Chapter XIV

Motivational Antecedents, Constituents, and Consequents of Virtual Community Identity

Utpal M. Dholakia, Rice University, USA

Richard P. Bagozzi, Rice University, USA

ABSTRACT

In understanding the influence of virtual communities on its members, examined in this chapter is the role of identity — the member’s conscious knowledge of belonging and the emotional and evaluative significance attached to the membership. Drawing from research and analyses across different disciplines, we present an integrative framework considering and elaborating on the motivational antecedents, constituents, and consequents of virtual community identity. We also discuss its implications for virtual community organizers and highlight promising research opportunities in this area.

INTRODUCTION

The rising research interest in virtual group interactions corresponds to the overall acceptance and growth of the Internet as an influential social forum, and has spanned many disciplines in the last few years, including sociology (e.g.,
Wellman & Gulia, 1999), social psychology (e.g., McKenna & Bargh, 1998), communications (e.g., Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2000), and marketing (e.g., Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Dholakia, Klein, & Bagozzi, 2003).

While such interactions may be analyzed using many different theoretical perspectives and lenses, as the chapters in this book illustrate, our focus is on a particular type of virtual group: the network-based virtual community. We define such a virtual community to be “a specialized, geographically dispersed group, interacting together in an online forum, and characterized by a structured, relatively sparse, and dynamic network of relationships among participants who share a common focus” (Dholakia, Klein, & Bagozzi, 2003). Current examples of such virtual communities include the slashdot Web site community of software enthusiasts, the alt.games.sony-playstation newsgroup on Usenet, and the Internet Bonsai Club.

Although collaborative, researchers acknowledged that interactions between members in such virtual communities are often focused, initially driven by self-interest, and generally narrow in scope (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Many such interactions also tend to be unplanned, often motivated by a functional goal (for example, wanting information regarding available products prior to a purchase) or a situational happenstance (e.g., logging into the chat room at the same time as another member). Moreover, the frequency and extent of participation by members is driven entirely by volitional choice, in that one can sever ties with the virtual community relatively effortlessly (simply by not returning to the venue).

In spite of their seemingly tenuous hold on members for all these reasons, marketers have been struck at how influential such virtual communities can be — from influencing purchase decisions and choices of their members, to rapidly disseminating knowledge and perceptions regarding new products (called “buzz” by marketers) and influencing their success, to strengthening company–customer relationships (Dholakia & Bagozzi, 2001). This influence only seems to be growing in range and extent as more people come to join and participate regularly in these virtual groups.

Because of this, researchers studying virtual communities have become interested in understanding why virtual communities are so influential for their members. In seeking to answer this question, one theoretical perspective that offers a useful starting point is that of social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1972; Turner, 1985), which posits that a crucial basis of the group’s influence on its individual members arises from the individual’s identification with the group (i.e., his or her conscious knowledge of belonging to the social group) and the emotional and evaluative value attached to this membership. Belonging to the group is a psychological state that is distinct from being a unique and separate individual and confers social identity (i.e., a shared or collective representation of who one is and how one should behave) (Hogg & Abrams, 1988).
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