Antecedents of Trust in Online Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Online virtual communities have existed on the Internet since the early 1980s as Usenet newsgroups. With the advent of the World Wide Web and emphasis on Web site interactivity, these communities and accompanying research have grown rapidly (Horrigan, Rainie, & Fox, 2001; Lee, Vogel, & Limayem, 2003; Petersen, 1999). Virtual communities arise as a natural consequence of people coming together to discuss a common hobby, medical affliction, or other similar interest, such as coin collecting, a devotion to a rock group, or living with a disease such as lupus. Virtual communities can be defined as groups of people with common interests and practices that communicate regularly and for some duration in an organized way over the Internet through a common location or site (Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002). The location is the "place" where the community meets, and it can be supported technologically by e-mail listservs, newsgroups, bulletin boards, or chat rooms, for example. The technology helps to organize the community's conversation, which is the essence of the community. For example, messages in a community supported by a listserv are organized in e-mails, sometimes even grouping together several messages into an e-mail digest. In bulletin board communities, the conversation is organized into message threads consisting of questions or comments posted by members and associated replies to the messages.

Virtual community members form personal relationships with strong norms and expectations (Sproull & Faraj, 1997; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991), sometimes developing deep attachments to the communities (Hiltz, 1984; Hiltz & Wellman, 1997). These developments are interesting, because the members of virtual communities are typically strangers to one another and may never meet face to face. Additionally, the nature of computer-mediated communication is such that nonverbal cues that aid in the interpretation of communication, such as inflections in the voice, gestures, dress, tone, physical personal attributes, and posture, are missing (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991), making the communication open to multiple interpretations (Korenman & Wyatt, 1996). Yet, despite these limitations, many virtual communities flourish by exchanging messages and building their conversation base. A key ingredient in sustaining the conversation in the community is the existence of trust between the members. Trust has a downstream effect on the members' intentions to give and get information through the virtual community (Ridings et al., 2002).

This chapter examines emergent virtual communities, that is, those arising without direction or mandate from an organization, government, or other entity for an expressed economic or academic purpose. For example, a discussion board for a strategic partnership work group between two companies or a chat room for a class taking a college course would not be considered emergent virtual communities. However, an online forum established by the Breast Cancer Young Survivors Coalition so that women could discuss their battles with the disease would be considered an emergent virtual community.

BACKGROUND

Trust is an essential ingredient in social relationships (Blau, 1964; Luhmann, 1979), and understanding and defining trust are dependent upon the situation in which they are considered. In communities, in general, trust is an integral part of interpersonal relations among members and defines an individual's expectations and behavior (Luhmann, 1979; Rotter, 1971). Trust has many definitions. It has been defined as a willingness to take a risk associated with the behavior of others (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995) and, more generally, as a method of reducing social uncertainty (Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub, 2003; Luhmann, 1979). In this sense, trust is used in the virtual community to reduce social complexity associated with the behavior of other members, and as a way of reducing the fear that the trusted party will take advantage by engaging in opportunistic behavior (Gefen et al., 2003), much as it does in communities in general (Fukuyama, 1995).

Participating in a virtual community entails exposure to risk. Opportunistic behaviors could include selling personal information that was confidentially provided, adopting a fictitious persona, deliberately and stealthily

marketing products and services when this is prohibited, flaming or spamming, making unfair practical jokes at members, providing false information, and, in general, behaving in a dysfunctional manner that ruins the community. Such behavior also applies to other types of communities, except that in the case of an online community, the anonymity provided by the Internet makes such behavior much easier to accomplish by the perpetrator and much harder to notice by the victim.

Scholarly research on trust has shown that trust is a multidimensional concept consisting of beliefs in ability, benevolence, and integrity (Blau, 1964; Butler, 1991; Giffin, 1967; Mayer et al., 1995; McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002). Ability deals with beliefs about the skills or expertise that another (i.e., trusted parties) has in a certain area. Ability relates to the belief that the other person knows what he or she is talking about. Because virtual communities are almost always focused on a specific topic, concerns about the abilities of others with respect to this topic are important. Benevolence is the expectation that others will have a positive orientation or a desire to do good to the trustee, typically by reciprocating with appropriate advice, help, discussion, and so on, such as contributing to the ongoing discussion with the intent to help, support, and care for others. Benevolence is important in virtual communities, because without positive reciprocation, the community would not exist. Integrity is the expectation that another will act in accordance with socially accepted standards of honesty or a set of principles, such as not telling a lie and providing reasonably verified information. Integrity applies in the virtual community context, because it is the existence of norms of reciprocity, closely linked with benevolence, that allow the community to properly function.

Research based upon surveying members of virtual communities has found that integrity and benevolence are united in this context, because the expected mode of behavior in many of the virtual communities is one of benevolence (Ridings et al., 2002). Hence, adhering to this expected mode of conduct, integrity, should overlap with actually behaving so, namely, with benevolence. Conformance to socially acceptable behavior or standards (integrity) and a desire to do "good" to others (benevolent intentions) are synonymous in the virtual community environment.

THE ANTECENDENTS OF TRUST

Trust in a virtual community is built through several mechanisms that are germane to the online context. As in personal contacts where successful interpersonal interaction builds trust (Blau, 1964; Gefen, 2000a; Luhmann, 1979), the responsiveness of other community members is necessary for trust to develop (Ridings et al., 2002). This can be shown through adherence to the social norms of the community (benevolence and integrity) and competency in the topic (ability). Members who post messages most often expect responses, and when these responses are absent, late, or lacking in number, there is no successful interpersonal interaction, and that hinders the development of trust. Responsiveness is also evident by members indicating gratitude for timely help. Trust is also built by reading what others post. If others post personal information about themselves, they appear less as strangers and more as acquaintances or friends. Divulging gender, age, name, e-mail address, or a personal problem may also add to the credibility of the member (ability) as well as make it easier for other members to shape beliefs regarding adherence to the community's standards and principles (integrity and benevolence). Personal information can also be provided in site profiles. Thus, the confiding of personal information also builds trust in other members of a virtual community (Ridings et al., 2002). Finally, humans have some degree of a general willingness to depend on others, known as disposition to trust (McKnight, Cummings, & Chervany, 1998), and this has been found to be stable across situations (Mayer et al., 1995). In the virtual community where people are unfamiliar with one another, disposition to trust, at least initially before extensive interactions take place, is also an important factor leading to the development of trust in others. Disposition to trust has been empirically found to be directly related to trust in virtual settings (Gefen, 2000a; Jarvenpaa, Knoll, & Leidner, 1998) and in virtual communities, in particular (Ridings et al., 2002).

Because virtual communities lack an enforceable legal system to ensure appropriate behavior online, the actual membership in the community and the feeling of being part of a community, even if a virtual one, may provide a possible way to enforce honest behavior. Virtual communities enhance honest behavior through creating what Ba (Ba, 2001; Ba, Whinston, & Zhang, 2003) called a trusted third party (TTP) certification mechanism. Considering the problems with the three current trust-building mechanisms in online markets (feedback, insurance or guarantee, and escrow), as pointed out theoretically by Ba and with some empirical support by Pavlou and Gefen (2004), extralegal mechanisms might be especially useful in virtual communities. Extralegal mechanisms, such as gossip, reproach, and community appreciation, and the praise and sanctions they bring, may serve to create trust just as they do in regular community settings.

Another way virtual communities may be applied to build trust, according to Ba, is through the sense of community, that, as we know from economics, is crucial when there is a separation in time between the quid and the pro (Ba, 2001). Moreover, if the members of the