Virtual Communities:
Towards an Extended Typology

Arunasalam Sambhanthan
Curtin University, Australia

Alice Good
University of Portsmouth, UK

1. INTRODUCTION

The percentage of companies using social media for marketing is expected to reach 88% by 2012, up from 42% in 2008 (Williamson, 2010). An early study by Szmigin *et al.* (2004) indicates that virtual communities (VC) are the most powerful e-tools for customer bonding. In china, virtual communities have been featured as forums where web users express themselves, seek relevant information, interact with each other, and establish their social networks (Lu *et al.*, 2010). Alongside, the computer mediated information exchange has been an area of study for decades. This includes the study of different virtual platforms and the use of those platforms in key application areas such as in business, education and health. Current research unveils that the marketers are challenged to cater to the development of social networking sites such as Myspace, YouTube and Facebook due to the rapid growth of information exchange among consumers (as well as vendors) on the Internet (Valck *et al.*, 2009). Apart from this, there are several reported studies which deal with issues related to the managers' knowledge requirements in a VC environment from a marketing perspective (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Dholakia *et al.,* 2004; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004; Wiertz & Ruyter, 2007).

Importantly, Leimeister *et al.* (2004) clearly shows the variability involved in the research of virtual communities. More specifically, there has been documented research with regard to the use of the internet in tourist information search (Werthner & Ricci, 2004; Davidson, 2008; Sambhanthan & Good, 2012). While several studies look at the use of the Internet in tourism promotion, a recent study reports a very high level of computer and internet usage in tourism related information search by the users (Jacobsen & Muna, 2012). The study further reports that 75% of the respondents have a Facebook profile. In other words, a significant percentage of tourists used social media for information search, although it is not essential.

YouTube, being a premier social media platform has more than 800 million users visiting each month (YouTube, 2013). There have been several other reported studies with regards to YouTube in general (Rotman & Preece, 2010). However, the role of YouTube in tourism related endeavours is still an open area. A recent research reports that the YouTube videos have the potential to substantially affect the experience of tourists (Tussyadiah & Fesenmaier, 2009). Further, the study states that these videos generate mental pleasure through generating the imagination of people as well as impart the feeling of travelling to selected destinations that the tourists have already visited in the past. To some extent, the above findings show the significance of further research on the use of YouTube platform in destination marketing. Evidently, the use of YouTube as a medium to market tourist destinations remains an open question for exploration in the context of rapidly emerging marketing models using web 2.0. Hence,

the research presented here focuses on extend the current typology of virtual communities for YouTube based destination marketing. A narrative literature review has been conducted for this research which surveyed the existing literature on Virtual Communities and documented those into five main clusters of extended typology.

2. VIRTUAL COMMUNITY DEFINED

The definitions of virtual community are oftentimes ambiguous. This research recognizes a need for clarification in terms of the definition of virtual community. There are many definitions available for the term virtual community in the past literature. Some of those definitions are analysed in order to derive a contextual definition for the purpose of this research exercise. Firstly Room *et al.,* (1997) defines VCs as "the groups of people who communicate with each other via electronic media" (Room et al., 1997). Secondly Kilsheimer, (1997) defines VCs as the "groups of people brought together by shared interests or a geographic bond" (Kilsheimer, 1997). Thirdly Dennis et al., (1998) defines VCs as the "people with shared interests or goals for whom electronic communication is a primary form of interaction" (Dennis et al., 1998). Finally Figallo, (1998) defines VCs as the "groups of people who meet regularly to discuss a subject of interest to all members" (Figallo, 1998).

The first definition is plain and looks at the virtual communities from the communication perspective. The main element of virtual communities in this definition has been featured as the ability to communicate with each other through the electronic platform. The second definition focuses on the shared interest perspective of the term virtual community. The main conceptual element featured in the second definition focuses on shared interests people have when interacting with others. However, the second definition has a major weakness of not including the electronic platform into it. Without electronic platform, the word virtual community would be meaningless. The third definition features the electronic communication but lacks to take in to consideration about the interaction possibilities people have over non electronic means. The fourth definition has the topic of interest as the main element of definition, but lacks to include the electronic platform into the definition.

Whilst these definitions shows the potential for a wide-ranging scope of virtual communities to be formed; the scope of the current research effort has been restricted primarily to virtual communities that are based on YouTube platform with its core focus on destination marketing. In this context, the term virtual community (VC) is redefined as the "Groups of people who communicate tourism related destination information and experiences with each other through YouTube platform".

3. RESEARCH IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

Virtual communities, the medium of electronic communication and information exchange among people with shared interest is an area which has been long researched. There has been documented research on the trust aspect of virtual communities (Rahman & Hailes, 2000). Hegel (1999) has reported about the virtual communities and the potential of virtual communities in expanding markets. Blanchard and Horan (1998) reported a research on the relationship between virtual communities and social capital. Hsu *et al.* (2007) investigated on the virtual communities of professional societies. The study proposed a social cognitive theory based model that includes knowledge sharing self-efficacy and outcome expectations for personal influences, and multi-dimensional trusts for environmental influences. Fuller

Related Content

Purchase Behavior of Generation Z for New-Brand Beauty Products: Exploring the Role of Blockchain
Shreya Sangal, Achint Nigamand Chitrakshi Bhutani (2022). *Journal of Electronic Commerce in Organizations (pp. 1-21).*
www.irma-international.org/article/purchase-behavior-of-generation-z-for-new-brand-beauty-products/300304

Towards a Framework for Web 2.0 Community Success: A Case of YouTube
Joshua Changand Clifford Lewis (2011). *Journal of Electronic Commerce in Organizations (pp. 1-14).*
www.irma-international.org/article/towards-framework-web-community-success/53195

Commercialisation Of Space Technology For Tomorrow's Space Missions
Stella Tkatchovaand Michel van Pelt (2008). *Commerce in Space: Infrastructures, Technologies, and Applications (pp. 241-256).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/commercialisation-space-technology-tomorrow-space/6696

Managing Security Vulnerabilities in a Business-to-Business Electronic Commerce Organization
Shirley Ann Beckerand Anthony Berkemeyer (2005). *Advanced Topics in Electronic Commerce, Volume 1 (pp. 51-75).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/managing-security-vulnerabilities-business-business/4406

Hyperlocal Supply Chains for Quick Commerce: An Indian Perspective
Mohammed Umair (2026). *Methods and Applications of Quick Commerce (Q-Commerce) (pp. 367-398).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/hyperlocal-supply-chains-for-quick-commerce/383436