

# How Fluidity Drives the Evolution of Group Norms in Open Online Communities: A Dialectical Model

*Completed Research Paper*

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## Abstract

*This paper develops a dialectic process model to explain how group norms evolve in self-organizing open online communities. Archived data collected from a celebrity fandom community is used for a netnography study, complemented by an interview with the community administrator. The analysis of the data reveals that the fluidity of online communities triggers changes in norm conformity, leading to increased peer-to-peer moderations. This raises contradictions in norm schemas (clarity and alignment with the community identity). I identify drivers that affect the resolution of norm contradictions. This paper develops an iterative model to explain how norm contradictions are continuously raised due to fluidity and resolved by community members. The findings have theoretical and practical implications for the sustainability and fluidity of online communities from a group norm perspective.*

**Keywords:** Group norms, dialectic process, contradictions, online community, case study

## Introduction

An online community (OC) is a computer-mediated virtual space containing various functionalities such as forums, chat areas, polls, or social group creation. OC platforms are businesses that have adopted a business model, positioning themselves as major players in web-based commerce, similar to Reddit, which has recently become the third most visited website, surpassing Facebook. The business model of OC platforms is rooted in the flexibility and autonomy of users creating OCs and governing them. Members are more engaged and motivated to remain in OCs when they have the opportunity to create and influence the way OCs are managed. Group norms developed by OC members play a central role in the sustainability of OCs.

Referred to as 'e-tribes,' different OCs have distinct group norms that regulate the use of slang, abbreviations, writing styles, preferred words, and emoticons, among other elements. OC members employ these group norms to enforce organizational routines that reflect the identity of the OCs. Newcomers are expected to grasp these group norms and behave accordingly to gain acceptance as OC members. Typically, group norms are encoded in articles and comments posted by veterans, and newcomers are expected to learn these norms through self-study or peer moderation. OCs with strong group norms that discourage anti-social behavior can reduce the costs associated with moderation and enhance OC sustainability. Research indicates that robust group norms contribute positively to reducing hate speech in online communities (Wachs et al., 2022; Schultz, 2022). OCs with strong and positive group norms tend to attract more voluntary members who actively moderate problematic content through formal or informal interactions to maintain these norms.

However, predicting and controlling the emergence and evolution of group norms in OCs can be challenging. Due to the dynamic nature of OCs (Faraj et al., 2011), membership turnover occurs over time, creating a dilemma for OC members in managing group norms within autonomous OCs. Established members (often referred to as 'oldies') with extensive knowledge of group norms and active involvement in norm enforcement may eventually leave OCs, while new members (often referred to as 'newbies') joining OCs are expected to have limited knowledge of these norms. Structurally, OCs often struggle with low-level norm conformity, leading to increased moderation efforts and potentially turbulent conflicts that can result in the decline or dissolution of OCs (de Valck, 2007). Turbulent conflicts sometimes lead to changes in the nature of OCs. For instance, an online brand community where customers co-create value can transform into a setting characterized by co-destruction as membership changes and toxic behaviors increase (Pera et al., 2021). Norm enforcement also presents challenges, as community members may not share a uniform understanding of group norms due to their informal nature. Enforcing norms becomes difficult when parties have differing interpretations of these norms. Shared rules among OC members may change over time, with rules considered appropriate today potentially becoming outdated in the future. Moreover, some rules may gain importance during specific stages of an OC's lifecycle while being less significant during other stages. Another challenge is managing tensions arising from norm enforcement activities. Moderation activities by peer members can lead to continuous conflicts between those trying to uphold traditional norms and those advocating for new norm arrangements, challenging established norms. Indeed, group norms are shaped and evolve not only through passive perception by members but also through active negotiation and contestation among members within the group, constrained by the historical and ideological continuity of the group (Reicher, 1996). Contradictions within group norms are key elements in understanding how group norms evolve as outcomes of negotiations and conflicts among forces with differing interests and preferences. Despite these challenges, many open OCs successfully maintain group norms despite high levels of fluidity. Understanding how such self-organizing OCs preserve group norms, a crucial factor for OC sustainability (Feldman, 1984), is vital for the success of OCs. The existing literature lacks studies that elucidate how autonomous OC members address this dilemma. Consequently, the research question addressed in this paper is as follows:

RQ. How does fluidity drive the evolution of group norms in self-organizing open online communities?

A netnography study based on a real case was conducted to answer this question. Data were collected from a celebrity fandom community, where members autonomously updated their community rules (i.e., group norms) through debates among community members, including new members who joined the OC throughout its lifecycle.

This paper draws upon the theoretical perspective of the dialectic view of organizational development and change (Benson, 1977). In this view, organizations are understood as "a concrete, multi-leveled phenomenon beset by contradictions that continuously undermine their existing features. Their direction depends upon the interests and ideas of people and their ability to produce and maintain a social formation" (Benson, 1977, pp. 1). The dialectic view is inherently process-oriented, considering entities as nested processes evolving over time (Farjoun, 2019). Specifically, this study utilizes the Dialectic Framework for Institutional Changes (DFIC) proposed by Seo and Creed (2002). The framework provides explanations for how contradictions arise under specific conditions and how agents mobilize logic and resources to build collective forces for action. The dialectic view equips researchers with constructs, such as the emergence of conflicting views, the formation of a network of opposing groups, and the use of power in processes to resolve changes, enabling a deeper understanding of the evolutionary process of group norms in OCs. The study examines how conflicting views emerge to form powerful groups and how they are resolved through the intervention of OC members who possess varying degrees of power. This approach allows us to comprehend different groups of actors, conflicting perspectives, and power dynamics contributing to changes in group norms.

Answering the research question carries both theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical standpoint, this paper offers OC scholars insights into how OC members address the challenge of maintaining norm conformity in open OCs amid high fluidity. It also elucidates how group norms evolve in open OCs without centralized authority. The way self-organizing community members preserve their identity while simultaneously attracting new members through the evolution of group norms remains unexplored. Additionally, the findings of this study are expected to provide OC platform managers with insights for designing OC platforms that assist OC members in developing strong group norms by

investigating how OC members employ OC platform features within dialectical processes to change group norms.

## **Conceptual Background**

### ***Group norms***

Group norms are generally accepted behavioral patterns of members used to regulate members' behavior, often supported by sanctions (Ehrlich and Levin, 2005). Group norms are enforced to facilitate group survival, reduce uncertainties in member behavior, prevent embarrassing interpersonal problems, and clarify group identity (Feldman, 1984). Studies on group norms in OCs are limited and biased toward identifying factors that affect the formation of group norms. Chatman and Flynn (2001) argue that demographic heterogeneity has a negative relationship with cooperative group norms in the early stages, but its impact weakens as interactions among group members increase over time. The development of group norms in an OC context has been investigated more recently. Ivaturi and Chua (2019) recently examined how framing by a moderator can develop group norms. According to their findings based on case studies of two OCs, frame construction, frame credibility, and frame salience have direct and indirect influences on the formation of group norms. Based on a social identity and social constructionist perspective, Postemes et al. (2000) found that group norms (represented by consistency in terms of message contents and forms) emerge in randomly composed student groups in a course. Students use different contents and forms when they communicate outside of the groups. This means that students identify themselves with different social identities for communication in different groups.

While group norms have been widely studied in various management contexts, studies on the development processes of group norms are relatively rare. Feldman (1984) proposes four ways of norm development, including explicit statements by supervisors or coworkers, critical events, primacy, and carry-over behavior from past situations. Bettenhausen and Murnighan (1985) investigated how group norms regarding appropriate behaviors for unstructured decision-making emerge in newly formed groups. They argue that group members who are strangers to each other use scripts based on their past experiences in similar circumstances to choose appropriate behaviors for interacting with other members when they do not know how to solve an uncertain problem. Group norms emerge as a product of interactions among group members to resolve differences in their scripts and definitions of new situations for decision-making through self-reflection and negotiations. In this process, the role of active members is critical, as they are the drivers in establishing and legitimizing certain behavioral patterns as group norms. Their findings provide implications for understanding how group norms evolve as newcomers interact with existing members to interpret and make changes to the norms.

On the other hand, studies that reveal how group norms are formed in online communities are rare. Burnett and Bonnici (2003) classify group norms as explicit (codified in documents such as FAQs) and implicit norms (not codified but understood and informally used by the majority of group members) in online communities like Usenet. In such environments, observing others' behavior is difficult, as it relies solely on text messages. Recently, Fiesler and Bruckman (2019) also take a similar stance, stating that group norms in OCs are formed through emergent practice and observation, migration from other OCs, or formalization by coded rules. Based on these studies, I also define group norms to include coded community rules and informally accepted practices within OCs.

### ***The governance of OCs***

Governance is an important issue in OCs as it connects individual activities to the social objectives outlined in normative orders (Horwitz, 1990). The characteristics of OCs, such as their formation, identity, and objectives, add complexity to understanding the governance structures within them. Governance is crucial for OCs to achieve their goals. In many OCs, governance is practiced through norms (Bauer et al., 2016). This practice varies depending on the purpose of the OCs. For open-source communities, governance activities aim to coordinate software development efforts by distributed contributors (He et al., 2020). In online brand communities, moderators facilitate discussions on new product ideas and collect feedback on existing products from community members to maintain positive brand loyalty (Cooper et al., 2019). Wikipedia also employs governance mechanisms to resolve conflicts among contributors during article development. In contrast, many other OCs appoint moderators with the authority to vet articles posted by

members and enforce community rules. The role of moderators is challenging because community maintenance work is highly contextual, as behavior celebrated in one community may be unacceptable in another (McGillicuddy et al., 2016). Community member reactions change over time as the emergent properties of the OCs evolve. The high level of fluidity in OCs means that the boundaries and identities of OCs continuously change as community members join and leave. Frequent changes in membership naturally make shared norms within the community prone to change, as the balance of opposing views among members shifts more frequently than in traditional organizations.

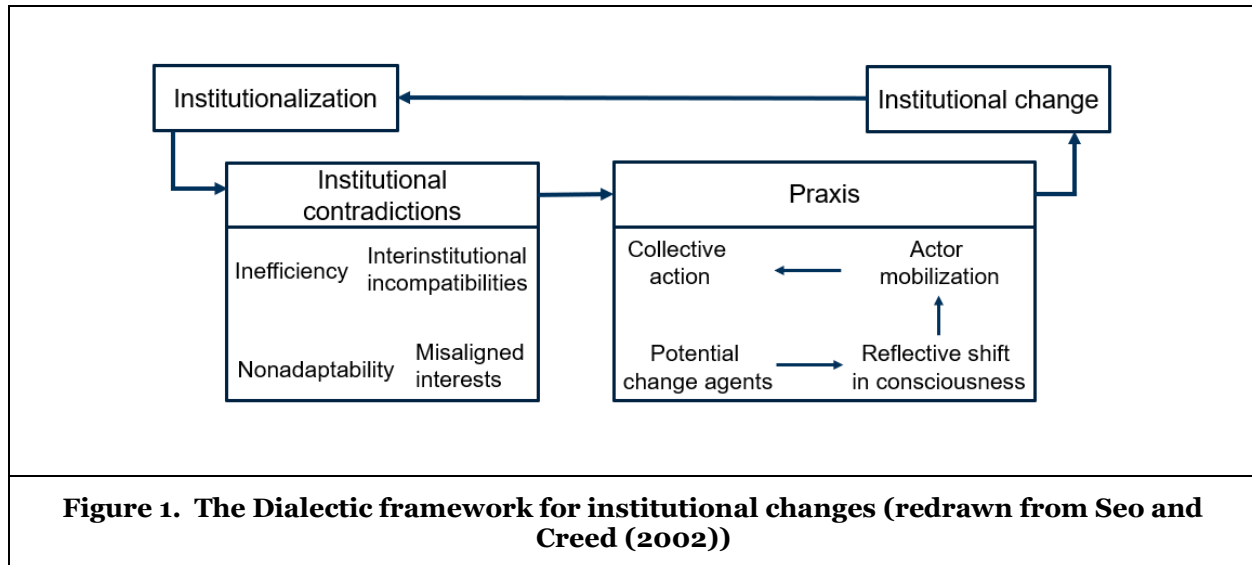
Sibai et al. (2015) argue that OCs are overseen by different governance structures, including market, hierarchy, and clan governance (Shah, 2006; Wiertz et al., 2010). Clan governance relies on social (or peer-to-peer) moderation, in which autonomous group members exercise moderation against peer members to maintain group norms. Group norms based on social moderation can effectively regulate OC behaviors and promote community well-being (Dym and Fiesler, 2020). However, this form of social norm enforcement can lead to conflicts, as enforcement may disadvantage groups and individuals not represented or involved in creating the group norms (McDonald and Forte, 2020). Most OCs have rulebooks, but interpretations may differ among different members. These differences often lead to ongoing arguments among members when one member's behavior is viewed negatively by some and neutrally by others. Furthermore, 'Oldies,' the group that established the social norms within the OCs, may have centralized power over new members (Kiene et al., 2016). Such power imbalances can contribute to conflicts regarding the unequal application of rules to old and new members, as powerful groups often hold superior positions based on their dependence, entitlements, contributions, and self-worth (Kabanoff, 1991). Additionally, the absence of a hierarchical structure means that small group networks within the community can influence power dynamics among community members. Oldies' networks often have a significant impact when disagreements arise between an oldie and a newbie. Social moderation should be understood in the context of these evolving power structures over time.

### ***Contradictions and a dialectical framework***

Contradiction, tension, paradox, and dialectics are commonly used in process studies that investigate how organizational changes occur. I use the definitions of these constructs provided by Putnam and her colleagues (Putnam et al., 2016) in this study. Contradiction refers to the existence of polar opposing elements that are interdependent and simultaneously negate one another. Tension indicates a mental state of stress, anxiety, or discomfort mainly caused by the existence of contradiction when an actor needs to choose between conflicting elements. An example of contradiction is the choice between lengthy and short rules. Lengthy rules describe what needs to be done considering all possible circumstances, aiming to remove any misunderstandings. Shortened rules describe only the core elements of what should be done in key circumstances. An organizational manager may feel tension when organizational members are equally divided in favour of two conflicting rule schemas. Dialectics refers to a process in which conflicting elements (thesis and antithesis) cause tension to be resolved through a 'push-pull' interaction between the elements to form a synthesis. Actors' agencies play a central role in this process. Paradox indicates an organizational state in which conflicting elements coexist in a ludicrous and ironic manner. Organizational change through a dialectical process aimed at resolving negativity may unexpectedly strengthen the negativity.

Organizational scholars have taken two approaches to understand how organizational contradictions are managed: the paradox and dialectical perspectives (Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2017). The former focuses on understanding how conflicting elements coexist and how tensions are managed, while the latter focuses on understanding how tensions are transformed into new organizational arrangements. These two perspectives are not mutually exclusive but complementary. Hargrave and Van de Ven (2017) proposed a process model for managing organizational contradictions that incorporates a sense-making approach and power distribution. They argue that managers need to consider the sense-making approach (accept or resist) and power distribution (stable symmetrical or unstable asymmetrical) between conflicting forces to take different managerial actions: synergy, assimilation, mutual adjustment, and conflict (or overcoming conflicting elements).

Seo and Creed (2002) proposed a dialectic framework for institutional changes (DFIC) based on four basic principles of dialectical analysis (social construction, totality, contradiction, and praxis) proposed by Benson (1977), as shown in Figure 1.



The framework provides scholars with constructs and relationships based on a dialectical perspective to understand how institutional contradictions are developed and resolved by human agents to form new organizational arrangements. According to the framework, contradictions within institutes emerge due to inefficiency, non-adaptability, interinstitutional incompatibilities, and misaligned interests. Contradictions cause tension within organizations, and praxis plays a central role in resolving the tension and leading to organizational changes. Praxis is a process in which human agents analyze the pros and cons of alternative arrangements (antithesis) and mobilize resources and logic to initiate collective actions for change. For praxis to occur, the emergence of potential change agents is required to bring about an institutional-level reflective shift in consciousness regarding the contradictions. Change agents mobilize institutional logics and resources to initiate collective actions that may lead to institutional changes. Seo and Creed (2002) argue that the DFIC is a general framework applicable to a broad range of organizational changes. Therefore, the above constructs, which are generic in dialectical processes in OCs, are used in this study.

## Research Approach

I use a case study to investigate the research questions, as these questions are novel in the literature with a very small number of studies (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). I selected an OC that went through a group norm evolution lifecycle. A netnography (Kozinets, 2002) is first used to develop a 'thick description' of how group norms evolved in the OC. Netnography uses archived data accumulated on the Internet, therefore it does not intervene in real-world phenomena in OCs. Secondly, I used interview data obtained from the OC administrators, who created and managed the website, to complement the netnography outcomes. The interview was conducted three times. The first interview was to understand the history of the OC, including main events, members, and its external relationships. The second one was to gather contextual information on the main events identified from the data analysis. The contextual information was used to define events and actors. The third one was to verify the process stories I established based on the data. Apart from the three formal interviews, I frequently contacted the administrator to interpret events while reading the articles and comments on the boards of the OC.

Langley et al. (2013) distinguish process studies into two categories based on ontologies of the social world: substantive metaphysics and process metaphysics. This study is based on the former and focuses on investigating how attributes of group norms (things) change over time. Abdallah et al. (2018) label this kind of study as evolutionary process stories.

## **Case selection**

Based on purposive sampling, I selected a Korean celebrity fandom OC, which I will refer to as 'J gallery' hereafter. J gallery is an online community where members share information about a K-pop star, Jung Dong-ha ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jung\\_Dong-ha](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jung_Dong-ha)), including video clips, photos, and reviews of concerts. J gallery was created by members of one of the communities within DC Inside (<http://dcinside.com>), also known simply as DC, one of the largest OC platforms in South Korea. Initially formed as a community of digital camera users, DC community members express their opinions using comical graphics and parodic images in numerous OCs (referred to as 'galleries') that are categorized based on various subjects, including politics, sports, dramas, films, and music, among others. Communities within DC have shaped a unique Internet culture characterized by a 'anything goes' attitude, which includes the use of explicit language and impoliteness to promote freedom of expression (Yang, 2019).

The K-pop star has two online fan communities: 'Lovely Songs for Dong Ha' (LSD) and J gallery. LSD is the official fan community with around 10,000 members. It is hosted on Daum, another OC platform in South Korea. Daum hosts many OCs where visitors need to undergo a formal verification process to confirm their real identity and become members of the OCs. OCs on Daum are centrally managed by OC owners who have full access to the real identities of members. Therefore, OCs on Daum Café typically have a different culture characterized by formal language and a strong emphasis on respecting others, enforced by strict sanctions in case of community rule violations. J gallery, on the other hand, has fewer members (around 1,000), but due to the openness of the DC platform, more articles and comments are posted by its members. There is a significant overlap in memberships between both communities, with most J gallery members also being members of LSD. J gallery began as one of the communities within DC in July 2011, but it migrated to its own website, J gallery.com, outside of DC in August 2012, following the unexpected closure of the gallery in July 2012 due to conflicts between the fandom and the management company to which Jung Dong-ha belonged at the time, just before its first anniversary. J gallery reopened in July 2014 when the community migrated back to DC. During this period, the K-pop star posted several articles on the board of J gallery.com, which led to a large number of LSD members joining the gallery. This resulted in cultural clashes, as two groups of members with different OC cultures coexisted in a virtual space. I used archive data from J gallery.com.

This community possesses ideal characteristics for use in this study. Firstly, the community started with a unique culture that distinguished it from other communities, naturally creating opportunities for cultural conflicts between oldies and newbies. Operating as an independent community outside DC naturally led to increased heterogeneity in community membership and conflicts, as new members joining the community tended to be unfamiliar with DC culture. Secondly, during that period, many new members joined the community, resulting in a meaningful power balance between oldies and newbies. The community provides a unique opportunity to understand how cultural conflicts between oldies and newbies unfold. Newbies face challenges in adapting to the distinct culture in order to become part of the community. Thirdly, members autonomously developed their own community rules (group norms) without central authority, leading to active debates on the rules through peer-to-peer moderation. Finally, the OC went through OC lifecycle stages, including creation, growth, conflict, and decline over two years, making it ideal for studying the process aspects of OC lifecycles and how fluidity impacts the evolution of community norms. In the community, traditions, including writing styles, references to the celebrity, preferred words, and slang, were all encoded as community rules.

## **Data collection and analysis**

J gallery uses a bulletin board system (BBS), which provides a number of virtual boards on which community members post articles as shown in Figure 2. On the landing page of the community, the latest articles are listed. Other members can make comments on the posted articles. I was able to access the database of the OC that stores all the activities of the community members during the entire period between September 2012 and July 2014 before they migrated back to the DC platform. OC members created 56,777 postings and 428,769 comments during the active period. There are 539 registered members in the dataset. Oldies constitute 103 members who migrated from DC. The community allows anonymous members to post articles and comments. The process data in this study includes event and state data concerned with group norm evolution. Event data includes any articles and comments used in moderation activities.

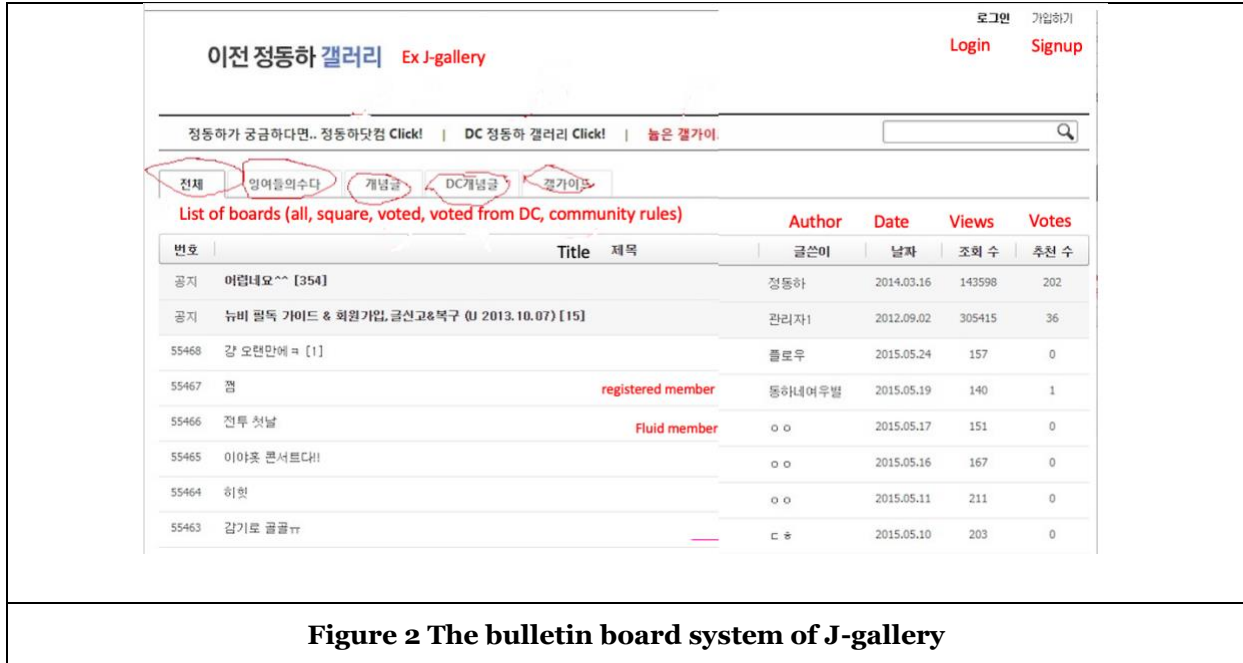


Figure 2 The bulletin board system of J-gallery

I searched articles and comments related to moderation from the website database using SQL queries. The keywords used in the search include common words used in moderation, such as “community rule,” “breach,” “sub-grouping,” “wrong wording,” “copyright,” “daknoonsam (meaning understanding the gallery for at least 3 months before you post an article),” “unfair,” and “troll.” The search resulted in a total of 1,651 articles and 32,000 comments. I read all articles and comments to filter out those that are not related to group norms. After this process, 942 articles were used in the analysis. For the state data, I collected data on the number of memberships (oldies and newbies), posted articles and comments, moderation exercises, and attributes of group norms over time. State data provides contextual information for understanding event data.

In the first round of coding, I focused on identifying group norms. I derived group norms by analyzing the reasons for moderation. In the first step, I used a constant comparative process (Glaser and Strauss, 1999) to develop categories of moderation reasons with the help of the OC administrator. Categories were developed through iterations between the author’s familiarity with the community and understanding the reasons for moderations. The author read articles referred to in the moderation articles or comments, tracking back up to 2 days before and more if further tracking was required. This process involved forming initial clusters of tasks to minimize differences within the clusters while maximizing differences between the clusters. An initial set of categories was then developed from these clusters. New norms were compared with earlier norms in the same category. If a newly categorized norm appeared to be different from other norms in the same category, it would be reconciled by attempting to refine the definitions and properties of these categories to accommodate the new data. This process of constantly comparing new data with existing codes continued until a level of stability was reached. From 12 initial categories, the list was ultimately reduced to six categories.

In the second round of coding, I analyzed how discussions on group norms unfolded during the evolution of group norms. For this, I coded the moderator, target members, concerned norm, and the method of moderation (either via posting a new article or comments attached to existing articles). The ontologies used for the coding are as follow. There are three types of actors involved in social moderation activities of the community: oldies (O) who migrated from DC, newbies (N) who registered on the website, and fluid nomadic (F) users who did not register in the community but used variant nicknames to post articles and comments on the board (I will refer to those users as ‘fluid members’ hereafter). Moderations are exercised by indicating target user(s) or all (A) members of the community. Moderation activities are exercised via an article (D) or comments (C). Moderation activities exercised as articles have a much stronger impact than those via comments. Articles are considered as surfaces of the community as they are visible to all visitors,

while comments are underwater, as they are only seen when a visitor clicks on the corresponding article. Due to the debatable nature of moderation activities, articles posted for moderation attract a large readership and a large number of comments.

Each moderation exercise is coded as a 4-tuple (moderator member type, target member type, method, related norm). For example, a moderation article (D) posted by an oldie (O) that blames another article posted by a fluid user (F) that contains defamation contents (IC) is coded as (O, F, D, IC). After reading each article and attached comments, the authors generated 942 tuples accordingly. Oldies exercised a total of 544 moderations, newbies 62, and fluid nomadic users 334. 667 moderations were exercised via articles and 275 moderations via comments. 251 moderations were against all members of the community, 86 oldies, 167 newbies, and 401 against fluid nomadic users. IC was the main reason for the moderation exercises with a total of 217 cases. LK caused 187 cases, IM 155, IW 132, IB 47, and SG 40 cases.

I analyzed the articles to understand how contradictions in the group norms were caused, by whom, what the responses from other members were, and how they were resolved. I also read related articles during the core periods in which the group norms were updated and double-checked our reconstruction of the group norm evolution process with the OC administrator. I operationalized contradictions by identifying any articles and comments that discussed the attributes of community rules. Any texts that represented different understandings of group norms were conceptualized as contradictions in group norms. These included differences in the required abstract (clarity) level of rules, the application target of the rules (casual visitors, for example), and alignment with the OC identity. For opposing forces, I coded the actors involved in the discussions and their stance on the contradictions. Change agents were identified based on their role in initiating a movement to change group norms in the discussion to resolve the tensions caused by the contradictions.

## The Evolution of Group Norms at J Gallery

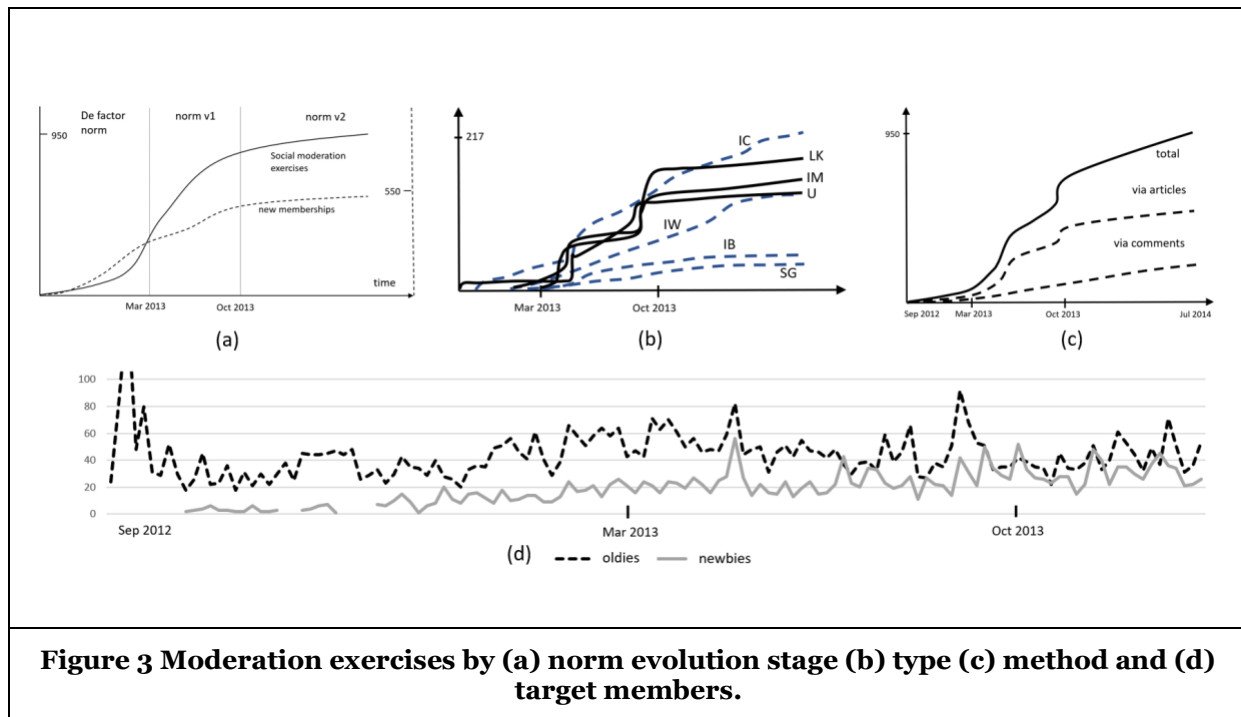
Based on the first coding analysis, I identified six group norms in J gallery as follows:

*Norm 1 (inappropriate wording, IW):* Use wordings that are widely accepted in DC culture. Moderation is applied to articles and comments that do not comply with DC culture. Examples include the use of polite expressions (as this goes against the DC culture of 'anything goes') and the incorrect way of addressing the celebrity and other members of the community. For instance, the celebrity is expected to be referred to as "J" or "J hyung (meaning brother)" in the articles or comments but not as "Mr. J" or "my darling J." The Korean language has two ways of expressions: polite expressions, which can be used for elders or strangers, and informal expressions that can be used for younger individuals and friends of the same age. Polite expressions are against the 'anything goes' culture as they make writers filter out words that are not appropriate for elders and strangers. Linguistic fit with the target OC is one of the reasons for the exit of community members (Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil et al., 2013), and community members tend to maintain their preferred linguistic style in OCs.

*Norm 2 (sub-grouping, SG):* Do not create sub-groups within the community. Sub-grouping refers to any articles or comments in which a member indicates a friendship with certain member(s) or includes topics of interest to only a sub-group. In DC culture, members are asked to refrain from forming sub-groups within communities as they can isolate other members from certain topics discussed among the sub-group members, thus becoming a barrier for newbies to develop a sense of belonging. This is a similar concept to 'circlejerking,' which is a slang term referring to the mutual appeal to and gratification of shared interests and tastes within a community (Allison and Bussey, 2020). The main reason for preventing sub-grouping is to avoid newbies feeling isolated from the community when reading such articles. Sub-groups within a community tend to become a political power group and can wield influence in the decision-making of the community. Members of a sub-group may have a louder voice in a debate between members and others.

*Norm 3 (inappropriate contents, IC):* Do not post problematic articles. Members are sensitive to the contents of the posted articles, as the community is open to the public. Therefore, any problematic content posted in the community can lead to legal and societal issues. Such articles include contents that violate copyrights and defamation laws, reveal the poster's personal life or background, spread rumors, patronize the celebrity, and express excessive affection toward the celebrity.





*Norm 4 (lack of knowledge on J gallery, LK):* Study the community before you post an article or comment. This norm is widely known in DC and other communities. Newcomers are expected to learn about the community and adhere to the culture of the community, including their preferred writing style, wording, and etiquette before posting their first articles. The number of social moderation exercises related to this norm coincidentally increases when many newbies join the OC.

*Norm 5 (inappropriate behavior, IB):* Do not engage in inappropriate behavior. This norm relates to the behavioral protocol expected from fans of J. Community members are expected to behave appropriately in online communities or at J's on-site performances, such as concerts or events. Social moderation targets the misuse of OC functionalities. For instance, there are articles that complain about frequent misuse of recommendation and complaint buttons for non-relevant articles. Additionally, community members discuss inappropriate behaviors during on-site concerts or events, where some members may disturb others. Finally, inappropriate posting activities in other online communities connected to the celebrity also fall under this norm. This norm lacks specificity, sometimes leading to debates among community members.

*Norm 6 (Inappropriate moderation, IM):* Moderation exercises must be fair, specific, and timely. This norm was developed in response to contentious moderation exercises conducted by community members. Social moderation can be inconsistent and biased because it can be carried out by anyone within the community. Social moderation related to this norm includes arguments about the fairness of moderation activities, counterarguments against moderation exercises received from other members, and instances of members bullying another member within the community.

Figure 3 depicts the event and state data over time as the group norms evolve including change of moderation exercises and new membership (a), types of moderation (b), moderation methods (c), and the change of contributors (oldies and newbies) to posting articles during the lifecycle of J Gallery (d).

In the initial 6 months, J Gallery adhered to de facto norms that were brought over from DC. During this period, the website's domain name was not initially indexed by search engines, resulting in a limited number of new members, primarily from DC, who became aware of the gallery's migration to the new website. Although there was no explicit discussion of community rules, the DC culture served as the foundation for the community rules on the new website.

In the first three months (Sep – Nov 2012), membership displayed a high level of homogeneity, as most members migrated from DC and were therefore familiar with its culture. An article summarizing the community rules was prominently placed at the top of the community board. These rules were described using DC slang, making it challenging for newcomers without experience or knowledge of the culture to comprehend. During this period, community rules did exist, but their role in J gallery was non-significant. Even members did not seem concerned about keeping the community rules. For example, according to Norm 2, members were expected to hide any personal relationships with other members. However, I found many articles whose subjects include nicknames of other members for sharing video clips and photos. Such articles highlighted the existence of sub-groups within the OC.

With J's increased television appearances, there is a more active influx of newcomers, many of whom are unfamiliar with the DC culture, leading to a rise in heterogeneity of OC activities. Despite this, OC members do not perceive the heterogeneity in their activities. From the perspective of long-standing members (oldies), the pros and cons of this heterogeneity become apparent when newcomers begin posting articles and comments on the boards. The benefits include a greater diversity of board content, including more pictures and video clips uploaded by newcomers. However, this also results in a higher number of breaches of group norms, as the newcomers do not fully grasp the DC culture. The increased volume of articles and comments from newcomers inevitably leads to more breaches of group norms. Initially, the oldies do not actively engage in moderation activities to encourage the participation of newcomers.

This situation changes in December 2012, when an oldie posts articles claiming that the community is losing its DC culture. These articles, which receive the most recommended votes up to that point, prompt oldies to initiate moderation activities. However, these moderation efforts lead to unintended consequences, including subsequent counter-moderations, which trigger debates between oldies and newcomers regarding the fairness and ambiguity of community rules. Ambiguous group norms prove to be particularly contentious. While oldies share a common understanding of these norms, newcomers often have vastly different interpretations, resulting in contradictions within the community. In the case of J Gallery, norm 3 restricts articles expressing excessive affection toward celebrities. However, what constitutes an acceptable level of affection within the OC remains a subject of debate. The OC favors articles with comical, graphic, and parodic images, aligning with an "anything goes" culture. On the other hand, many newcomers, primarily females between their 40s and 60s, may lack the skills to create such images and instead post text-based articles expressing their admiration for the celebrity and his songs. This practice causes frustration among other members who disapprove of the Daum culture. Consequently, there is a noticeable increase in moderation activities against such articles.

The tension arising from the ambiguity of community rules is further exacerbated by newcomers. There are debates about whether the community rules need to be updated to be more specific. A small number of oldies argue that most DC galleries use similar community rules, and it is the newcomers' responsibility to study the meanings of the rules if they wish to be part of the community. The debate is resolved by updating the community rulebook, adding further explanations with examples in March 2013. Firstly, in early March 2013, the last part of IP addresses of fluid members is revealed as their duplicated nicknames cause confusion during debates. Secondly, the members agree to introduce automatic deletion of articles that attract more than 10 complaints, mainly due to articles posted by trolls and spam. Thirdly, they make the rules clearer by adding more explanations and examples. In this case, the revision of the group norms is mainly driven by most oldies who consider newbies important for the sustainability of the community.

With the first update of the group norms, there is an increased number of moderation articles and comments referring to group norm version 2. The number of articles and comments that point out breaches of community rules dramatically increases. This coincides with the increased number of newbies, and the portion of the articles and comments also significantly rises. This stage includes warfare between oldies and newbies. A notable event triggering the warfare occurs on J's birthday (April 17, 2013). Many newbies, who had not posted any articles before, become brave enough to post articles celebrating J's birthday. Most of these articles express too much affection toward J, which is forbidden in the OC. Since then, there has been a significant increase in articles posted by newbies, and moderation activities become more active than before. While most moderations were targeted at anonymous writers or the whole community in the first stage, individual registered members who actively participated in posting articles on the community boards are now targeted for moderation. During this period, I identified two main reasons for moderation: lack of understanding of the community vs. fairness of moderation (see Figure 3 (b)). The former is mainly raised

by oldies who argue that newbies are posting articles without studying the practices and rules of the community. On the other hand, the latter is raised by newbies who argue that moderation is mainly targeted at newbies, while breaches of community rules by oldies go relatively unchecked. While oldies welcome newbies, they are also concerned about the increased number of articles that reflect the Daum culture. Additionally, newbies who are blamed for posting Daum-style articles start taking significant roles, including gift donations, which causes concerns for some oldies.

Oldies begin to argue that the gallery is being taken over by LSD members. I observe increased policing by a few oldies and cases of organized bullying toward newbies who are aggressively responding to moderation exercised on their articles and comments. These newbies eventually had to leave the community, although there is meaningful evidence (IP addresses) that they returned to the community with new nicknames. This warfare leads to an identity struggle. Oldies explicitly demand visitors from Daum not to post articles but just to read. They also propose showing the original logo used at DC on the landing page. These debates ultimately lead to the change of the community's name from J Gallery.com to DC J Gallery and another revision of the community rules by emphasizing the history of J Gallery and highlighting that the community is the continuation of the DC J Gallery on September 23, 2013. The second version of the group norms is aimed at clarifying the identity of the community to inherit from DC.

## Drivers of Norm Changes in OCs

I further analyzed the case to understand how the constructs of Seo and Creed (2002)'s DFIC play roles in the group norm evolution processes in J gallery. The aim is to identify drivers of the dialectical processes in the OC context.

### ***Fluidity, moderation, and contradictions***

Seo and Creed (2002) argue that the presence and degree of misaligned interests of a partial population of actors increase the likelihood and scope of praxis for changes. Misaligned interests generate potential change agents who may play a central role in the praxis.

In the J gallery case, the changes in group norms were initiated by two distinctive contradictions. Firstly, the low clarity of group norms caused different interpretations among community members, leading to inconsistencies in applying the norms for moderations in the early stage of the norm evolution process. The low clarity of group norms is a common issue in many OCs, as the norms are often presented as abstract entities. In J gallery, gallery rules were presented using slang that is shared among DC platform users. The low clarity of group norms disadvantages newbies who are not familiar with DC culture and easily become targets of social moderation. These newbies realized their misaligned interests and emerged as change agents. Secondly, the degree of alignment with the community identity also caused contradictions for some oldies as the number of newbies dramatically increased during the growth stage of the OC lifecycle. The increased number of articles posted by newbies who came from LSD caused a hybrid culture in J gallery, as they sometimes used words from both communities. Oldies who strongly preferred DC culture emerged as change agents in this case. In both cases, OC fluidity was the main source of contradictions. The low clarity of group norms did not raise tensions when the homogeneity of group members was high in the early stage of the OC. The alignment of group norms with the OC identity was not an issue.

However, with an increased number of newbies, the breaches of norms activate an increased number of moderations, which causes contradictions in the norms (clarity and alignment with identity) to surface. For example, contradicting views on group norms were highlighted in two articles posted by oldies who had opposing views in March 2013:

*"Is it only me who thinks that our current rules are enough? I do not think we need to write a book of rules to help newbies when they do not have the intention to read the current rules. It is up to them to study the rules of communities if they really want to be part of the community."* - By Ms. Jung, on March 6, 2013

*"I think we can't take the same stance as other DC galleries, as we are in a different circumstance from them. ... On the other hand, we are out of the DC platform, and most of the newbies joining us are not from DC galleries. Rather, it seems that they are mostly from Daum. If we want to grow as a community for J, then we need to be a bit kind to help them understand DC culture and rules. Otherwise, our gallery may end up as a Daum café, I am afraid."* - By ○ ○, on March 6, 2023.

### ***The reflective shift in collective consciousness***

Contradictions do not inevitably lead to organizational changes (Seo and Creed 2002; Heydebrand 1977). Seo and Creed (2002) argue that contradictions need to be collectively acknowledged by actors to generate sufficient momentum for change.

In the case of J gallery, even though two contradictions related to group norms (clarity and alignment with OC identity) were recognized as tensions at the community level, sparking intense discussions and conflicts to resolve them, there were other contradictions that did not escalate to the level of community-wide tension. One example is the scope of moderation. On April 17, 2013, a large number of articles were posted by anonymous users to celebrate J's birthday. These articles were based on Daum culture, hinting that they were from J's official fan community on Daum. As moderations were carried out against those articles, a group of members argued that the group norms do not necessarily have to be strictly applied to casual visitors who visit the OC only once or a few times, just to share pictures of J taken at concerts and external events. On the other hand, a number of oldies argued that the rules should be applied to all members of the OC, while others argued that it is difficult to distinguish casual or repetitive visitors due to anonymity. Therefore, the rules should be applied to everyone who posts articles and comments on the board. However, this contradiction failed to evolve into a community-level tension.

In the case study, visualizing contradictions was used to elaborate contradictions into community-level tensions. Members in J gallery used features of the OC platform to present contradictions. For the first change of group norms, a newbie who repeatedly reacted to moderation exercises by a group of oldies based on ambiguous group norms made the contradiction regarding norm clarity significant enough to become a notable tension within the OC. Since the platform allows only asynchronous communication among OC members, the method of articulation and timing are important factors in the elaboration process. From Figure 3 (C), I observed a dramatic increase in moderation activities using articles before two changes in group norms. In BBS-based OCs, issues become more visible when they are written as articles rather than comments, placed within the first two or three pages of the main board, and selected as recommended articles through voting processes. In J gallery, OC members can click the 'like' button for each article if they believe the article is worthy of being promoted to the recommendation list. Contradictions articulated as articles and included in the recommendation list have a higher chance of evolving into community-level tensions involving a large number of OC members.

We also find that artificial selection is used in the process. The exercise of moderation by OC members tends to be more lenient towards members who contribute to the community and align with the community culture and identity, while it becomes stricter towards community members who do not. Due to the abstract nature of group norms, many articles or comments are prone to breaching group norms depending on how the contents are interpreted. The OC tends to encourage members to create content that will benefit the OC by ignoring or sometimes defending any breaches of group norms by those content providers so that any contradictions involving those members are not elaborated into significant tensions.

The forces that create contradictions in the status quo take different stances depending on their political needs during the evolution processes of group norms. Newbies were the forces that developed contradictions regarding the clarity of group norms for the first revision, while oldies were the forces that built contradictions regarding the identity of the group.

### ***Actor Mobilization***

Seo and Creed highlight the importance of agents' ability "to artfully mobilize different institutional logics and resources, appropriated from their contradictory institutional environments to frame and serve their interests" (Seo and Creed 2002, p. 240).

Members of J gallery posted articles to propose alternative arrangements (clarity and identity alignment) of group norms. The proposed arrangements have a greater impact when they are supported by core role players within the community. It's important to note that there were established role players who were involved in most of the norm-related debates. For example, a member with the nickname 'Keeping the line' is perceived as a watchdog because she writes norm-related articles and comments nearly every day. She is most active in moderating articles and comments written by other members and fights against trolls.

Another member with the nickname 'Valley' is seen as a norm teacher as she writes lengthy articles to explain each community rule and frequently refers to the group norms of other OCs in DC. A member with the nickname 'k' is a norm philosopher who provides philosophical justifications for each community rule and explains why J gallery needs to maintain its identity as a DC community. These role players are opinion leaders when it comes to group norms, and involving them is a critical success factor in generating collective action in favor of the new arrangements. The quality of messages is important for gaining support from core members. Due to the openness of OCs, OC members tend to be highly alert to articles posted by anonymous users whose activities within the OCs are untrackable. In the case of J gallery, the oldie who first raised the issue of losing DC culture in December 2012 posted the article as an anonymous user. She emphasized her association with the OC from the beginning of the DC platform era before addressing the issue. Her message was persuasive and constructive. On the other hand, I observed numerous articles posted by other anonymous users, most of which were critical of the OC, receiving hostile responses from OC members.

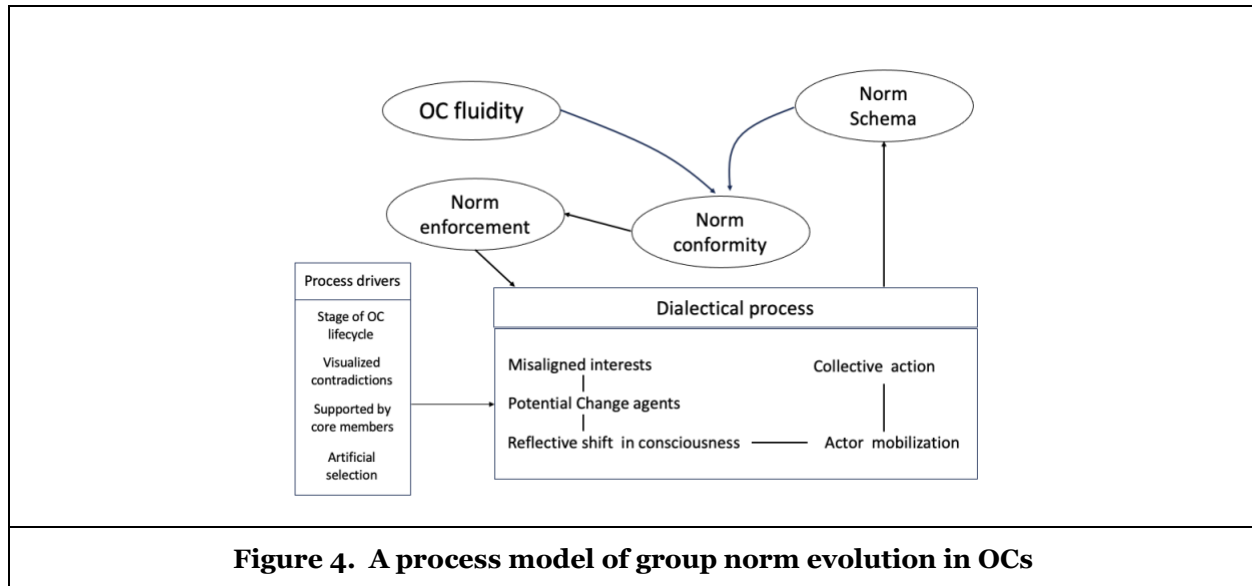
### ***Resolution of tensions***

OC members employ different approaches to take collective actions to resolve tensions caused by contradictions regarding group norms, depending on various contextual factors, including the nature of tensions, the stage of OC lifecycle, and the power of confronting forces.

In this case study, I have identified two distinct resolution strategies for the two tensions. For the tension caused by a contradiction in norm clarity, the contradicting forces held two different views, and a compromise was reached by integrating these views to create synergy. In contrast, for the second tension, an overcoming strategy was employed, with the dominant force seeking to overpower the confronting force through warfare. I have further analyzed the context behind the use of these two different resolution strategies. The synergy strategy was applied during the early stage of the OC's lifecycle when the oldies were still dominant in posting articles, and the activities of newbies were relatively quiet. During this period, oldies welcomed the newbies, and there was a sense of cooperation. Newbies' initial articles received positive responses, and oldies were more willing to assist them in becoming part of the OC. Conversely, the overcoming strategy was employed during the middle stage of the OC's lifecycle when the number of newbies significantly increased, creating a powerful force with a different style of posting articles that did not align well with DC culture. Moderation articles during this period were more assertive in suppressing such articles.

I have observed that the stage of the OC's lifecycle significantly influences how OC members address tensions. The evolution of group norms is a process influenced by the interplay between two modes of change: lifecycle and dialectic mode (Van de Ven and Poole, 1995). In the early stage of the OC's lifecycle, the clarity of group norms tends to be low, as a smaller number of members develop implicit group norms, and there is no immediate need to codify community rules. Group norms start as abstract concepts when group memberships are dominated by homogeneity and high cohesiveness. During this early stage, dialectical interactions between oldies and newbies are more supportive, as oldies are more accommodating and patient with breaches of group norms by newbies. However, as membership heterogeneity increases, resulting in varied perceptions of group norms, there is a surge in social moderations and resistances. The dominant pattern of supportive dialectics shifts to intense dialectics between oldies and newbies. These debates lead to the updating of group norms and are a process of finding common ground from differences and negotiating compromises. These processes reduce variances in perception and increase membership homogeneity, leading to an equilibrium status. In the later stage, as the number of newbies increases, further increasing membership heterogeneity, dialectics escalate into conflicts over the OC's identity. This iterative process is a result of the fluid nature of OCs, where the interaction between lifecycle and dialectic modes causes changes in dialectics. Consequently, different dialectical flows are observed in different stages of the OC's lifecycle.

Figure 4 depicts the process model of group norm evolution in OCs. OCs maintain continuously changing norm conformity, which is influenced by the continuous influx and outflux of OC members. Norm conformity is also impacted by norm schema, which defines how norms are shared among OC members, including clarity and the presentation of norms. Low norm conformity triggers norm enforcement by OC members through moderation activities. Norm enforcement can potentially give rise to contradictions, reflecting misaligned interests among a portion of OC members, within the OC.



**Figure 4. A process model of group norm evolution in OCs**

A dialectical process is initiated to resolve tensions triggered by these contradictions, driven by various factors such as the stage of the OC's lifecycle, how contradictions are communicated to the members, support from core members, and the tendency for artificial selection. The resolution of tensions, achieved through either synergy or overcoming, may result in changes to the norm schema, including increased clarity or alignment with the group's identity. This process repeats due to the fluid nature of OCs.

## Discussion and conclusion

The theoretical contributions of this paper are as follows. Firstly, to our best knowledge, this paper is one of the first efforts to develop a process model to understand how group norms evolve in OCs. There are a small number of studies that investigate how norms evolve but focus on international politics (Florini 1996) and international law (Sterio 2008). We have limited understanding of how group norms emerge and evolve as community members join and leave OCs. Existing studies reveal how group norms emerge in unstructured decision-making via face-to-face interactions (Bettenhausen and Murnighan, 1985) or computer-mediated communications during a course at a university (Postmes et al. 2000). Those studies investigate how group norms emerge when there is no clear indication of accepted behavioral patterns in groups. Recently, Ivaturi and Chua (2019) investigated how group norms are framed in OCs, but their focus is on the role of moderators who have centralized authority within OCs. There is limited effort to understand how self-organizing OC members develop and maintain group norms without centralized authority. Existing studies do not provide the generative mechanisms that explain why and how group norms in OCs are derived to evolve and who plays major roles in the process. This study identifies a dialectic process model based on DFIC as the generative mechanism of group norm evolution in the OC context. A group norm evolution process can be understood as a dialectic process in which potential contradictions are substantiated by new forces introduced by the fluidity of OCs and turn into community-level tensions. Platform features such as the 'like' button and artificial selection increase the visibility of contradiction and elaborate it into a community-level tension. Coordinated discourses by core role takers are an important factor in building enough force to take collective action. Synergy and overcoming have been identified as resolving strategies. The selection of these strategies is context-specific, and the stages of OC lifecycle are one of the factors that affect the selection.

Secondly, this study extends our understanding of the role of fluidity in OCs. Faraj et al. (2011) argue that the fluidity of OCs, which causes resources such as passion, time, socially ambiguous identities, social disembodiment of ideas, and temporary convergence within knowledge-creating OCs to fluctuate over time, can create tensions between the positive and negative consequences of such changes. They suggest that such tensions can be resolved by engendering roles, channeling participation, dynamic boundaries, and evolving technology affordances. The findings of this study indicate that the tension caused by fluidity in OCs can be

resolved through group activities like dialectical processes. This paper explains the processes in which contradictions emerge, identifies the actors involved in specific conditions, and demonstrates how the tensions caused by these contradictions are resolved.

Thirdly, the findings provide scholars with new insights into understanding how contradictions are managed in organizations. The literature in organizational studies indicates that there are two main approaches to managing tension. The paradox perspective considers that two contradictions coexist within organizations, creating continuous conflicts. An effective resolution mechanism in the paradox perspective involves creating synergies from two conflicting views (Cameron & Quinn, 1988; Clegg et al., 2002). On the other hand, the dialectic perspective sees the tension resolved when a dominant force overcomes the other competing force, leading to organizational transformation (Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2017). In this case study, OC members resolved tensions caused by norm clarity by creating synergy through the integration of newbies' opinions into the group norms. On the other hand, oldies overcame the other force to enforce their preferences regarding the identity of OCs. These two cases demonstrate how organizational tensions in OCs are managed by using two tension resolution strategies selectively, depending on the distribution of systemic power and the sensemaking approach, as illustrated by Hargrave and Van de Ven (2017).

Fourthly, the findings of this study contribute to extending our knowledge of the sustainability of OCs. Feldman (1984) argues that group norms are enforced for the survival of groups and to maintain group identity. Open OCs appear to be unsustainable as they continuously lose members who have knowledge of group norms while gaining new members who are unfamiliar with these norms. This paper provides scholars with insights into how such a loss of norm conformity is addressed by acquiring knowledge of norms through moderation activities and the continuous unfolding of dialectical processes.

Finally, the literature indicates that leadership in OCs is endorsed based on meritocracy and organizational building activities (O'Mahony and Ferraro, 2007). The findings of this study expand our knowledge of the governance of OCs by identifying emerging roles in organizational building activities. There are patterns in the activities of emerging roles during the debates on norm evolution. The coordinated actions by a network of perceived role players have a significant impact on elaborating contradictions into tensions and determining the resolution strategies.

This paper also has practical implications. OC platform managers need to put more effort into detecting not only problematic articles and comments but also group norms of OCs that may facilitate these negative articles. The latter has a bigger impact on reducing anti-social behaviors in OCs, as group norms are a mechanism to create and control positive organizational routines in OCs. Additionally, group norms evolve over time, and continuous health-checking of group norms is a managerial challenge for OC managers. OC managers and members can exploit contradictions caused in their OCs to empower and legitimize their conduct in OC activities (Whittington, 1992). The dialectic process model developed in this study can provide OC managers with insights into the design of a cost-effective governance mechanism for OCs. The dialectic process model, based on DFIC, provides managers with insights into the features of OC platforms to facilitate strong group norms in OCs. For example, the 'like' button is used to increase the visibility of contradictions and facilitate the participation of OC members in the debates over group norms. Additionally, OC platform managers need to consider better features for mobilizing logic and resources for collective actions. The process model can be used to monitor the changes in group norms in many OCs on a platform. It is a future research issue to convert the dialectic process model into design constructs for OC platforms for continuous monitoring of group norms.

This paper has limitations that provide future research directions. The dialectic process model developed in this study is based on a single case and needs to be verified against multiple OCs. Furthermore, the selected OC has a unique context in which the OC starts with established strong group norms. I investigated how the established group norms evolve as new members who are not familiar with the norms affiliate within the OC. The dialectic process model for OCs with different contexts may unfold differently. However, the findings from this case provide scholars with a reference model to be tested and adjusted in other cases.

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