

Chapter 14

Trust and Trust Building of Virtual Communities in the Networked Age

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ABSTRACT

This is the networked age, when people participate in various virtual communities through a platform or network of communities. Members of the communities communicate in faster and more simultaneous interactions in invisible ways. Since the importance of trust in virtual communities has been widely recognized, trust as a complex, multi-faceted, and context-dependent concept has been examined by many researchers in several disciplines. In this chapter, the authors aim to examine the definitions and characteristics of trust in the context of virtual communities and discuss terms relevant to the concept and types of trust. Relevant issues on trust and trust building in virtual communities are discussed, and future research directions are suggested for further study.

INTRODUCTION

With the widespread use of internet, smart phones and social computing in recent years, people are becoming more engaged by participating in various virtual communities in everyday life. Virtual communities have their own unique characteristics such as anonymity and a lack of physical presence. Virtual communities make it possible for people who share similar values, interests, experiences, and knowledge and have similar beliefs and per-

sonal views to come together from various backgrounds and motivations. People can interact with other members of a virtual community anywhere at any time through any device. People can also be involved in multiple virtual communities and communicate with members of other virtual communities simultaneously. In doing so, trust and trust building between participants has become more significant than ever in order to maintain communication in virtual communities. In particular, virtual communities provide a platform or network

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for members to communicate through faster and simultaneous interactions in a variety of ways. As the importance of the concept of trust in virtual communities has been widely accepted, it remains a complex, multifaceted and context-dependent concept (Kelton, Fleischmann, & Wallace, 2008; Stabb, Bhargava, Lilien, Rosenthal, Winslett, & Sloman, 2004).

In this chapter, first we examine the terms community and virtual community and describe their characteristics. Then, we examine the definitions and characteristics of the term trust in the new contexts of virtual communities and review relevant issues related to the concept of trust. Different types of trust and trust building are also investigated. Major research issues, challenges, and further research directions revolving around the term trust are discussed. In examining the concept of trust, this chapter focuses on the social aspects rather than the technical side of the term.

BACKGROUND

Community

There have been several different definitions of the term community, which reflects the fact that there may be difficulty and confusion with regards to defining the term (Bhattacharyya, 2004). Since a community seemingly refers to geographic proximity and the characteristics of defining community are similar to those of group (Christenson, Frendley, & Robinson, 1994), the term community is used interchangeably with the term group. Brandon and Hollingshead (2007) define the term group as “an entity comprised of people having interdependent goals, who are acquainted, interact with one another and have a sense of belonging associated with their membership” (p.106). Wilson and Ryder (1996) also agree that groups become communities, “when they interact with each other and stay together long enough to form a set of habits and conventions,

and when they come to depend upon each other for accomplishment of certain ends” (p. 801).

Turning to the term community, it is defined as “a constructed arena where multiple people with shared interests interact with each other” (Dehnart, 1999, A standard definition of community, para. 5). In comparing these definitions, we see that three components are shared: people, interaction, and a sense of belonging. In other words, community is composed of people who join as members, they socially interact, and their members have a set of shared denominators as their social identification or a sense of belonging to the community (Christenson et al., 1994). This third component is considered important since people need to have a sense of belonging by occupying a mutual and collective interest or intention to form a community. In line with this notion, the following definitions emphasize a sense of sharing, by saying that community is “any social configuration that possesses shared identity and norms” (Bhattacharyya, 2004, p. 12), or “a social organization of people who share knowledge, value and goals” (Jonassen, Peck, & Wilson, 1999, p. 118). To see whether the characteristics of the term community may apply to another term, virtual community, we now examine how differently or similarly people act in the virtual community.

Virtual Community

With the development of the Internet - also called virtual space, online space or cyberspace - people began to interact with each other through the medium. Rheingold (1993) defines the term virtual community as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net which is loosely interconnected computer networks, when sufficient people carry on those public discussions... to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (p.5). More specifically, Ridings, Gefen, and Arinze (2002) state that “virtual communities can be defined as groups of people with common interests and practices that communicate regularly and for some

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