities that enhance credibility will be associated with lower negative affect; those detracting from credibility will be associated with heightened negative affect.

Research has found that people experience positive and negative affect independently of each other and that the experiences of positive and negative affect are negatively correlated (Diener & Emmons, 1984). Within a collective, emotional contagion effects will further suppress others’ experience of positive affect when one or more members experience negative affect. Consequently, a heightened experience of negative emotion will suppress the community’s experience of positive affect. We further examine effects that each message dimension from narrative theory will have on emotional change within the community.

Narrative word count can signal the time and effort a moderator spent addressing a grievance. This is important because time spent attending to the victim of a grievance can affect attributions of injustice and subsequently experiences of anger, dissatisfaction, distress, and affective commitment (Young, 2012). Longer messages that signal more moderator effort and involvement will appease community members, resulting in a decrease in negative affect. Concrete messages that explicitly address community members’ grievance will communicate the moderator’s understanding of members’ needs and putting them “at center stage” (Williams & Cothrel, 2000: 83). This will mollify the community, decreasing negative emotion.
The use of alliteration, i.e., “repeating patterns of sound,” has been found to be aesthetically pleasing (Davis, 1936; Lea, Rapp, Elfenbein, Mitchel, & Romine, 2008: 709). Aesthetically pleasing triggers result in viewers’ experience of positive emotion (Ramachandran & Hirstein, 1999). Thus, use of repetitive motifs is likely to heighten positive emotion within the community and reduce negative emotion.

Hypothesis 1: The materiality of the moderator’s message – (a) word count, (b) concreteness, and (c) use of repetitive motifs – will increase levels of positive emotion within the community.

Hypothesis 2: The materiality of the moderator’s message – (a) word count, (b) concreteness, and (c) use of repetitive motifs – will decrease levels of negative emotion within the community.

Narratives are usually third person accounts, in which the narrator is not a character in the story. One reason narrators may be hesitant to interject themselves into a story is that self-disclosure is “interactionally problematic (i.e., face threatening)” (Holtgraves, 1992: 149). Yet, telling personal stories develops rapport and are important rhetorical devices in facilitating collective action (Polletta & Lee, 2006). By opening themselves up to vulnerability, narrators can lower audiences’ defenses and place the audience in a position to empathize and identify with the narrator. Consequently, showing their “human side” has been viewed as desirable moderator behavior (Williams & Cothrel, 2000). Thus, by becoming a character in the story, a moderator can increase identification and positive emotion within the community while decreasing negative emotion within the community.

When addressing a grievance, moderators can attribute causation to internal or external factors. As the face of the organization, denying internal responsibility and attributing the cause of a grievance to external sources can provide organizations with a face-saving excuse, which not only saves face for the organization, but also supports the audiences’ positive face by not flatly denying harm (Holtgrave, 1992). Saving face for the audience will result in increased
positive emotion – specifically the experience of relief – and decreased negative emotion. When a moderator can save face for the audience while also preserving the reputation of the organization, the moderator will decrease attributions of injustice and negative feelings toward the organization. Thus, narration from an external perspective can promote positive emotion and reduce negative emotion within a community.

A moderator’s use of professional language will communicate their effort in composing the message and therefore their respect for the community members. As with longer messages, this will tend to appease community members (Young, 2012), engendering more positive and less negative emotion within the community.

In general, theories of emotional contagion suggest that moderators’ expressed emotion would tend to be reciprocated by members of the community. Positive moderator affect has been shown to increase conflict resolution (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005) and enhance joint gains during negotiations (Barsade & Gibson, 2007), whereas negative moderator affect promotes competition and negative outcomes (Forgas, 1998). In a consumer context especially, salespeople’s displays of positive emotion were found to induce positive affect in customers (Pugh, 2001) and increase their positive appraisal of service quality and their service encounter satisfaction (Barger & Grandey, 2006). However, in online communication, expressions of positive emotion can be viewed as ingratiation (Byron, 2008). This is particularly likely to occur in a grievance context, where community members anticipate the purpose of the moderator’s being to change their mind about the grievance experienced and about the underlying brand and company. Therefore, even positive emotions communicated will be received with suspicion, decreasing positive and increasing negative affect in the community.

Hypothesis 3: The voice and perspective of the moderator’s message – (a) character in story, (b) external authority, (c) professional language, and (d) dispassionate language –
will increase levels of positive emotion within the community.

Hypothesis 4: The voice and perspective of the moderator’s message – (a) character in story, (b) external authority, (c) professional language, and (d) dispassionate language – will decrease levels of negative emotion within the community.

Epic Hero’s Journey narratives portray the organization as having boldly confronted a problem beyond their control. Romanticist narratives, on the other hand, portray the organization as having fallen from grace and seeking repentance (Barry & Elmes, 1997). Though Epic Hero’s Journey narratives do not concede organizational responsibility, both types of narratives can acknowledge offensiveness and offer apologies, which supports audiences’ positive and negative face (Holtgraves, 1992). However, only Epic Hero’s Journey narratives offer the possibility of organizational face-saving by not conceding fault. Admitting fault and asking for a pardon without offering compensation can result in audience attributions of moderator insincerity, which can result in decreased positive mood and increased anger and moral indignation (Schmitt et al., 2004). Thus, by not conceding fault, moderators can increase positive emotion and decrease negative emotion within the community.

Hypothesis 5: The moderator’s use of an epic hero journey rather than a romanticist plot will increase levels of positive emotion within the community.

Hypothesis 6: The moderator’s use of an epic hero journey rather than a romanticist plot will decrease levels of negative emotion within the community.

Research has shown that assisting others in processing information increases the other’s positive affect (Winkielman & Cacioppo, 2001). As an information processing aid, enthymemes thus increase positive affect in communities. Further, research has demonstrated that shared cognition creates shared identity (Swaab, Postmes, van Beest, & Spears, 2007). As a reference to shared cognition, the rhetorical device of enthymemes thus enhances community identification with the moderator. Identification processes culminate in increased interpersonal attraction (Hogg & Hains, 1996), thereby increasing positive affect and decreasing negative affect in
collectives.

Hypothesis 7: The moderator’s targeted use of enthymemes will increase levels of positive emotion within the community.

Hypothesis 8: The moderator’s targeted use of enthymemes will decrease levels of negative emotion within the community.

Explaining Participants’ Continuance within a Community

As a dimension of trust (e.g., Doney & Canon, 1997), credibility has been found to be an important predictor of relationship continuance in a variety of arenas (e.g., Canon, Doney, Mullen, & Peterson, 2010; Gilbert, 2012; Shultz & Omweri, 2012). Further, as noted earlier, a key motivation for continued participation in communities is access to useful information (Lampel and Bhalla, 2007; Gu et al, 2007, Wasko and Faraj, 2005). Moderator communications that are not credible are not likely to be perceived as useful. The credibility of a moderator’s message can therefore be expected to positively influence participants’ continuance in a community.

Longer messages are more likely to offer novel information. Concrete reference to the specifics of a member’s grievance makes that information relevant. In these ways, communities will perceive longer, more concrete messages to be more useful. Then, alliteration has been found to enhance information processing and memory (Lea, Rapp, Elfenbein, Mitchel, & Romine, 2008), making the message more memorable. Message usefulness and memorability will increase individuals’ motivation to continue to participate in the community.

Hypothesis 9: The materiality of the moderator’s message – (a) word count, (b) concreteness, and (c) use of repetitive motifs – will increase participants’ continued participation in the community.

Self-disclosure has been found to have positive effects on continuance in diverse online communities such as dating sites (Gibbs, Ellison and Heino, 2006), learning environments (Liu et al., 2010), and social networking sites (Arguello et al. 2006). Empirical evidence has shown
that disclosure of personal history is related to community member’s willingness to reply to posts by signaling a sense of trust between the individuals (Arguello et al. 2006). By placing herself in a story in the message, a moderator’s self-disclosure is liable to foster members’ empathy and trust and their consequent sense of emotional support, which in turn results in continued participation (Maloney-Krichmar et al., 2005).

The organization literature suggests that an institutional form of trust is developed when social entities reference external sources of legitimacy (Singh, Tucker, and House 1986). Organizations referring to institutionalized practices and standards to justify their activities gain legitimacy among stakeholders and increase survival changes (Meyer and Rowan, 1977).

Empirical evidence has shown that consumers perceive higher source credibility from a communicator when causality for an injustice is assigned to an external source (Hunt and Kernan 1991). Similarly, evidence has shown that bloggers have found legitimacy and source-credibility through the use of external recognition and expert connections (Doyle et al., 2012).

Walther (2007) found that people are differentially attentive to the level of professionalism in their writing, engaging in more editing when targeting their message toward a desirable rather than undesirable other. Messages on which authors spent more time editing were subsequently evaluated more favorably by recipients. Walther’s work further found a tendency for people to craft messages directed toward high status individuals more carefully. Recipients of poorly-crafted messages may therefore view such messages as a negative signal of the moderator’s perception of their status. Professional language will therefore contribute favorably to community member’s need for quality information (Lampel and Bhalla, 2007; Gu et al, 2007, Wasko and Faraj, 2005) and for status enhancement (Li and Kim, 2010; Lakhani and von Hippel, 2003; Hall and Graham, 2004).
Finally, as noted earlier, dispassionate language is likely to be viewed as more informative and less manipulative, thereby satisfying users’ informational needs.

Hypothesis 10: The *voice and perspective* of the moderator’s message – (a) character in story, (b) external authority, (c) professional language, and (d) dispassionate language – will increase participants’ continued participation in the community.

By not ceding responsibility for factors culminating in the grievance articulated, an Epic Hero’s Journey plotline permits the moderator to address the grievance, without compromising the credibility of the company or the brand. When the credibility of the corporate sponsor of a brand community or of a brand is tainted, members’ identification with the brand and their desire to continue to participate in the community erodes (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006).

Hypothesis 11: The moderator’s use of an *epic hero journey* rather than an *romanticist plot* will increase participants’ continued participation in the community.

Knowledge of the embedded cultural influences within a community provides moderators a unique opportunity to encourage shared identity between the community and individual members (Bartel and Garud, 2009). Use of accepted arguments, terms, and phrases - in the form of enthymeme, indicates to the community the existence of an ‘in-group’ in which the members and the moderators of the community share implicit knowledge of the topic which would be unfamiliar to outsiders (Barry and Elmes, 1997, Feldman & Skoldberg, 2002; Feldman et al., 2004).

Evidence suggests that any effort a manager makes toward creating a sense of community identity will encourage members to perceive similarities between the group’s identity and their own (Bateman, Gray and Butler, 2011). This sense of shared identity allows individuals to feel connected to the community’s culture and purpose, in turn encouraging behaviors that lead to achieve group goals and objectives (Ren et al., 2012). Likewise, a shared sense of identity develops affective commitment toward the community (Jin, Park and Kim, 2010), in turn leading
to motivation for continued engagement with and participation in the community (Bateman, Gray and Butler, 2011).

Hypothesis 12: The moderator’s targeted use of enthymemes will increase participants’ continued participation in the community.

Theories of emotion theories assert that emotion results in action. In general, a positive disposition toward a target leads to continued engagement with that target, while a negative disposition leads to disengagement (Carver, 2006).

Within the online community literature, studies have investigated ways in which online community characteristics impact affective commitment, and thus, continued engagement with, the communities. Bateman, Gray, and Butler (2011) suggested that targeting affective commitment enhances desired behaviors such as reply-posting and informal moderation. In other words, we can anticipate spillover benefits from escalating positive affect as members increase the value of the community to other participants.

Likewise, consistent with emotional contagion theory, we can anticipate spillover effects of escalating negative emotion too. Affective interaction has been found to lead to affect generalization, where an individual’s affect toward a target spreads to encompass the group or community, thereby impacting subsequent community engagement (Ren et al., 2012).

Hypothesis 13: The community’s increase in positive emotion will increase participants’ continued participation in the community.

Hypothesis 14: The community’s increase in negative emotion will decrease participants’ continued participation in the community.

Humans act to confirm their emotions (Heise, 1979, 1988). Not to do so induces cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), especially since emotional states have been verbalized in the community (Bem, 1967). Consequently, we anticipate that changes in emotion will at least partially mediate effects of the moderator message on community continuance.
Hypothesis 15: Effects of increase in positive and negative emotion on participants’ continued participation in the community will be partially mediated by the materiality, voice, language, plot, and targeted readership of the moderator’s intervention.

Methods

To test our hypotheses, data was collected from the Kraft Food Cooking Community (KFCC). In Kraft’s words, the KFCC provides opportunities for “sharing a recipe or two, or looking for a quick and easy dinner idea…make new friends and become inspired.” In addition to recipe and photos exchange, the community also features message boards on topics such as “Cooking and Recipes”, “Entertaining”, and “Healthy Living”. The KFCC was chosen for three reasons. First, the community meets the criteria to be distinguished as a brand community, namely the community exhibits 1) a sense of belonging within the in-group which support Kraft Food brand, 2) evidences traditions and rituals that surround the brand, and 3) a shared sense of obligation to the community by group members (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Second, the forum threads exhibit a strong use of moderator narrative in guiding conversations and addressing member questions, providing ideal conditions for understanding the effects of narrative on emotional change in the threads. Finally, the forum displays posting information allowing us to determine member participation in the community (in terms of forum posting) both prior to and subsequent to the moderator intervention in a thread, allowing us to determine continuance in the community.

Because of our interest in emotional change, the focus of posts analyzed were grievances against company products, policies, technology, etc.. We developed a data set consisting of 75 moderator interventions across 27 threads. Moderator interventions marked turning points in the threads. Each resulting sub-thread consisted of one or more posts by community members, immediately followed by one or more moderator posts, immediately followed by one or more posts by community members. In other words, each transition from community to moderator to
community marked a sub-thread, which is the unit of analysis in this research.

**Study Metrics**

We began by assessing the content of each message posted in each thread using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software (Pennebaker, Chung, Ireland, Gonzales, & Booth, 2006). LIWC scores thus obtained were then used to develop the word count, moderator emotion, and professional writing metrics associated with the moderator’s intervention, and emotional change metrics described below.

The remaining constructs were manually coded by two of the authors. Individual moderator interventions were coded to obtain the narrative dimensions of materiality (abstraction and repetitive motifs), voice and perspective (character in the story, externality and language), plot (epic hero vs romanticist) and targeted audience (enthymeme). The operationalization for these constructs is described below. Moderator interventions were coded individually and reconciled to ensure consistency. Cohen’s (1960) kappa was used to calculate inter-rater reliability prior to reconciliation. These exceeded the specified inter-rater reliability threshold of 0.70 (Boudreau et al, 2001). The coders were able to reach complete agreement after reconciliation of the codes.

**Moderator intervention**: The four dimensions of moderator intervention are described below.

**Materiality.** Message length was obtained as the LIWC *word count* score. Concreteness was coded as high, medium or low for each moderator intervention. A moderator intervention with high concreteness contained detailed references to specific grievances from a commenter whereas an intervention with high abstraction did not refer specifically to the grievance to which it was responding. Interventions with medium concreteness/abstraction contained some reference to the grievance being addressed, but no specific details were mentioned. For example, “I'm sorry to hear that happened. I let the appropriate staff know about this issue and
they will attempt to resolve it as quickly as possible.”, was coded as high abstraction, referring to “that happened” and “this issue” rather than specifically mentioning the issue in question. Another moderator addressed the specific product in question, “Are you referencing the Viva Italian Dressing that has been discontinued since about 2006?”, indicating high concreteness.

Repetitive motifs were operationalized as the number of commonly used phrases within the moderator’s narrative. For instance, multiple moderator’s used the phrases “Thank you for your feedback!”, “we are sorry for your frustration”, or “I hope you will enjoy”. Coders listed each repetitive motif to ensure the coded number was represented by the same phases across coders.

**Voice and Perspective.** A moderator was coded as a character in the story when he or she included a specific description of personal actions or experiences within the narrative. For example one narrator described her personal experience with a product, “I totally agree with you that the Seven Seas Creamy Italian dressing was great. It was probably one of the first salad dressings that I liked.”

Externality was represented as either “internal” or “external”, describing the moderator’s reference to factors external versus internal to the company to address a grievance. One moderator reference economic factors when addressing a product change, “We all know that prices are increasing on everything from gasoline and corn to automobiles and houses and as costs go up, companies often find that they must raise prices to maintain high quality.” Another relies solely on company objectives to respond, ‘Unfortunately, the CRYSTAL LIGHT Sunrise Ruby Red Grapefruit has been discontinued… At this time, there are no plans to bring the Ruby Red Grapefruit back.”

Language professionalism was computed as inverse of the sum of the LIWC non-fluencies (nonfl) and fillers scores. The positive and negative emotional content of each moderator
message was obtained as the LIWC *posemo* and *negemo* scores.

*Plot.* A moderator intervention was coded as either “Epic Hero’s Journey” or “Romanticist”, depending on whether the moderator responded by portraying the company as heroic (Epic Hero’s Journey) or by admitting a failing or error by the company (Romanticist). In one post the moderator is clearly attempting to resolve a product quality problem using a Romanticist plot, “We recently received word from a consumer about an issue with a Capri Sun pouch. We understand that some of you are concerned. Now that we’ve tested the material, we’ve confirmed it was mold.” Alternately, when customers were disappointed with website design changes, the moderator portrayed the changes as an enhancement to the website using an Epic Hero’s Journey plot, “We are very excited about all the great new features on the site and the ability for the community to express themselves in more ways...”

*Enthymeme* was coded as terms and phrases in which the meaning was embedded within the community culture. For instance, in a thread regarding technical changes to the forum technology, one moderator suggested the following: “A compatibility issue shouldn’t exist. What I’ve found to be helpful is to clear the cache on your browser.” These phrases, while ambiguous in many contexts, were specifically targeted to an audience familiar with the use and navigation within the context of an online forum. Similarly, the community provides a focus on baking, cooking, and recipes. A moderator’s response to a product question is directly targeted to a group with experience in the technical aspects of these activities. “Stiff jam or jelly may be caused by: under ripe fruit, over cooking, or possibly using too much pectin or sugar. Also, using Sure Jell for lower sugar will tend to form a firmer set.”

*Emotional change:* As with the moderator messages, the positive and negative emotional content of each community post was obtained as the LIWC *posemo* and *negemo* scores. While
moderators did not use emoticons, community members did. When copying the messages into Notepad to generate the LIWC inputs, emoticons automatically converted to the word representing the emotion depicted. These transcribed emotions were retained for computing the LIWC scores.

We then obtained the average score for positive and negative affect in posts by community members preceding and following each moderator post. Consistent with prior research (Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, & Gremler, 2006), emotional change was then computed as the change in positive and negative emotion following the moderator’s post, i.e., the difference between the average emotion scores following the moderator’s post and those preceding it.

While prior researchers have expressed concern about the reliability associated with change scores, these threats are less salient when the individual scores contributing to the change scores are themselves highly reliable and when the correlation among those individual scores is low (Bergh & Fairbank, 2002). Because we used objective assessments of the emotion represented in the messages posted, our assessments of the individual emotion scores are highly reliable. Correlations between prior and subsequent positive emotion was found to be -0.28 (p>0.06); correlations between prior and subsequent negative emotion was found to be 0.09 (p>0.57). Consequently, neither factor contributing to reliability threats to difference scores is pertinent here. Nonetheless, we also ran the analyses using the residuals obtained from predicting follow-up emotion levels from prior emotional levels in a thread as recommended by prior research. Findings were comparable to those reported below. We report findings based on the change scores because those are the easiest to interpret (Bergh & Fairbank, 2002).

Continuance in Community: To assess community continuance, we ascertained the number of times each participant in a sub-thread continued to post messages to the community. Because
we wished to continued community membership and not return participation when the focal grievance was unresolved, we excluded continued posts to the same thread from this metric.

**Controls:** We controlled for levels of *initial positive* and *negative emotion* within the community posts. These were computed as the average of the *posemo* and *negemo* scores for posts prior to the moderator’s intervention within a sub-thread. Not all grievances aired within the community could be addressed by Kraft. For example, one customer commented, “I work for a Major Grocery chain and while working on price changes this weekend we noticed we had discontinued tags for all Kraft Mayo products every different type…” The moderator replied, “All of our KRAFT mayonnaise products are still available. Please understand it is up to the individual stores or their corporate headquarters as to what products to stock.” Because grievances framed as being remediable are more likely to produce sustained collective action (Jasper 1998; Benford and Snow 2000), we controlled for whether or not a thread was based on an *actionable* grievance.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Means (SDs)</th>
<th>1.</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
<th>4.</th>
<th>5.</th>
<th>6.</th>
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<th>12.</th>
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<th>14.</th>
<th>15.</th>
<th>16.</th>
<th>17.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Response Delay</td>
<td>27.76 (143.33)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Actionable</td>
<td>0.81 (0.39)</td>
<td>0.09</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Positive Emotion in subthread</td>
<td>3.62 (3.23)</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Negative Emotion in subthread</td>
<td>1.57 (1.60)</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>0.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Moderator word count</td>
<td>95.71 (40.24)</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Abstraction</td>
<td>1.47 (0.72)</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Repetitive motifs</td>
<td>2.96 (1.51)</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.36**</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Character in story</td>
<td>0.93 (0.25)</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. External authority</td>
<td>0.13 (0.34)</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Romanticist</td>
<td>0.32 (0.47)</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>-0.27*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Enthymemes</td>
<td>0.07 (0.47)</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.30*</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Moderator positive emotion</td>
<td>5.48 (2.44)</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Moderator negative emotion</td>
<td>2.05 (1.92)</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.35**</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Professional language</td>
<td>0.30 (0.52)</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>0.28**</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.15</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Change in positive emotion</td>
<td>-1.03 (4.65)</td>
<td>-0.23*</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.76***</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Change in negative emotion</td>
<td>-0.65 (2.02)</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.78***</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.23*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Members’ prior number of posts</td>
<td>85.44 (148.95)</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.24*</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>-0.25*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Members’ following number of posts</td>
<td>265.82 (485.48)</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.24*</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>-0.25*</td>
<td>0.99***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Because a delayed moderator response could result in heightened negative affect and community alienation, we controlled for the *response delay* in each sub-thread as the difference between the time at which the moderator intervened in a sub-thread and the time of the first posting within that sub-thread.

**Analysis and Findings**

Descriptive statistics and correlations are presented in Table 1.

Effects of moderator intervention on emotional change within message threads were assessed using ordinary least squares regression. Findings are reported in Table 2. Non-independence of error terms within a thread necessitated clustering for thread. Significance of parameter coefficients reported are based on robust standard errors (n=27).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Effects of Moderator Message Framing on Emotional Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent Variables</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response delay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actionable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior positive affect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior negative affect</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moderator word count</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abstraction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetitive motifs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character in story</td>
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<tr>
<td>External authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderator positive affect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderator negative affect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epic hero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthymemes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$ (p)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<0.10, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001
From Table 2, we first note that the moderator intervention explained only 4.5% of the variance in increased positive emotion and 5% of the variance in negative emotion. We then note that only character in story and professional writing had significant effects on the increase in positive emotion. Specifically, character in story increased levels of positive community affect within discussion threads. This supports hypothesis 3a. Professional writing decreased levels of positive community affect, contradicting hypothesis 3b. Moderator’s use of an external authority increased levels of negative emotion within the community, contradicting hypothesis 4c.

Because community continuance was assessed using count data, which manifested over-dispersion (μ=265, σ=485.48) and a high-incidence of zero values (>50%), we analyzed effects of interventions and emotional change with the sub-thread on community continuance using a zero-inflated negative binomial regression. The binomial portion of the model was estimated using prior community participation, i.e., the count of participants’ comments prior to the focal thread. The coefficient for prior community participation ranged from -0.6779 (p<0.0001) to -0.6368 (p<0.0001) across the three models reported in Table 3.

From Table 3, we note direct positive effects of character in story and external authority on members’ continuance in the Kraft community and a direct negative effect of enthymemes. Thus, hypotheses 10a and 10b were supported. A change in positive affect was not found to contribute significantly to community continuance (hypothesis 13), but a change in negative affect was found to reduce community continuance, as expected (hypothesis 14).

Effects of the significant moderator intervention variables were not dampened by the addition of the emotional change variables into the model. Sobel-Goodman tests for mediation, bootstrapped to account for the non-independent error terms across sub-threads within a thread,
did not support mediation of effects of message credibility on community continuance by change in either positive or negative emotion. Thus, hypothesis 15 was not supported.

**Table 3: Effects of Moderator Message Framing Emotional Change and on Members’ Community Continuance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Controls</th>
<th>Moderator Framing</th>
<th>Emotional Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response delay</td>
<td>0.00*** (0.00)</td>
<td>0.00* (0.00)</td>
<td>0.00** (0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actionable</td>
<td>1.93* (0.81)</td>
<td>2.51+ (1.44)</td>
<td>2.33** (0.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior positive affect</td>
<td>-0.04 (0.05)</td>
<td>-0.05 (0.13)</td>
<td>0.06 (0.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior negative affect</td>
<td>0.41*** (0.09)</td>
<td>0.51** (0.20)</td>
<td>-0.04 (0.32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderator word count</td>
<td>-0.01 (0.01)</td>
<td>-0.01 (0.01)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstraction</td>
<td>0.24 (0.25)</td>
<td>0.06 (0.17)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetitive motifs</td>
<td>0.12 (0.10)</td>
<td>0.07 (0.10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character in story</td>
<td>1.47+ (0.87)</td>
<td>1.36* (0.64)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External</td>
<td>2.24* (0.91)</td>
<td>2.14*** (0.45)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderator positive affect</td>
<td>-0.05 (0.07)</td>
<td>-0.11 (0.08)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderator negative affect</td>
<td>-0.16 (0.20)</td>
<td>-0.23** (0.08)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional writing</td>
<td>-0.26 (0.37)</td>
<td>-0.15 (0.56)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Epic hero</td>
<td>-0.05 (0.63)</td>
<td>0.50 (0.66)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Enthyememes</td>
<td>-0.93* (0.40)</td>
<td>-0.96+ (0.50)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔPositive emotion</td>
<td>-0.05 (0.01)</td>
<td>0.12 (0.12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔNegative emotion</td>
<td>-0.48* (0.22)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.58*** (0.64)</td>
<td>5.04*** (0.94)</td>
<td>6.62*** (1.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log likelihood χ²(p)</td>
<td>11.98 (0.0175)</td>
<td>23.98 (0.0461)</td>
<td>28.68 (0.0262)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+ p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

**Discussion**

Results presented in Table 2 first suggest that the ongoing emotional tenor of the community is best explained by its previous emotional tenor. Specifically, 60% of the variance in increased positive emotion was explained by the community’s prior emotional state. The escalation in negative emotion decreased with higher levels of prior negative emotion, but increased with increased delay in the moderator’s response. These two control variables also explained about 60% of the variance in escalation in negative emotion. While the absence of significant effects for several of the hypothesized variables may be attributed to the limited power conveyed by our
sample size, the quality of the moderator intervention, which was the focus of this investigation, clearly explains only a very modest amount of the variance in emotional change within the community.

Nonetheless, as anticipated, character in story increased levels of positive community affect within discussion threads. This finding supports not only narrative theory, which formed the basis of this research, but also the research on organizational communication and social movements that speaks to the value of personalized storytelling (e.g., Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983; Guber, 2007). Unexpectedly, from the perspective of narrative theory, professional writing was found to decrease levels of positive community affect. From the perspective of the literature on emotion though, this is perfectly understandable. This research has found that people in more negative affective states tend to write more carefully (Forgas & George, 2001). It is entirely possible that careful writing therefore communicates this underlying affective state to community members, decreasing levels of positive affect in the community. Finally, again contradicting narrative theory, the moderator’s use of an external authority was found to increase levels of negative emotion within the community. Invoking an external authority may communicate a moderator’s external locus of control. In a meta-analysis of locus of control and depression, Benassi, Sweeney, and Dufour (1988) found an external locus of control to be moderately correlated with depression. So once again, from an emotional contagion perspective, these findings are understandable. Specifically, communicating an external locus of control may also inadvertently transmit a sense of depression, increasing levels of negative emotion within the community.

While we lack an easy-to-interpret metric of explained variance with regard to community continuance, the change in the log likelihood $\chi^2$s suggests that moderator intervention contributes
a substantial amount to explaining this behavior. Nonetheless, only hypotheses pertaining to two aspects of the voice and perspective dimension – character in story and external authority – confirmed narrative theory. Use of enthymemes was found to negatively influence community continuance. This finding need not represent a contradiction of narrative theory though. Effective use of enthymemes entails the moderator’s accurate assessment of community knowledge. Failure to do so may result in moderator’s use of jargon rather than enthymemes, thereby alienating community members. How moderators can walk this fine line between using enthymemes to co-opt rather than using jargon that alienates certainly merits further investigation.

Our findings suggest the three-way relationship between moderator intervention, emotional change, and community continuance may be more complex than we anticipated. Specifically, we did find that escalation of negative emotion within the community detracted from members’ ongoing participation. Oddly though, moderator’s invocation of an external authority, which resulted in an escalation of negative emotion within the community, which in turn detracted from community continuance, also increased community continuance. This suggests that de-escalation of negative emotion and community continuance may perhaps be competing community goals. Finally, our inability to observe significant effects of either the moderator’s positive emotion or the community’s increase in positive emotion substantiate Byron’s (2008) position that, while clearly important, positive emotion appears to be neutralized in online communication.

Scholarly and Practical Implications

The hypotheses put forth have implications for management scholars and practitioners alike. First, they imply that although the literature suggests that emotional contagion should be
emotion can and does spread through text-based, online communities. More importantly, we found that organizational intervention, in the form of moderator comments, does impact change in both positive and negative emotions within the community. Specifically, moderators can increase positive emotion and decrease negative emotion within the community by designing grievance response posts to feature qualities of high materiality, external voice, narrator character involvement, low affect and professional tone language, and avoidance of inappropriate enthymeme. This insight not only has implications for online brand community moderators, but also for narrative theory scholars seeking to understand differences in narrative effectiveness in different contexts. Few, if any, empirical tests of management science narrative theories have been conducted in any context. Thus, we contribute to current understanding by showing that in this context narrative theory does hold, with the exception of enthymeme. Our unexpected results regarding enthymeme are best understood in light of our context. Unlike face-to-face communities, online communities offer limited interaction, which can impede the development of shared culture (Etzioni & Etzioni, 1999) and boundary objects. Thus, it is likely that the syllogisms on which the moderators relied for enthymeme understanding were not culturally embedded deeply enough in the community to have been understood and appreciated by community members. This interpretation aligns with prior research, which shows that miscommunication of ambiguous information is common in lean media settings because individuals tend to overestimate their ability to convey information in that context (Krug et al., 2005).

Our hypotheses also have important implications practitioners seeking to increase online community retention and participation. Joyce and Kraut (2006) found that the emotional tone of
responses online community members received did not affect likelihood of continued participation in the online community. However, we found that community participants were more likely to continue to be involved in the online brand community when negative emotions were decreased and positive emotions were increased. This finding makes sense in light of community retention research, which shows that community involvement is most strongly linked with affective commitment (Bateman et al., 2011). Thus, attending to the affective state of online brand communities should be a priority for website moderators and information systems managers.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Though the study presented here has valuable implications for scholars and practitioners, it is not without limitations. First, our sample size is quite small (n=27 threads) and pertains only to one site. Future research building on our results in light of larger samples and comparing multiple communities would be enlightening. Research that considers the manner in which qualities of a moderator message interact with Web 2.0 affordances, e.g., visibility, persistence, editability, and association (Treem & Leonardi, 2012), may be particularly valuable. For example, a feature that permits community members to visualize a moderator’s position on a variety of issues may reveal that moderators who invoke an epic hero plot have a more favorable impact on ongoing community discourse when the community is able to see that it is not a plot they invoke always. In other words, being able to see a moderator occasionally acknowledge company fault may enhance the credibility of her message when company fault is denied.

Conclusion

The diffusion of Web 2.0 technologies has changed the way customers and organizations interact, specifically relating to service-related communication. More than ever, customers are
going to the Web to air grievances on topics ranging from discontinued products to spiders found in food products. When customers post their grievances to online brand community forums, the organization has a chance to respond to grievances in a public manner. Community moderators are tasked with the job of addressing customer grievances in a way that increases positive emotion within the community, decreases negative emotion within the community and promotes community continuance. In this paper, we present the results from a rare, empirical test of narrative theory, which can guide moderators in crafting optimal redress messages.

**References**


