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RESEARCH PAPER

# “I Am Your Fan; Bookmarked!” Members’ Identification Development in Founder-Led Online Communities

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## Abstract

In this study, we present the findings from an inductive and interpretive case study of a founder-led online community (OC), exploring how members’ identification develops within the community over time. Using a longitudinal study of an OC that was founded by a reputable individual, it is shown that members were first attracted to the OC through their affective and cognitive identification with the founder; however, over time, they developed identification through social interaction with other members. The findings show that this transformation was enabled by the founder’s communication behavior, which not only led to inspired and engaged members but also to the emergence of new leaders who supported the identification process. The study contributes to the fields of founder-led OCs, identification and emergent leadership in the OC context.

**Keywords:** Online Communities, Founder-led Communities, Identification, Membership, Emergent Leaders, Founders

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## 1 Introduction

Online communities (OCs), as emergent types of organizations, have been garnering increasing attention from researchers and practitioners. These communities of often large connectives of dispersed and voluntary members provide opportunities for innovative product designs, knowledge creation, collaboration and learning (Faraj, Kudaravalli & Wasko, 2015; Kane, Johnson & Majchrzak, 2014). However, in contrast to the self-organized, bottom-up OCs, such as support communities (e.g., Phang, Kankanhalli & Sabherwal, 2009; Gibbs, Kim and Ki, 2016) and those that are formed spontaneously as a response to emergencies and natural disasters (e.g., Nan & Lu, 2014; Majchrzak & More, 2011), founder-led OCs experience different dynamics, as their

survival and growth lie heavily with those who install the foundations for their development, the founders.

On the one hand, these individuals create opportunities for OC membership growth through their social and human capital; on the other hand, they incorporate a degree of risk into the success of support communities, as, due to their top-down leadership approach, they are solely responsible for the success of the OC (Kraut & Fiore, 2014). In other words, the fate of this particular form of OC depends on founder behavior in a way that mainstream OCs do not. In self-organized OCs, such risk is mitigated by the potential emergence of multiple leaders who develop a shared responsibility for the effective functioning of the OC. Our study is driven by an interest in understanding how this risk is mitigated in founder-led OCs.

Founders, who are the central entity that hold the initiative of the OC together, and thus comprise the core of the OC, have been shown to play an important role in the success and failure of groups formed on social networking sites (Kraut & Fiore, 2014) and, generally, in the early stages of Internet-based business activities (Spiegel, Abbassi et al., 2015). According to Kraut and Fiore (2014), founders' human and social capital before the OC is formed, the decisions they make with regard to the design of the online initiative, and their online posts and interactions in the early stages of the community development, all have a positive influence on community growth. However, despite founders' centrality in the development of a community, very limited reference has been devoted to founders in this area of research, thus leaving a gap in the literature in terms of understanding how this specific type of OC can survive and grow. Membership has been found to be critical to OC growth, with members' participation being related to both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations (Lakhani & Wolf, 2005) and interactions within the OC (Bateman, Gray & Butler, 2011; Ren, Kraut & Kiesler, 2007). Due to the top-down leadership approach that is expected in founder-led OCs, founders play a vital role in OC growth, as they can be the main source of attracting and retaining members. In particular, we posit that the risk of failure can be mitigated in founder-led OCs when founders' communication behavior online contributes to strengthening members' identification with the community. Based on identification literature, our objective is to examine how founders can develop members' identification with the community. Instead of focusing only on membership growth as the indicator of a successful OC, we examine the various processes of creating, maintaining, and strengthening identification within founder-led OCs, studying how these evolve over time and examining their consequences in terms of OC membership growth. The driving questions of the study are as follows: In founder-led OCs, how does members' identification with the OC develop over time? What is the founder's role in this process, and what are the consequences of this for OC membership growth?

In this paper, we expand on theory in this underdeveloped area through a qualitative, longitudinal study, where we investigate founders and members' communication over a period of five years. Our findings point to two facets of members' identification in founder-led OCs; first, there is members' personal identification with the founder on the basis of his or her reputation, which attracts members to the site, and second, there is members' identification with other members of the OC. In this regard, we find that, over time, through their engagement and interaction online, members develop identification with others and, subsequently, a sense of belonging to the community. Finally, we show how

members emerge as leaders and this helps to strengthen other members' identification. Founders play a key role in all of these processes: first, by attracting members to the community through their already established reputation; second, through their own communication behavior online, presented primarily through the consistency and nature of their posts that encourage members' participation; and third, by providing space for members to step in as leaders. Our study contributes to the literature by developing a model that shows the different influences that founders exert on members and by illuminating the process of developing members' identification with the founder-led OC. This emergent model provides insight into the key factors that contribute to members' identification in founder-led OCs, thus expanding the opportunity for theory development in the areas of online identification and founder-led OCs.

This paper is structured as follows: first, we introduce founders as important stakeholders of OCs, whose behavior can potentially influence members' identification with the community. Next, we review the literature on identification and describe the research site and the methods we employed. As further explained below, we adopt a qualitative longitudinal approach to explore members' identification process in the context of a founder-led OC over a five-year period. Finally, we explain how the empirical findings contribute to theory development.

## **2 From Self-Organized OCs to Founder-Led OCs**

OCs are often depicted as decentralized and self-organized entities consisting of dispersed individuals who voluntarily form a social aggregation through an online platform for sharing interests, knowledge, and experiences without any central control mechanism (Rheingold, 1993). In certain instances, OCs are formed on an ad hoc basis in response to an emergency (e.g., Nan & Lu, 2014). OCs may be used to provide "shelter" and a sense of "place", offering opportunities for congenial and stimulating discussions (Panteli, 2016) in a space in which members can freely express themselves (Vaast & Levina, 2015).

An increasing body of literature has argued that the effective functioning of these self-organized groups is linked to successful steering by those who emerge as leaders (Johnson, Safadi & Faraj, 2015; O'Mahony & Ferraro, 2007). Within this context, leadership behavior must be attuned to accommodate the characteristics of the online environment—namely, in terms of asynchronicity, temporality, and distance (Johnson et al., 2015). As an OC's sustainability and survival depend on members' ongoing and active participation (Bock, Ahuja, Suh, & Yap, 2015), leaders have a vital role to play in developing a growing and

sustained community participation (Oh, Moon, Hahn, & Kim, 2016).

Emergent leadership has been defined as the phenomenon in which an OC member exhibits leader-like responsibilities and achieves a position of authority within a community (Coglise, Gardner, Gavin, & Broberg, 2012). Accordingly, studies have elicited that successful leaders emerge from the interactions that occur within OCs (e.g., Carte, Chidambaram & Becker, 2006; Johnson et al., 2015). The authors of these studies have suggested that for members to become leaders, they should actively participate in several activities within the community and make contributions to discussions and/or encourage other members to collaborate. Factors identified in the literature related to the succession to leadership in the online setting include frequency of participation and communication with other members (Yoo & Alavi, 2004), task-oriented behavior, and sociability and centrality within the group (Faraj et al., 2015). In addition, emergent leaders must exhibit organizational-oriented behavior, as they have been found to play a crucial role in the success of online interactions by coordinating and directing OC members toward common goals (O'Mahony & Ferraro, 2007).

A common characteristic among existing empirical studies on OCs is that researchers tend to examine them only once they are well-established and have a large number of members. In other words, the extant literature on OCs has not yet devoted attention to explaining emergent founder-led OCs. In this type of OC, an individual is responsible for establishing the OC and plays a key role in its success or failure (Lazar & Preece, 2003; Kraut & Fiore, 2014). In contrast to the online leaders previously studied, founders do not emerge from community interactions; instead, they form the foundation for these interactions to occur. Barrett, Oborn & Orlikowski (2016) have illustrated this with SocialHealth, an online health community, where they show how founders' own values may inform the direction and the values of the OC at large.

Founders are the focal point of any new venture, online and offline, and lay their "stamp" on the organization's mission, structure, and culture (Nelson, 2003). Founders' vision, financial capital (Hanks & McCarrey, 2015; Chandler & Hanks, 1998), human capital (Colombo & Grilli, 2005), and social capital (Elfrin & Hulsink, 2007), including their relationships and network ties (Kreiser, Patel & Fiet, 2013), have been found to be positively related to business growth. Furthermore, founders' beliefs not only play a key role in defining the culture of the organization, they also have an impact on defining the leadership styles of their successors (Bass & Avolio, 1993). Jensen and Luthans (2006), who examine founders as leaders and address the impact that their leadership behavior has

on employees, found that when employees view the founder of their organization as an authentic leader, this has a positive effect on their attitude toward work and their overall commitment to the organization.

Within the information systems (IS) literature there has only been limited reference to the founders of online initiatives. Spiegel et al. (2015), who studied the role of founders in the early stages of Internet start-ups, found that it is the founders' social capital and professional networks that play the most significant role in the success of the start-up, while human capital is moderately significant and founders' experience and skills are statistically insignificant. In addition, Kraut and Fiore (2014), who studied more than 400,000 online groups created over an eight-day period, found that founders' human and social capital prior to the creation of the group, in addition to their decisions as well as interactions during the first week of the group formation, were factors that influenced online group survival. In particular, the researchers evidenced that online groups are more likely to survive, if the founder uploads fresh content on a frequent basis, thus creating opportunities for members to interact with each other. It follows that the survival and growth of founder-led OCs lie heavily with the founder. This increased dependence on the founder leads to both opportunities and risks for OC membership growth, as founder's connections and behavior online may either encourage or deter members from joining (Kraut & Fiore, 2014).

The ability to grow OC membership by attracting and retaining members has been used as evidence of the success of online communities (Ma & Agarwal, 2007). Indeed, many OCs suffer from the lack of member attachment and contribution because the relationships formed and the social ties that bind members together may be weaker than in face-to-face communities (Gibbs, Kim & Ki, 2016). When OCs fail to attract new members and when their existing members do not have a strong identification with the OC, they become inactive and therefore fail (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Phang, Kankanhalli & Sabherwal, 2009; Ma & Agarwal, 2007). In founder-led OCs, one of the risks is that member's engagement with the OC is critically related to the founder who establishes the OC. In these OCs, it is the founder who typically has the primary responsibility for attracting and retaining members, whereas in self-organized OCs, this responsibility tends to be shared among those who emerge as leaders. Building members' identification is critical in OC membership growth and success (Ren et al., 2007), and we consider this matter worthy of investigation.

### **3 Identification in Online Communities**

Identification with online groups and communities is an area of study that has attracted attention in multiple disciplines during the last two decades (see, e.g., Fiol

& O'Connor, 2005; Sivunen, 2006; Wiesenfeld, Raghuram & Garud, 1999). Identification has been viewed as an important element of OC success, and active participation has been found to increase members' identification with the community (Qu & Lee, 2011). At the same time, strong identification with the OC has been found to be a factor leading to a stronger desire to participate (Dholakia, Bagozzi & Pearo, 2004).

Considering the specific interest of the study on founder-led OCs, we study identification in two phases. First, we are interested in the identification process through which members become attracted to the OC, which is largely based on cognitive and affective identification with an individual—the OC founder (see, e.g., Ashforth, Schinoff & Rogers, 2016). Second, we are interested in the identification processes through which members construct and maintain their identification with the OC, which are heavily based on communicative actions that members use to construct their identification through group norms and prototypical messages in conjunction with other OC members (see, e.g., Hogg & Reid, 2006).

The first phase, identification with the OC founder, is based theoretically on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which describes identification, first and foremost, as a cognitive state based on an individual's "perception of oneness with or belongingness to some human aggregate" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 21). Despite research contending that cognition is the only theoretically needed dimension for identification, the role of emotions has also been introduced into the discussion (Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008). This approach to identification is based on self-categorization processes (Hogg & Terry, 2000), which individuals use to maintain self-esteem and pride by categorizing themselves with others whom they value or appreciate. Researchers have applied this approach to understanding members' identification with their leaders in organizational settings (see, e.g., Haslam, Reicher & Platow, 2013). Studies in this area have shown that the more prototypical the leader is, from the viewpoint of the followers, the more easily members will endorse and identify with the leader (e.g., Van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). When OCs are established, founders of the communities can be viewed as the prototypical members of the community, in that they create the community and attract members who share similar interests and values. Thus, social identity theory can explain how members identify personally with the founder and become attracted to the OC (see also Ashforth, Schinoff & Rogers, 2016). This view of personal identification suggests that OC members perceive oneness with the founder and identify with the founder's most central attributes (Ashforth et al., 2016).

However, in the second phase of identification in founder-led OCs, communication with other OC members becomes a more integrated component of the identification process because it reveals and strengthens the community norms. Although later applications of social identity theory have recognized that not all aspects of identification are merely cognitive and that social interaction plays a role in making certain identities more salient through talk (Hogg & Terry, 2001), few studies have empirically explored this (Hogg & Reid, 2006). According to Hogg and Reid, information regarding group norms and the prototypicality of the group is something that is constructed in communication, either directly by asking questions about group norms or more indirectly by observing how other group members communicate and discuss topics that elicit other members' norms. Through communication, OC members dynamically construct what is prototypical in the OC they belong to and what identifying with the community means to them.

It follows that developing and strengthening members' identification is critical for the OC's success. When members have a strong identification with an OC, they are motivated to work for and support community affairs, as well as willing to be cooperative with the norms and values of the community (Ren et al., 2007). Identification may help OCs bring members together, given they cannot rely on face-to-face communication. According to Sivunen (2006), this coming together occurs through symbolic action, whereby the leaders of online groups cater to the individual members by providing positive feedback, evincing common goals and practices, and setting up any proposed face-to-face meetings. These communicative actions can also signal community norms and thus strengthen members' identification with the OC.

Our study expands on these insights by exploring a founder-led OC case. This study provides qualitative and longitudinal evidence on how members' identification with OCs develops in founder-led OCs over time, the role of the founder's communication behavior in this process, and the consequences this has on OC membership growth. As we are interested in the two different phases of identification—the founder-based identification phase, as well as the OC member-based identification phase—the longitudinal nature of our study allows us to unpack how members' identification with the OC develops over time and to explore how the founder enables this process.

## **4 Research Site and Methods**

We determined that an interpretive case study (Pan & Tan, 2011; Walsham, 1995) was appropriate for this study. The interpretive approach is well documented for investigating implied meanings embedded within natural settings (Davidson & Chismar, 2007; Pan &



Tan, 2011) and is particularly useful for exploring human interaction and for identifying patterns of behavior (Bryman, 2004). This approach enables researchers to move beyond a simple model of causality to elicit greater understanding, which is the objective of our study of members' identification in a founder-led OC and the role of the founder in this process.

This study is based on a single OC; hence, the appropriateness of the site was crucial. The selected site needed to meet the following criteria: evidence of the founder's online posts, a sufficient amount of activity that would justify the in-depth investigation required for this interpretative study, and signs of membership growth over a period of time. The latter point is most important, having been identified in earlier studies as a sign of OC success (e.g., Phang, et al., 2009; Ma & Agarwal, 2007). We selected Omega (a pseudonym) as the site for this study, as it met all of the above criteria. Omega was founded in April 2006 by an internationally known spiritual writer, hereafter referred to as "Founder". When we accessed the site in 2011, its membership had grown to two million users. As such, in accordance with the criteria identified by the literature for OC success, Omega can be described as a successful founder-led OC. Omega consisted of its Founder, an administrator, and its members. The site was structured around discussion forums or threads that were thematically organized.

The longitudinal study covered the period from 2006 to 2011. The data set was derived predominantly from the Omega online discussion forums, with additional data collected from announcements made on the site and background statistical information, also available on the site. In accordance with the longitudinal nature of the study, Founder and member posts were analyzed and compared over the five consecutive years. Since the site was founded in April, we selected five threads that were posted in April for each year between 2006 to 2011 (Phase 1 of the data collection). In total, we qualitatively examined 30 threads during this phase of the study, contributing 1,862 posts from this site. The analysis of these posts showed that there was a change in the way that members interacted online over time, which primarily involved more communication with other members and less with Founder. During the process of analyzing this data set, it was deemed necessary to examine more threads in the site in order to better understand members' interactions with each other. This process led to the collection and analysis of additional data pertaining to the most popular threads during the six-month period from January to June 2011 (Phase 2 of the data collection), which, in total, contributed an additional 714 posts to the data set, comprised of all the messages posted by Founder, as well as those sent by members. Taken together, Phase 1 and Phase 2 of data collection resulted in 2,576 posts.

This type of change in the sampling is not only legitimate in qualitative exploratory studies but expected (Pratt, 2009). In other words, from a grounded theory perspective, it is not uncommon that the researcher collects and analyzes data to decide what else is needed for the development of theory. This process, known as theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), recognizes the complexities of data collection and analysis, which makes it necessary for the researcher to continuously refine the conceptualization of the focal phenomenon. This process often involves gathering extra data for the purpose of theory confirmation or rejection (Vaast & Walsham, 2013).

## 5 Analysis

Adhering to the guidelines of the grounded theory method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we inductively analyzed the data as we collected them. This process was influenced by the focal objective of the study, which regards understanding the role of Founder in developing members' identification with our focal OC. The process was iterative, and the data analysis began after Phase 1 of the data collection. During this phase, we scrutinized Founder's posts, reading and rereading them. However, this scrutiny invoked further questions regarding how members were interacting with Founder and others and how these interactions appeared to be changing over time. Consequently, and as explained above, data collection continued with Phase 2. Upon completion of the data collection, to analyze the collective data set we utilized the constant comparison technique (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). With the help of two qualitative researchers not involved in the study, we identified and categorized incidents, events, and activities through ongoing comparison. This process continued until a category was finally saturated and the aggregated dimensions had become clearly evident.

The longitudinal nature of the study allowed for analysis to be performed for different periods of the OC's development (e.g., founding year of 2006 versus five years later in 2011). We analyzed these references in context to view how OC members talked to each other and to Founder in these different time periods. We observed that messages related to other members increased in the data over time and that members became more interdependent of each other. We interpreted this change as a sign that members had begun to construct their identification with the OC through social interaction. From this stage onwards, the analysis was informed by the concept of identification. To determine identification-related messages, we searched for messages showing pride, respect, and shared values with Founder from the data (Shamir, Zakay, Breinin, & Popper, 1998; Steffens, Haslam & Reicher, 2014).

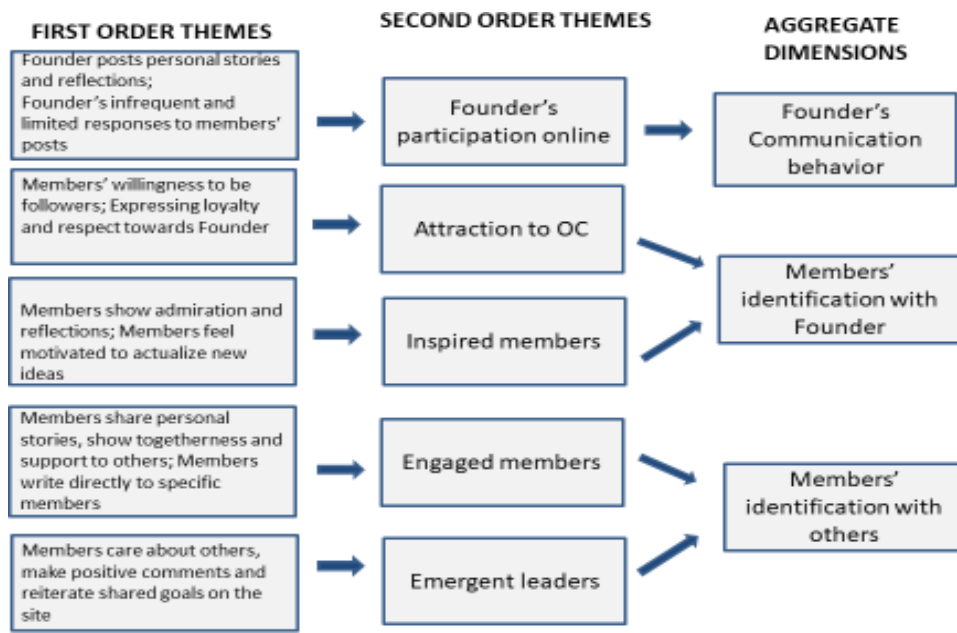


Figure 1. Data Structure Following Data Analysis

We anticipated that identification in the starting phase of the founder-led OC would be in a cognitive and affective state, signaling personal identification with Founder (Ashforth, et al., 2008; Ashforth et al., 2016) and that there would not be as many references to the overall OC or reciprocal communication threads with him or with other OC members. Thereafter, and for the second time period, we searched the data set for messages signaling members' identification with each other. In this stage, we focused on the manifestations of community norms and salience, anticipating that by sharing group norms and prototypical OC behavior in their messages members would construct and strengthen their identification with the OC (Hogg & Reid, 2006). We sought messages containing signals that not only demonstrated one's own identification with the OC but also strengthened that of others: in other words, messages that catered to the individual, offered positive feedback, evinced common goals and practices, as well as those that referred to upcoming face-to-face meetings involving the members (Sivunen, 2006).

During the analytical process, we sought common themes and subsequently categorized into *in vivo* concepts, which considered the language used in the online discussion forums. These findings constituted the first-order themes shown in Figure 1. Then we sought relationships between the different categories in addition to any similarities among the first-order codes, which contributed to the second-order theme. We then linked these themes to develop broader overarching dimensions, as per Gioia, Corley & Hamilton (2013), which, in our case, centered around

the identification construct. Second-order themes and aggregate dimensions were subsequently used in the development of the theoretical model of the study. The final data structure, as shown in Figure 1, summarizes the emerging first- and second-order themes and dimensions that emerged from the analysis.

## 6 Findings

Our findings are structured around the three aggregated dimensions that emerged from the analysis: Founder's communication behavior, members' identification with Founder, and members' identification with others.

### 6.1 Founder's Communication Behavior Online

Founder, a highly reputable individual because of his writings, played a prominent role in organizing and structuring Omega and in posting topics for discussion. During the five-year period of the study, there were more than 60 posts each month from him, with at least one topic being introduced on a daily basis. Collectively, the posts covered a wide range of spiritual issues touching on different aspects of life and relationships—such as fear, loneliness, friendship, and motherhood—with each one conveying a distinct message often derived from Founder's personal experience. All posts during the period of the study developed into threads, as they attracted users' comments and participation online.

Founder's role online had two distinct features. First, Founder acted as the initiator of all discussion topics

by posting entries on a consistent and regular basis. Each thread initiated by Founder began with his experiences and views. For example, one thread, on the topic of friendship (posted in 2011), received more than 200 comments and was one of the most popular posts in its month of entry. In their responses, several members took the opportunity to thank or congratulate Founder for his writings and inspirations: for example, "I want to congratulate the God given gift of imagination.... This [story] is simple but inspiring". Despite the popularity of the thread, Founder made no other attempt to communicate further with his readers on this topic.

In relation to the above, the second feature in Founder's behavior that we observed was that he remained primarily silent on the contributions of his readers pertaining to the discussions they had about the topics that he initiated. Among the total 2,576 posts that we analyzed, there were only four contributions by Founder in the discussions, other than his initial posts. In all cases where he added a comment in an existing discussion, his contribution was brief and responded directly to a comment or question made by an individual member: "I was like you when the episode above took place" (Founder, April 2011). Despite Founder's limited interaction with community members, membership grew steadily and in April 2009 it was announced on the site that there were more than 200,000 visitors a month. In March 2011, Founder announced on the site: "We are again over 2 million unique members this month.... I do not intend to publish the stats every month here, but I want you all to know that we have stabilized at a higher level".

Having presented Founder's role online, in the following section, we show how Founder, despite his limited online participation, exerted a positive influence on members and their identification with the OC, contributing to its membership growth.

## 6.2 Members' Identification with Founder

As an internationally known writer, most members of Founder's online community knew him through his books, offline talks, and appearances. As such, the Omega founder attracted a number of individuals to the site on the basis of his offline reputation. His initial post to the site in 2006 attracted 26 commenting individuals. None of these comments responded to the core theme of the nature of the post itself. Rather, nearly 80% of the comments reflected the individual's admiration toward Founder. The remainder were from individuals who made positive comments regarding the site start-up, with many expressing their willingness to join the community. The members indicated that they were interested in reading Founder's experiences and views:

*Dear [Founder], Thank you for allowing us to accompany you on this journey...I know that walking the path "virtually" with you on this website in no way compares to actually being there with you, but it has given me further understanding of the journey and I am enjoying it greatly. (April 2006)*

*Reading your first post has been a nostalgic and almost reviving experience. I am extremely delighted that you decided to initiate a site where you could post your experiences/views/perspectives on subjects close to your heart. It gives an opportunity to your fans (like me!!) to still have something written by you to read on a regular basis, while anxiously awaiting your next book!!! Thank you!!! (May 2006)*

*Hello there! Just want to say that I find your site interesting enough for me. Useful information and all is arranged good. Thank you for your work. I will visit your site more often from now and I bookmarked it. (June 2006)*

Furthermore, the members showed their excitement regarding the fact that Founder had started the community and signaled their respect to him:

*I just want to congratulate the author with his entrance in the online space, I am sure all my friends ... will be thrilled to hear this wonderful news. I will be visiting frequently and enjoy the presence of a great man in the [online] world. (April 2006)*

*Just found your home page, it's great, it looks like you folks do a great service, keep up the good work. (June 2006)*

As these examples show, personal identification with Founder was demonstrated through pride, respect, and shared values. Founder became the source of attraction to the OC: "I will be visiting frequently"; "bookmarked"; "I am your fan". Identification with Founder led to many of the initial visitors returning to the site, although he was not often present.

Table 1 presents the different modes of showing personal identification with Founder that emerged from the data analysis. According to this, members showed their personal identification with Founder by expressing that they were attracted to, inspired by, and emotionally attached to his initial posts. These responses referred directly to Founder as an individual in the context of his offline reputation: "You serve as an inspiration. You stir the soul. You compel me to fight for my dream". In certain cases, members' posts revealed their immediate reactions to Founder's own posts: "your lovely wise words are always an inspiration, no matter what the day".



**Table 1. Members' Identification with Founder**

<b>Members' responses signaling personal identification with Founder</b>	<b>Exemplary quotes</b>
Attraction	<i>"Great website! Bookmarked! I am impressed at your work!" "It is so interesting. I'm your fan"</i>
Inspiration	<i>"I always enjoy how you courageously speak of lack of courage, fear, doubt and sense of loss of ability and I am inspired to recapture my dream which is echoed in your words" "very inspiring"</i>
Emotional Attachment	<i>"I feel so touched"; "Thanks for posting .... I really needed it"</i>

Members also showed inspiration that revealed their immediate emotional reaction to the topic being presented: "beautiful"; "greatest ever story"; "the best entry"; "very touching, it leaves u speechless"; "and this brought so much tears to my eyes...tears of all emotions". Thus, at this early stage of the founder-led OC, members' identification was mainly a cognitive and affective state reflecting their personal identification with Founder.

### 6.3 Members' Identification with Other Members

In addition to being attracted to Founder's site and to him personally, members shared posts that demonstrated their increasing identification with other members and the community at large. Table 2 provides exemplary quotes that illustrate this category of members' identification with others, which go beyond

merely being inspired by other OC posts. In such posts, members go beyond being actively involved with topics and commenting on how topics have affected them personally to actually becoming involved in "decoding" the Founder's initial post, adding their own interpretations, providing examples from their own experiences, and showing compassion and understanding in response to fellow members' experiences. Emerging community norms, such as inspiration and emotionality, were strongly present in such posts. Posts in this category were frequently addressed to other OC members instead of to Founder, and these communication threads often became interactive and interdependent: "Thank you [member] for sharing such wonderful thoughts with us...it is great to hear and see that there are people out there, people one does not know and may never know who share the same ideas and values" (member to member exchange).

**Table 2. Members' Identification with Other OC Members**

<b>Members' responses signaling identification with OC members</b>	<b>Exemplary quotes</b>
Interpreting post in accordance with emerging community norms	<i>"It is a very good story. In this story the father's honest action not only affects his children's upbringing but he also unknowingly affected others livelihood" "Speaking the truth is sometimes the hardest but most important thing to do, why lie?"</i>
Sharing personal stories that fit the emerging community norms	<i>"It is so true. I remember I was only seven, I was going somewhere by train..." "my sister and me always looked like twins.... Thanks for bringing back the memories".</i>
Supporting/Interacting with others	<i>"Beautiful [member's name] I like it" "What a beautiful, beautiful poem, thanks [member's name] for sharing it"</i>

Some members adopted Founder's approach of using a post to share a personal story and shared personal stories, personal tragedies, and/or their life journeys. Thus, Founder was not only initiating a topic for discussion, and therefore having an influence on the topic of the discussion by directing its focus, he was also impacting how the topic was addressed. However, while these posts imitated the style of Founder, they were no longer direct responses to him but were contributions to the whole OC: "Reading this, reminds me of my last trip to a small town in Vietnam. I was solo traveling there, it was Saturday night..."

Thus, members were not simply learning from Founder's experiences, they were also learning from each other and hence, developing bonds. The following examples illustrate these bonds:

*Dear K, I feel your despair, and I am so sorry for you, but hate won't get you anywhere Lots of Love, Ann.*

*Hello everyone! 😊 I miss talking to everyone here, but I was away from my computer for a while. Dan.*

*Hi Dan! U were missed.*

Evidence also exists of how specific members made attempts to strengthen other members' identification with the OC. In particular, the data showed that these

members actively participated in interactions with other members through responding to them in a caring way, providing positive feedback, and making reference to upcoming face-to-face meetings (e.g., "...if you ever come to my town, do not hesitate to call").

In what follows, one of the members (Yasmin) writes in a thread directly to another member, Rita:

*Yasmin: Rita my friend, how are you? It has been a while.*

*Rita: Long time Y, happy, very happy to see you back here. More often than anything using this place of Founder's OC as a tool for self-development will help you come back here as often as you can ... About your post about the topic—u have raised an interesting angle.*

Other examples of Rita's communications include the following:

*Hi Cathy! u r right, people who cheat may seem to be succeeding in the short term, but life is bigger than short term gls.... I like your earlier avatar much more!*

*Hope to see you more often here, and rather than showing your avatar, it would be nice to see a snap of yours here, Love.*

**Table 3. Characteristics of Members' Posts: A Comparison between April 2006 and April 2011**

Reactions	Thread 1 (2006)	Thread 2 (2006)	Thread 1 (2011)	Thread 2 (2011)
Inspiration and Attraction	73.1% (19)	48.2% (13)	1.2% (1)	0.5% (1)
Emotional Attachment	3.8% (1)	3.7% (1)	47.7% (41)	10.1% (21)
Interpreting posts according to community norms	11.6% (3)	18.5% (5)	39.5% (34)	46.2% (96)
Sharing normative, personal stories	7.7% (2)	22.2% (6)	7% (6)	13.9 % (29)
Supporting/interacting with other members	3.8% (1)	3.7% (1)	2.3 % (2)	23.1% (48)
Other	0% (0)	3.7% (1)	2.3% (2)	6.2 % (13)
Total no. of posts	26	27	86	208

Similar to the virtual team leaders in Sivunen's (2006) study, in this online space, Rita takes on the role of commenting on other members' posts, showing how much she cares, making positive remarks about members' posts, and reiterating the role that the online site can play in members' lives. In another instance, Asmat was recognized by other OC members as an example to others for her strength and perseverance.

*Asmat: I do not know if I really care to be an example for anyone ...ok well maybe for children.*

*Jose: Too late Asmat, you are already an example to everyone here!! ☺. (2011)*

Collectively, members such as Rita and Asmat engaged in communication practices that were prototypical for Omega and fostered its norms. Furthermore, these individuals' communication had common characteristics that led to us calling them emergent leaders within this founder-led OC. Both Rita and Asmat decided to informally enact a positive role in the OC interactions and growth. Thus, these individuals contributed to strengthening members' identification with each other and with the OC more broadly. Therefore, these individuals' online activity justifies their characterization as leaders not only because of their active participation but also on the basis of their contributions to the community and the influence they exert on others by encouraging and supporting them. These are members whose views and presence are sought by others, and who, because of the nature and frequency of their posts, are particularly valued by others.

#### 6.4 Temporal Patterns in Members' Identification with the OC

Due to the longitudinal nature of the data set, it was possible to examine temporal patterns in members' identification with the Omega OC. Accordingly, further analysis of the data was pursued targeting any changes in members' reaction over time. Thus, a systematic analysis of threads was conducted across two time periods, with a five-year gap between them (Period 1 and Period 2) to explore the online interactions between Founder and members in the Omega case. Specifically, two threads in April 2006 were compared with two in April 2011. This comparison, which is indicative of the transformation of members' identification over time in this founder-led OC, showed that with time, members became more open in their own posts, as well as more willing to share personal stories (both happy and sad ones), poems and other readings they had encountered and wanted to share with others. At this point, messages became much more interdependent and mutual but also normative to the community; they were reciprocal and often emotional and inspirational communication

threads, signaling members' identification with one another. Table 3 presents the results of this analysis.

Threads 1 and 2 (Table 3), the first threads of the site developed in 2006, mark the formation of the site and, consequently, the beginning of the OC. These threads show that the members identified themselves with Founder and reveal enthusiasm and willingness to follow his posts online. During the equivalent period five years later (as per Thread 1 and 2 in 2011), the members showed an ability to develop connections with other community members regardless of the topic being discussed, sharing interpretations, reflections, and personal stories. Thus, over the course of time, members started to interact with and learn from one other, to open up, share fears and concerns, provide advice and support, and ultimately strengthen relationships. At this point, five years after the site was started, it has been clear that interactions with other members have become more prominent than interactions with Founder. Although Founder was the reason for joining the site, and, consequently, the basis of their attraction to and identification with the site, following this longitudinal analysis of the posts, the evidence points to the paramount importance of members' increasing identification with other members.

During the first five years of Omega, the OC continued to grow in terms of popularity and membership. While the Founder's reputation continued to play a role in attracting new members, growth was primarily based on the interactions among OC members themselves rather than on the active involvement and ongoing presence of Founder. Moreover, members were clearly aware of Founder's limited participation in discussions: "Founder, it is ok to respond once in a while to so many inputs...maybe u r too busy". This finding shows that for members, it was sufficient that Founder had a presence on the site—he presented his own posts in a consistent and regular manner and shared his views with them. More importantly, however, Founder provided members the opportunity to express their own opinions, share their stories, and reflect and interact with others with similar experiences. The membership growth of the OC in this case is characterized by a transition from identification with Founder to identification with its members. Founder's role in this transition was twofold: first he provided a mutual focus of attention and examples of prototypical messages in this community that provided direction and orientation to community discussions. Founder provided this guidance through initiating topics of discussion among OC members. Second, Founder contributed to providing a space where the OC members and those interested in his writings could talk to each other and, thus, support and learn from each other, regardless of their temporal or spatial differences. Members who were initially strangers became united within this shared space, which was an

opportunity created by Founder. Founder's frequent and consistent behavior in initiating topics for discussion, which drew upon personal stories and reflections, created an environment in which members felt inspired and engaged and which subsequently resulted in sustained interactions on the site. As shown in the previous section, an increased engagement with other members contributed to member identification with the OC. We discuss the theoretical implications of these findings in the section that follows.

## 7 Discussion

OCs have become ubiquitous, with online interactions being a frequent topic of discussion among researchers within the IS field. As is the case with offline, collocated organizations (Nelson, 2003), founders have been identified elsewhere (Kraut & Fiore, 2014; Spiegel et al., 2015) as playing a key role in the success or failure of online groups. Founders are thus associated with both opportunity and risk in terms of OC membership growth and success. By utilizing the concept of identification, we take the position that the risks of OC failure can be mitigated when founders create opportunities for members' identification to develop with the OC and not only with the founders themselves. In a longitudinal study, we examined the case of a founder-led OC and observed that, while members initially experienced personal identification with the founder, over time there was evidence that their identification developed with the OC itself. The case allowed us to examine the factors that enabled the development of members' identification in a founder-led OC.

Based on the findings, we present a theoretical model (Figure 2) that shows the process of developing

members' identification in the context of founder-led OCs over time—this model also accounts for the founder's role in this process. The arrows in Figure 2 are used to recognize patterns of interactions instead of causal and deterministic relationships.

The model depicted in Figure 2 presents three core components—the first two, OC attraction and OC belonging, signify different facets of members' identification in the founder-led OC. The third component, the identification development process, pertains to the factors that enable this transformation from OC attraction to OC belonging. The three components that originate from the data structure presented in Figure 1 (particularly the second-order themes and aggregate dimensions) are supported through our analysis and interpretation of findings.

The first component of the model, OC attraction, explains personal identification with the founder and signifies that in founder-led OCs members are attracted to the site because of who the founders are. At this early point of the OC, members identify with the founder as an individual, while they identify less with the community. The latter component, community identification, is continuously created. In this context, founders become the prototype (e.g., Haslam et al., 2013) of the OC and its members. In the Omega case, there was clear evidence in the members' posts that Founder's offline popularity was an important factor for attracting members to the OC. That is, individual members were attracted to the site by identifying cognitively and affectively with Founder, even though they did not have much reciprocal communication with him.

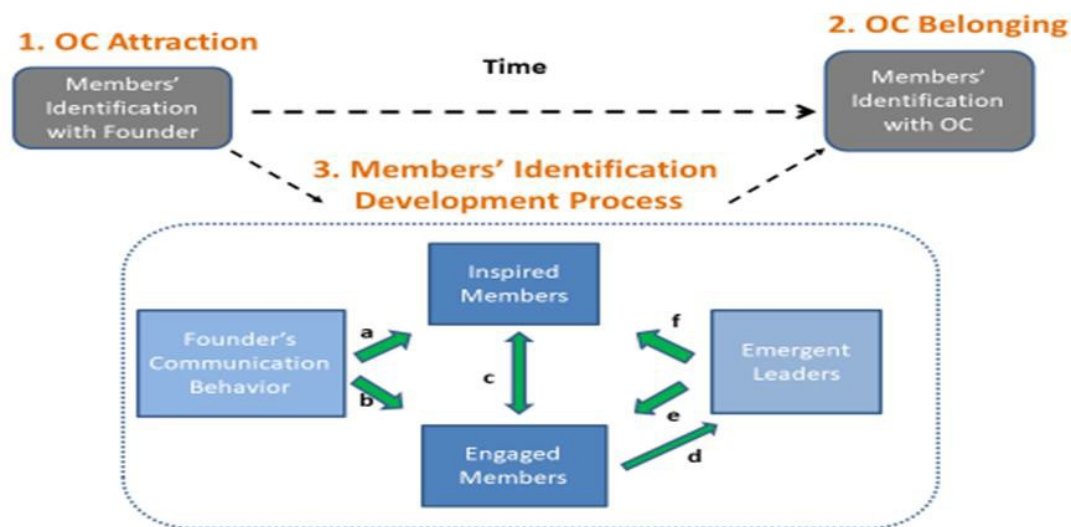


Figure 2. Theoretical Model of the Study: Members' Identification in Founder-Led OCs: Process and Enablers



The second component of the model refers to members' identification with others, which is coupled with a greater sense of community norms and belonging to the community at large. When this belonging occurs, members show less dependency on the OC founder and enjoy increased interactions with each other. We argue that it is through this increase in members' sense of belonging and identification with the OC, rather than simply with the founder, that the founder-led OC's risks of failure diminish. OCs thrive in the context of increased dependency and support from community members and less dependency on the OC founder.

The third component of the model refers to the development process that enables members' personal identification with the founder to be transformed into identification with the OC and explains the move from OC attraction to OC belonging. In a founder-led OC, we contend that the founder's communication behavior online is crucial for shifting members' identification with the founder to identification with the OC. As has been argued in the literature and shown in our case study, the founder plays a key role in OC interactions (Kraut & Fiore, 2014)—the founder's role is denoted in the model as "Founder's communication behavior". The founder of Omega revealed his behavior online through the prototypical content and communication style of the posts in terms of what was written and how it was presented. Thus, Founder acted as a source of inspiration for OC members (Arrow a); in addition, by providing an opportunity for members to engage in a dialogue with each other, Founder facilitates members becoming active contributors to the site (Arrow B). In other words, Founder's active communication behavior online (e.g., the style of the messages and the creation of new discussion threads) both inspires members and offers opportunities for members to engage and interact with one another. These interactions were further enabled by Founder's passive communication behavior (e.g., being silent and providing space for mutual discussions between the members and providing time for leaders to emerge), which was conducive to members becoming more engaged in the online discussions. During this process, members also began to identify with each other through reciprocal communication (Arrow c), while opportunities were also created for some members to emerge as leaders. These emergent leaders were individuals who not only frequently participated in OC discussions, but they also showed that they cared for other members, made positive comments about others, and reiterated the shared goals of the community.

This emergence of leaders from existing members (Arrow d) further strengthened members' identification with each other and with the OC at large. These characteristics are in accordance with Sivunen's (2006) study on strategies that virtual team leaders tend

to adopt to develop members' identification with the team. In other words, by complementing Founder's role and encouraging OC activity, emergent leaders with their own online posts contributed to the manifestation of inspired and engaged members (Arrows e, f). During this phase, the reciprocal and prototypical communication between the emergent leaders and other members played an important role (Hogg & Reid, 2006), while Founder, through his active and passive communication behavior, simply became the means through which members could develop identification with other members who shared similar interests and modes of thinking.

Collectively, the dimensions associated with the three components of the theoretical model show that members' identification in founder-led OCs goes through phases and develops over time. As members begin to interact with one another, identification changes from being personally oriented and focused on the founder, to being socially oriented, encompassing other OC members and the OC at large. Thus, identification shifts from being cognitive and affective identification (Ashforth et al., 2016) with the founder to something that is based on and constructed through communication with other members. As such, it is the members' communication with each other that begins to play a larger role in their identification with the community and contributes to identification with the OC. The longitudinal nature of our study shows that, as time progressed, posts by the Omega founder played a different role: they provided developmental opportunities for members to share their own interpretations and reflections with others to obtain feedback and to benefit from learning and knowledge-sharing with the collective. Furthermore, these interactions among the members were dynamic, in that they not only were an outcome of the shared space, and these interactions were also inputs to further interactions in the online forums, without which the OC would not have been sustainable. The fact that this OC grew in terms of number of members provides strong evidence that members found value in such interactions and, hence, that they wanted to be part of the OC. As has been proposed elsewhere, rising levels of identification have a tendency to motivate members to increase their contact with the organization (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994). Active and engaging participation supports members' sense of belonging, which, in turn, promotes knowledge sharing and ultimately strengthens OC identification.

## **7.1 Theoretical Contributions**

The study makes theoretical contributions to the literature in the areas of founder-led OCs, online identification, and emergent leadership. We explore these areas below.

This study provides insights on founder-led OCs, which is a type of OC that researchers have devoted little attention to. In these OCs, founders constitute the main source for attracting and retaining members. Attracting members is particularly important at the early stages of OC development as, without a sufficient number of members, there may not be a community. The founder carries the responsibility not only for attracting members in the early stages but also for retaining these members. The current study reinforces a previously stated view that founders play an important role in online groups (Kraut & Fiore, 2014). The study extends research in this field by showing that the founder's reputation is a main source of attraction to the OC and can therefore serve as a means of mitigating the risk of failing to attract members at the early stages of OC development. Furthermore, the study provides theoretical insights into the specific roles that founders can exercise to hedge the risks of founder-led OCs. In particular, the findings of our case study show that the founder can mitigate the risk of failing to retain members by creating opportunities, through their communication patterns, for members to develop identification with other members and with the OC itself, which ultimately contributes to members' increasing sense of OC belonging. These findings are consistent with those of Bateman et al. (2011) who argue that affective community commitment is an explanatory factor for members' increased participation in OC discussions.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the literature on OC members' identification and, in particular, to how this develops over time in the context of founder-led OCs. While there has been research explaining why members may identify with certain OCs and not others (Ren et al., 2007), this work is the first that uncovers how founders may contribute to the OC members' identification with the community. We have also demonstrated how these different types of identifications may occur in succession in OCs—first with OC attraction, through the cognitive and affective processes of personal identification with the founder, and then with OC belonging where the social processes of identification shape and are shaped by the members engaging in online behavior. Accordingly, we have found evidence that identification is a dynamic process in the OC context; that is, it can evolve over time. In the founder-led context of our study, we have shown how this process can be enabled by founders' communication behavior online. Linked to these aspects, we also extend theory on identification by showing empirically how identification can be viewed not only as a cognitive and affective phenomenon based on internal self-categorization processes between oneself and the OC founder (see, e.g., Ashforth et al., 2016), but also as an ongoing social process, constructed and sustained by the interaction between community members.

Finally, the study contributes to the field of emergent leadership, both in founder-led OCs and in the wider, more general OC context. The findings extend the literature on online leadership by showing how online leaders can emerge in founder-led OCs and not simply in self-organized OCs, which have been studied in the literature. In contrast to the existing literature that has shown that emergent leaders may become officially appointed leaders due to the centrality they have in the network and their organizational and communication skills (Johnson et al., 2015; O'Mahony & Ferraro, 2007), our study has found that emergent leaders may perform alongside appointed leaders, such as founders, in our case. Because founder-led OCs experience risks of failure since sole responsibility is held by a single individual, emergent leaders may mitigate these risks by taking some responsibility away from the founders. Thus, the findings of the study add to the extant scholarship on online leadership (Faraj et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2015) by providing new knowledge about emergent leaders, who, through their own interactions with OC members, facilitate membership growth and promote OC interactions and identification with the community (Sivunen, 2006). Through the active attempts by emergent leaders to strengthen member identification with an OC, communities can thrive without a formal leader and without the active participation of the initial founder.

## **8 Conclusions and Implications**

This research was based on a single case study of a founder-led OC and was driven by an interest in understanding how the failure risks of founder-led OCs can be mitigated. From a theoretical perspective, the research targets generalizing from this case by contributing to theory development. In particular, the findings provide new insights for the body of knowledge on online identification; in particular, our findings reveal modes of building successful founder-led OCs and illuminate the role of founders in this context. Although our study was based on a case involving a founder-led OC with an internationally known founder, we take the position that the model that we developed (Figure 2) and its related contributions are not unique to this case. For example, there are numerous OCs formed by well-known individuals (e.g., celebrities, corporate leaders, and activists) whose established reputation plays a key role in attracting members to their online activities. Nevertheless, other cases need to be investigated. Specifically, cross-case analyses could be used to evaluate variations in how members' interactions and dynamics unfold in different types of founder-led OCs. Cross-case comparisons could also be used to show whether other successful founder-led OCs show similar identification processes. It would also be interesting to examine how OCs with active founders contribute to members' identification with each other

as well to the emergence of new leaders. Furthermore, within the context of successful OCs—i.e., those with a growing membership—the behavior of reputable founders should be examined in relation to nonreputable ones to identify similarities and differences. In addition, the study has revealed the dynamic and temporal nature of identification within OCs by uncovering the evolving process of members' initial personal identification with the founder and their shifting identification with other community users. Additional research is needed to examine the role of emergent leaders in building identification among OC members. Finally, while the study has shown that building members' identification with the OC is a factor involved in community growth, other factors that may contribute to the OC membership growth of founder-led OCs also need to be examined.

Despite the increasing interest among academics regarding OCs, founder-led OCs have remained largely unexplored. In addition to elucidating the role of founders in developing identification among OC members, our study lays the foundation for future research in the area of founder-led OCs. We believe that there are numerous opportunities for conducting research in this specific domain. Future research could examine how founder-led OCs are structured, the different stages they experience for their development as well as the different roles that are enacted within it. Moreover, research questions might include: How do founders' behavior differ in different types of OCs, such as online productive communities and interest-based communities? How do founders' online activities impact members' online activities? How can members exert a role in the governance of founder-led OCs? Further, research is also needed to understand how founders and emergent leaders can work alongside each other: Are there different roles that can be enacted by each? Finally, longitudinal research may target examining structural and leadership changes in founder-led OCs over an extended period of time and at different stages of the OC lifecycle.

This study also has practical implications. While our study did not treat the emergence of leaders as a component of a founder's deliberate attempt to mitigate the risks of declining membership, there are nevertheless lessons to be learned for other founders. We have shown that it is not only the founder's reputation that results in OC membership growth and in developing members' identification with the OC. Founders' reputation may contribute to OC attraction but not to OC belonging. Furthermore, attraction to OC develops through the messages the founder shares with members who are familiar with his or her reputation. It is through the founder's messages to community members that OC norms and prototypical OC communication are created. Thus, founders who succeed in maintaining and fostering their reputation

through the messages they send to the OC are more likely to attract members to the community.

The practical implications of this study are also related to OC founders and their communication behaviors after they have attracted sufficient members to the community. In this phase of identification, it is important that founders target creating opportunities for members to become active contributors on the site and to emerge as leaders. This desire may require founders to be silent and to provide space for mutual discussions between the members and time for informal leaders to emerge. These actions, as we have shown in our study, will increase members' identification through the perceptions of belonging to and valuing the community and will thus actively contribute to the OC sustainability and growth.

Finally, the results of this study have practical implications for OC platform developers. Designing and structuring the user interface of an OC platform in a certain manner could enhance the development of group norms and identification with the OC. By making messages highly visible to community members who are the most aligned with group norms and by including prototypical characteristics of the community, the platform design could enhance members' identification with the OC. Enhancing the visibility of messages—depending on, for example, whether they use specific words or include elements that are prototypical for the community—could foster the salience of the community to its members and could further enhance member identification with the OC.

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