

Definition, Antecedents, and Outcomes of Successful Virtual Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Howard Rheingold's (1993) book *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* was the first to bring virtual communities to the attention of researchers and practitioners. Although virtual groups have been examined previously, Rheingold's descriptions of participating in the WELL, an Internet-based bulletin board, vividly portrayed the potential of online social groupings. Rheingold told stories of people who had never met face-to-face providing socio-emotional and even financial support to each other through times of crisis and celebration.

Since then, the popularity of virtual communities (also known as online communities) has increased. Interacting with others online became more common as organizations and society began to perceive it as a normal behavior and not one engaged in primarily by the socially inept. Indeed, virtual communities became a typical mode of interaction for both work and social purposes. At work, employees have organizationally sanctioned virtual communities such as the company listserv as well as virtual communities for professionals to interact with each other outside their organizations (e.g., Charity-HR, a listserv for HR professionals in non-profit organizations). Some organizations have even developed virtual communities for their customers. Some of these virtual communities are for users of particular products, like the wristwatch enthusiasts (Rothaermel & Sugiyama, 2001). Others, however, are designed to allow customers to provide input for the company's new products and services (Catterall & Maclaran, 2002).

Virtual communities have also become quite common in social interactions. Many neighborhoods have developed listservs as well as electronic bulletin boards to allow neighbors to interact and share information. Social groups who interact face-to-face (FtF) may also use virtual communities to keep members informed and connected between their meetings. The most com-

mon social virtual community, however, may consist of people who are physically dispersed and never interact FtF. These virtual communities are formed around a shared interest in a particular topic. These topics range from movies, to food and wine, to pets, to political topics, and even to aspects of parenthood as evidenced by the hundreds of interactive sites on Babycenter.com.

BACKGROUND

But what are virtual communities and what distinguishes them from mere virtual groups? Ironically, the definition of community has always been a bit difficult. Even among traditional, FtF communities, there are over 71 definitions (see Jones, 1997). Among the issues in defining FtF communities is been whether communities need to be colocated, like a neighborhood, or whether they can be dispersed like a community of interest (e.g., stamp lovers).

Currently, community researchers agree that both co-located and dispersed groups can be communities. However, members of these groups must have a *sense of community* to be considered a community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Sense of community is defined as group members' feelings of belonging, identity, attachment, and influence among each other. By using this criterion, virtual communities can be defined as groups of people who interact primarily through e-collaboration technologies and who have developed feelings of belonging, identity, attachment, and influence (i.e., a sense of virtual community) with each other.

Virtual communities have degrees of virtuality. At one extreme are dispersed virtual communities, which exist entirely online. Members of dispersed virtual communities live in many different locations and do not interact with each other FtF. At the other extreme are colocated virtual communities in which members primarily meet FtF, and the e-collaboration technology

supplements their interactions. Virtual communities for employees co-located within a single organization as well as neighborhoods, and social/volunteer groups fall primarily into this type. In the middle are virtual communities that exist primarily online. Members may be dispersed or colocated; however, these members additionally interact FtF.

Virtual communities also exist over a variety of e-collaboration technologies (see Figure 1). These technologies can be asynchronous, in which communication is delayed like e-mail or bulletin boards, or synchronous, in which communication is instantaneous like instant messaging and chatrooms. Another key feature is whether the e-collaboration technologies allow one-to-one communication like instant messaging, one-to-many communication like blogs, other Web pages and some information distributing listservs or whether they allow many-to-many communications like bulletin boards and most interactive listservs. Other more advanced e-collaboration technologies allow avatars (pictorial representations of the communicators) as well as two-dimensional representations (e.g., rooms and parks) in which people can interact.

In general, virtual communities are valued because they are considered to have positive effects on both the organizations that sponsor them and within the general community in which they are used. In particular, they are believed to increase the amount of social and intellectual capital available in the organization or larger society. Social capital is defined as the networks, norms, and trust of a group (Putnam, 1996) while intellectual capital is defined as the knowledge that is created and shared within a group (see Bieber et al., 2002).

CURRENT ISSUES IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

One of the most pressing current issues in virtual community research is to understand virtual community success. Virtual community success is defined as the ability for the virtual community to sustain itself while meeting its members' needs and maintaining member satisfaction within the community.

Jones (1997) was one of the first researchers to seek to identify the characteristics of a successful virtual community. He takes an anthropological perspective, arguing that one can identify a successful virtual community when one can identify objective components

of the community's existence. He calls these objective features a *virtual settlement* and argues that they are composed of: (a) a minimal level of interactivity, (b) by a variety of communicators, (c) with a minimum level of sustained membership, and (d) interacting in a common public space. When these four features exceed a minimal threshold, then Jones argues that the online group can be called a virtual settlement. A virtual settlement is distinct from a virtual community like buildings are distinct from a village. However, he argues that once one has identified a virtual settlement, one is likely to have identified a virtual community.

Within successful virtual communities, researchers have additionally identified three types of members: leaders, participants, and lurkers. Leaders have assumed some sort of prominence in the group. Often, they are informal leaders without any sort of formal authority. Instead, leaders are generally prototypical members who are more likely to provide help and assistance to other members.

Participants are members who contribute to the public communications, but are not considered leaders. Lurkers simply read messages but do not publicly contribute to them. Lurkers are sometimes considered negatively (Kollock & Smith, 1996) because they free-load off the other members' contributions. However, this may only be true if the number of active participants is very small and they have to engage in a disproportionate amount of activity for the community to survive. If the total number of participants is high and the number of active participants is adequate enough to spread out the communication effort, then lurkers are not freeloaders. Blanchard and Markus (2004) found in the study of their virtual community that there were approximately 250 active participants and 16,775 lurkers. If each one of these lurkers posted just once, the sheer volume of messages would overwhelm the cognitive capacities of the virtual community members.

Researchers have additionally focused on the social processes of the virtual community participants. They have noted that successful virtual communities have developed particular social processes that help the community function. These include the exchange of socio-emotional and informational support between members, the development of trust between members, and the development and enforcement of norms of behavior.

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