

Critical Online Group Dynamics in LinkedIn

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to critically analyze group dynamics. Through displaying an understanding of core concepts such as group roles, power in groups and leadership the online group dynamic is be defined and assessed. In introducing and using the LinkedIn group Creative Design Pros Group the previously mentioned core concepts are further explained and understood through various examples. These examples and observations are then followed by an overview of the process undergone to attain the information granted and my feedback on my group participation experience.

## Critical Online Group Dynamics in LinkedIn

### **Introduction**

Groups are essential and quite unavoidable in today's society. Most individuals are introduced to the fundamentals of being in a group by first being a member of their family. In support of this concept Dreikurs (1994) wrote: "The family is the testing ground for our attitudes and approaches in dealing with others" (p. 108) (as cited in John, 2000, p. 420). The reasons many individuals are a part of a group varies a great deal (i.e. sports team, cult, religious, cultural, etc), but the common factor among those various differences is a group identity. An individual a part of a group is expected to assimilate to the group's dynamics and contribute to the normativity of the group's ideals, if not they would be considered deviant.

### **Part I**

The group that was participated in was a group exclusively a part of LinkedIn.com. The professional online group, Creative Design Pros, is based on discussions surrounding the topic of design and all it encompasses. In the official summary of the online group it states they are "a design community that boasts a cross section of creative pros with backgrounds in fashion, industrial, advertising, web design, to photography, illustration, animation, graphic and interior design" (LinkedIn, 2011). The group was social and information oriented. Members of this group often asked questions, solved personal design problems, learned about design, posted jobs, requested feedback, and self-promoted their own work. It was a non-hostile environment with creative ideas constantly being bounced around as well as a vital place where thoughts could be provoked through valuable information shared by group members. As of

December 11, 2011 Creative Design Pros had approximately 73,800 members (Figure 1) (LinkedIn, 2011). The creator and manager of this group is Calvin Cox. The acceptance e-mail I received approving me as a member of Creative Design Pros contained his digital signature at the end of the “no reply” LinkedIn e-mail address (Figure 2). The online group was created June 13, 2008, proving it is a fairly new group to the LinkedIn website. To gain access to this group all I had to do was apply. However, I made sure my LinkedIn profile was tailored to the graphic design experience I have, including posting my portfolio website on my LinkedIn profile. There is no way to know if this granted me access to Creative Design Pros, but I would image it did not hurt my chance of gaining acceptance. The group, while centered on design and a broad range of creativity, also dealt with intriguing, critical group dynamics. Beyond the educational design aspect of this group what was gathered by in depth analysis were the group’s dynamics, how so many members made a cohesive whole.

## **Part II**

**Group Roles.** Group roles are critical when analyzing the functionality of a group. Individuals who join groups take on group roles. Group roles that can be placed are formal and informal. Formal roles are partly set to establish a sense of order in the group while informal roles are self-assigned functional roles members fill (Pulaski Behling, 2011). Formal roles are in place to officiate someone and make them liable for the position or role they incur. These roles are assigned if not applied for by the group member and mostly occurs in the workplace rather than in online groups. Given a title (i.e. Creative Director, Team Captain, Visual Team Manager etc.), the member of the group as well as the other members of the group recognize the individual’s status and

addresses him or her with the respect that comes with that title. When a formal role is established so is the very essence of the individual's responsibility to the group or team. He or she is obligated by the very title that is attached to them to fulfill the responsibilities assigned to them, for the betterment of the group. This formal role assignment would often be used in a task oriented setting, making specific members responsible for specific parts eventually leading to the completion of the task. Nevertheless, online group environments are not settings where role formality occurs often, or to the extent it does in the face-to-face workplace.

Informal roles are loosely established contingent upon the group member's involvement in the group. The informal roles of a group by a group member are rarely recognized, never formally assigned, not static and are never limited to just one group member at any given time (Pulaski Behling, 2011). However, in a slight twist of formality informal roles are sometimes placed, "at crucial times, [when] each informal role must be filled by someone" (Pulaski Behling, 2011, slide 46). In contrast to formal roles, informal roles are divided into categories to better understand the nature of each type of informal role there is. Informal roles are sub-categorized as task oriented roles, maintenance oriented roles and self-serving roles. Task oriented roles consist of: initiating, information seeking, opinion seeking, clarifying, coordinating, evaluating, and consensus testing (Pulaski Behling, 2011). Maintenance oriented roles consist of: encouraging, gatekeeping, harmonizing, comprising, and standard setting (Pulaski Behling, 2011). Self-serving roles are the distasteful informal roles one would want to avoid such as: blocking, aggression, recognition seeking, and withdrawing (Pulaski Behling, 2011). Either way, whether a group contains formal or informal roles the group

will always be an ever changing environment based on new membership, based on assimilating to the norm of the group. The roles emerge to contribute to the group as a group member, not as an outside individual, but as an insider. Hogg and Tindale (2005) explain this concept by stating, “Where people define themselves in terms of group membership (social identity), group norms become a key influence on perception, cognition, and behavior” (p.157). In other words, as a member is taking an active role in the group they are conforming subconsciously to the norm of the group, through their current group role.

**Power.** Power in groups is a critical concept that spans across the topics of conformity and leadership. Pulaski Behling (2011) states, “Power is an individual’s ability to get other members to conform to his or her wishes” (slide 60). Power is honed in on the ability of one group member to make others change, even if he or she does not want to. Power is established when conformity has occurred and attention of fellow group members has been attained. Similar to the group roles, power comes from the position formally assigned in a group or informally from the individual’s actions in the group.

Power in groups is sub-categorized into 7 types of power that can influence a group setting. The 7 types of power are position power, coercive power, reward power, expert power, referent power, information power, and connection power. Position power is an individual’s ability to have influence based on the position he or she holds (Adler & Elmhorst, 2010). Coercive power is an individual’s ability to punish others (Adler & Elmhorst, 2010). Reward power, in contrast to coercive power, is the ability of an individual to reward another (Adler & Elmhorst, 2010). Expert power is derived from the

group's awareness of an individual's expertise or advance knowledge of a particular area (Adler & Elmhurst, 2010). Referent power is based on an individual with great likability and repore with the group; this individual is often well respected by his or her group members (Adler & Elmhurst, 2010). Information power is when an individual's power comes from the information they know and share with the group; this is different from expert power in the sense that this type of power does not come from a formal education or training background, but from obscure knowledge (Adler & Elmhurst, 2010). Connection power, a significant factor in today's society, is the power an individual attains by affiliating with influential and key individuals (Adler & Elmhurst, 2010) who may possess some form of position power.

Power is exercised I many ways such as through verbal and nonverbal communication. Raising one's voice or using powerful diction further establishes an individual's power in a group. Huffaker (2010) notes that scholars have argued to the testament that powerful language is used and common in discussion groups. With the lack of indecisive language an individual who desires to be powerful among group members will have a greater chance of reaching that goal. Assertion and confidence in language and appearance are powerful characteristics and traits associated with powerful individuals in groups.

Power and gender is another concept that is critical to fathom when analyzing a group. Groups that are comprised of men and women will have evidence of gendered power. It is typically understood that men hold more power than woman and because of that they have more say in group settings. Herring (1993), "pointed out that in large discussion groups on the Internet were "gendered" in the sense that the group as a whole

took on the communication style of the predominant gender in the group” (as cited in Savicki & Kelley, 2000, p. 818). Understanding that the masculine gender is the dominant gender it is conceived that the group conforms to the gendered norm of masculinity which represents power.

**Leadership.** Leadership, as a concept, is at the center of group dynamics and functionality. Leaders are key components of groups and depending on the type of leader he or she is can influence the group’s dynamics and norms. Huffaker (2010) states leaders, as defined in his article are, “those who have the ability to trigger feedback, spark conversations with the community, or even shape the way that other group members of a group “talk” about a topic” (p. 594). Leaders are not always just the person in charge such as a manager, but can be group members who are emergent leaders as a result of involvement and group following. The trait approach is based on research conducted in the mid-1930s that aimed to conclude all leaders possess common traits such as physical attractiveness, sociability, desire for leadership, originality and intelligence (T. Simons, 2000, cited in Adler & Elmhurst, 2010). While this study never proved these traits were foreseeable of potential leadership it certainly establishes credible features.

Leadership understood through style is important to a group’s functionality as well. The three leadership styles consist of an authoritarian approach which consist of a coercive, controlling style, a democratic approach that consist of a more balanced inclusive setting where members have decision say and a laissez-faire approach which is when the leader gives up power and lets the group lead themselves (Adler & Elmhurst, 2010). Each type of leadership style has it’s own ideal situation in which it works best. Through the contingency approach leadership is understood as situational and flexible



(Adler & Elmhorst, 2010). A leader, in order to effectively lead a group needs to grasp the concept of adaption to a situation. One approach will not work all of the time and it is critical that that concept is understood in leading a group or team.

### **Part III**

**Group Roles in Creative Design Pros.** The group roles in the LinkedIn Creative Design Pros were informal, aside from the LinkedIn manager of the group. The roles were diverse and intriguing to observe and be a part of. Due to the nature of the group, it being a discussion design topic-centered group, many members acted in task oriented roles. Members posting questions to the group usually were seeking information or an opinion related to design. In participation of Creative Design Pros, I initiated group discussions by seeking information and opinions (Figure 3). It is, in my opinion, an easy way to begin a dialogue with a group. I find that individuals are eager to use the information power they possess, especially if persuaded to do so by another group member. However, not everyone in the group had task oriented roles. Some members in the group took on maintenance oriented roles such as being encouraging, being a gatekeeper, or a harmonizer. The community of Creative Design Pros is dependent upon individuals who take on these roles. The support and openness of everyone in a setting where art is critiqued and creativity is a source of judgement is a sensitive environment. In a post by Soren Ingomar Petersen, a group member, who wanted to know how graphic designers could reduce or stop gang violence (Figure 4) I, subconsciously, responded as an encourager and gave my opinion on the issue (Figure 5). The roles in which I fell into were acceptable norms of this group and in a computer-mediated setting it is easier to do.

However, not everyone in the group was helpful and responsible as far as being helpful and following group rules which states group members should not promote themselves anywhere else, but on the “promotion” section of the group (LinkedIn, 2011). One group member in particular posted in one of my discussions and seemed to only be doing it to promote himself, for recognition purposes. The question I posted asked fellow group members how they broke into the professional world of graphic design and the self seeking group member thought it would help me if I had a link to his online portfolio. I followed the portfolio link to find no background story of his graphic experiences or any information that could answer my question. I did not realize he was self promoting until I again encountered this individual posting his portfolio on Soren Ingomar Petersen’s post about reducing gang violence. Needless to say in doing more research on this group I went back to that very group discussion on gang violence just to find that his post had been removed from the discussion. Also, his post was right after mine which gave me an uncomfortable feeling that he was following me - virtually. However, since then I have not encountered this self-serving individual in the group.

**Power in Creative Design Pros.** Information power and expert power were among the most prevalent forms of power analyzed in the group. To some extent connection power is established as well due to the nature of LinkedIn, featuring connections of individuals to other individuals, some who may be prominent members of their community. Group members who knew more about certain aspects of design shared their invaluable experiences with others in discussion groups. From observation some older group members felt empowered to speak to younger group members about their view point on discussions. Also, because LinkedIn allows members to display job titles

and years associated with a prestigious position members, in my opinion, had an extra ego boost. With credentials readily available on LinkedIn to back their opinion up members seemed confident in posting their experienced views on discussions. However, due to the lack of face-to-face interaction I believe these older powerful individuals have even more confidence to speak on discussion post in which they know a great deal of information on; then again information and expert power can convert to a self-serving role that is rather annoying to see or be a part of.

In Soren Ingomar Petersen's discussion about reducing gang violence a woman proved to be a clear dominator. I fathom it was an emotional discussion that intrigued group members, but how much information is too much? The dominating group member continued on for paragraphs, for posts at a time on her opinions on the matter (Figure 6). While it was informative it was an evident abuse of information power and clear neglect that she was in a group.

**Leadership in Creative Design Pros.** Leadership in Creative Design Pros was distinct and fair. The manager of the group, Calvin Cox, is the only leader of the group and he does so in a democratic, group-centered style. Besides posting informative weekly announcements about the latest jobs, discussions, and comments on Creative Design Pros on the group's side bar Cox would causally be a part of group discussions. He also e-mails the weekly announcements to group members' e-mails (Figure 7), insuring they are aware of the group's current news even if they do not participate in the group often. The formal democratic, group-centered leadership he has over the group makes him a credible individual to the group and respected among those who are active in it. Position power can be had by this position of leadership, but none was exercised by

Cox. All actions taken by Cox in his relation to the group was never aggressive or lazy. Cox is a fair leader who puts the group first, and as displayed by his smiling profile picture, enjoys what he does being established in the world of creative design.

**Computer-mediated communication.** Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is best described as the phenomenon of individuals communicating through computer devices. It grants the means of speaking to someone without awkward face-to-face moments or nonverbal gestures that can give true emotions away. CMC is different from any other medium because it allows individuals to be extremely open and diverse with how they communicate while still granting them a true sense of privacy which is an intriguing juxtaposition. As stated by Savicki and Kelley (2000) “Because humans are very social animals, they might be expected to have some difficulties with this new medium of social interaction” (p.817-818). Group members of Creative Design Pros engaged in CMC in different ways. In reflecting on the group roles I analyzed in the group it would prove that individuals are at a greater comfort level to simply post a question through the computer, perhaps walk away, and come back to replies rather than asking face-to-face questions and feeling embarrassed by their ignorance. Being a part of an online community that facilitates and encourages these roles allows intelligent, curious voices to be heard. It allows, especially for artists, easy access to online portfolios and feedback on them.

According to Huffaker’s (2010) view on online groups:

The members of these online groups create and share information at an unprecedented level, resulting in millions of messages, photos, or videos, but

more importantly opinions, ideas, and a finger on the pulse of the needs and beliefs of the massive audience that makes up the Internet. (p. 593)

The environment the internet creates is an endless portal of what can possibly be infinite knowledge. This can be a good and bad feature of reality.

The pros and cons of CMC are both respectable arguments. The pros of CMC consist of learning and brainstorming with knowledgeable people about a subject that strikes an interest. Those remote intellects have never seemed closer with networks like LinkedIn in existence. At the strike of a key stroke the most puzzling questions can be answered or needed support and direction can be given. However, when there is a good thing around you can always count on individuals to abuse it's power. The cons of CMC span across a spectrum of bullying, threats, and to many of the self serving roles that can be found in a group. Using the internet as a shield to hide behind to ridicule others rather than a vehicle to help others is a distasteful feature CMC can promote. In considering both views I deem CMC to be a reliable, affective resource for groups. Considering the coming together of *virtual* strangers through a technological device sharing ideas, perhaps in more serious cases life saving ones, CMC is a great value to many groups.

The factor that makes the difference on whether CMC is affective or not is the passion of the group members. If a group member is a part of a group that he or she enjoys the topic of to a great extent then that will be reflected in their CMC. He or she will make the online community feel like home, being informative, supportive, and even protective of it by reporting undesirable behavior. The factor that is key to an affective group experience is the group members who comprise the group and identify themselves with the group. When this is established thought provoking CMC is sure to follow.

#### **Part IV**

The experience of participating in an online group proved to be an invaluable one. Engaging in CMC with a community of individuals who share the same interest as me was a great experience to behold. I do not associate in my physical, daily life with other graphic artist so I usually am in the situation where I have to explain what I do and how I do it to many individuals; however in being a part of Creative Design Pros it was I who sought information about the craft. Participating in the group gave me great insight on my future endeavours as a graphic designer. When applying for graphic design opportunities I can include my LinkedIn profile with Creative Design Pros discussions I have lead or participated in. The display of my group involvement would supplement my portfolio justly, illustrating my graphic talent as well as my passion and teaching abilities to employers. Through thorough participation in Creative Design Pros I learned from experienced designers how to approach my craft in a professional manner and I truly trust the knowledge shared with me will be a tremendous help for my future graphic design career.

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Appendix

Figure 1

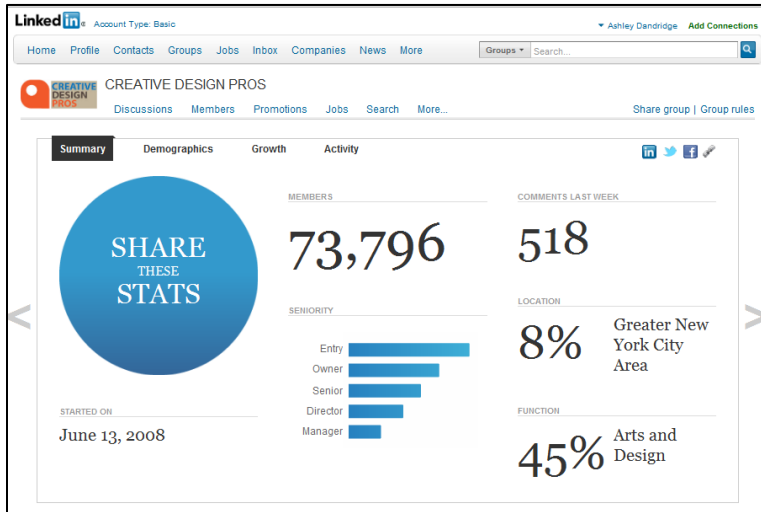


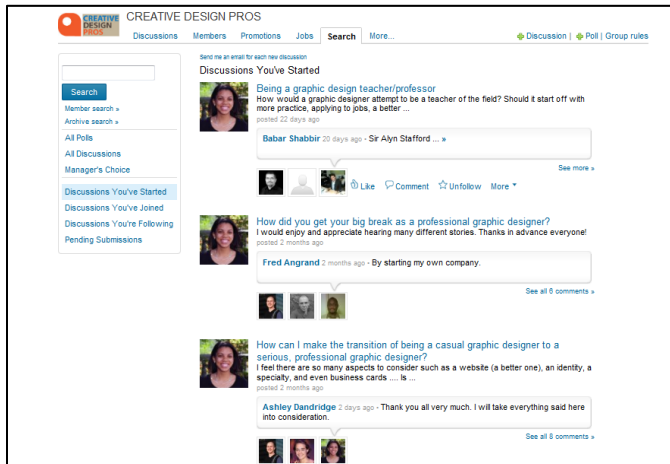
Figure 1. Statistics of LinkedIn group Creative Design Pros. Data Retrieved December 11, 2011 from Creative Design Pros page on LinkedIn.

Figure 2

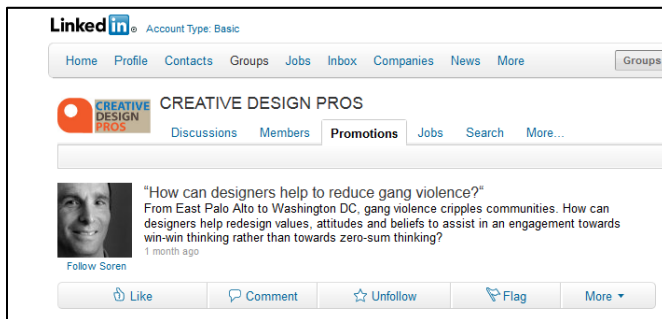


Figure 2. My acceptance e-mail from LinkedIn group Creative Design Pros. Retrieved from A. Dandridge, personal communication, December 10, 2011.



**Figure 3**

*Figure 3.* All the LinkedIn group discussions I've started on Creative Design Pros. Retrieved from Creative Design Pros page on LinkedIn December 13, 2011.

**Figure 4**

*Figure 4.* Soren Ingomar Petersen's discussion post on Creative Design Pros. Retrieved from Creative Design Pros page on LinkedIn December 13, 2011.

Figure 5

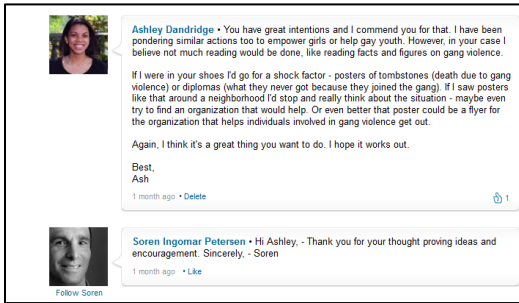


Figure 5. My feedback to Soren Ingomar Petersen's Creative Design Pros discussion post. Retrieved from Creative Design Pros page on LinkedIn December 13, 2011.

Figure 6

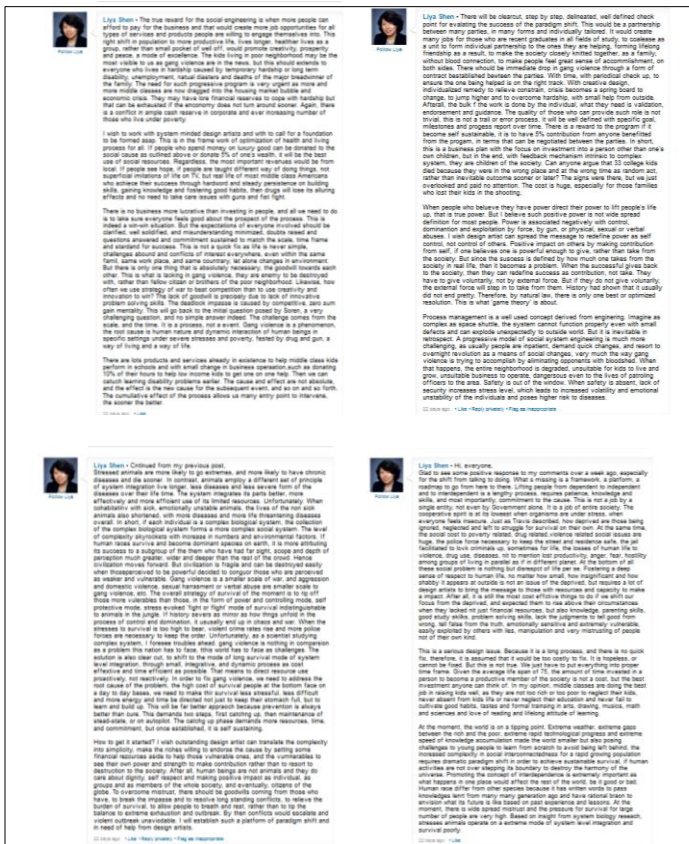


Figure 6. Creative Design Pros member's consecutive posts on Soren Ingomar Petersen's discussion post (see Figure 4). Retrieved from Creative Design Pros page on LinkedIn December 13, 2011.

Figure 7

Gmail by Google Ashley Dandridge <dandridge.a@gmail.com>

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**[15] new discussions, [31] new comments and [19] new jobs on LinkedIn**

CREATIVE DESIGN PROS Group Members <group.digests@linkedin.com> Tue, Dec 13, 2011 at 10:17 AM  
 To: Ashley Dandridge <dandridge.a@gmail.com>

**CREATIVE DESIGN PROS** **LinkedIn**

December 13, 2011

Latest: [Discussions \(15\)](#) • [Jobs \(19\)](#) • [Members \(100\)](#) • [Comments \(31\)](#)

Still Active Discussions (21)

[Hi guys. I am a bit stuck, need a name for a pet shop but can't think of anything different than the standard petco type of thing, and want to differentiate from that Market. any ideas would be great!](#) [8 new comments](#)  
[Like »](#)

Started by George Theodorou

Wag Central!  
By Rick Hartley

[It drives me nuts when a client starts off a project saying: "\\_\\_\\_\\_\\_."](#) [7 new comments](#)  
[Like »](#)

Started by John Coonen

omg, I'm crying over the oatmeal comic Scott!!!!  
By Tremayne Cryer

[Unbelievable..... Client asked me if a pattern in an illustration I did contained "hidden words because graphic artists do that kind of thing."](#) [2 new comments](#)  
[Like »](#)

Started by Pam Olson

@Pam: I love that site. Some of it I don't understand and I skip through it, but a lot of it I giggle incessantly at and then have... [more »](#)  
By Kathleen Joy Dahl

[How to design for marginalized people?](#) [3 new comments](#)

Figure 7. Calvin Cox, manager of Creative Design Pros, weekly e-mail update. Retrieved from A. Dandridge, personal communication, December 13, 2011.