

Virtual Communities on the Internet

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INTRODUCTION

With the advent of the Internet a little over a decade ago, technology has enabled communities to move beyond the physical face-to-face contacts to the virtual realm of the World Wide Web. With the advent of highways in the 1950s and 1960s, communities were created in suburbia. The Internet, on the other hand, over the last fifteen years, has enabled the creation of a myriad of virtual communities that have limitless boundaries around the entire globe.

This paper begins by providing a definition of the term *virtual communities* and then describing several typologies of this phenomenon. The various motivations for joining communities, how marketers create social bonds that enhance social relationships, as well as strategies used by firms in building virtual communities also are discussed. We conclude by discussing strategies for managing virtual communities, researching them, as well as directions for future research.

DEFINITION

A community refers to an evolving group of people communicating and acting together to reach a common goal. It creates a sense of membership through involvement or shared common interests. It has been considered a closed system with relatively stable membership, which demonstrates little or no connection to other communities (Anderson 1999).

With the rapid growth of the Internet, the geographic boundaries constraining the limits of communities are no longer a factor, and the functions of maintaining a community can be fulfilled virtually from anywhere on the globe. This is the basic essence of a virtual community. Several authors have attempted to provide a formal definition of the term for semantic clarifications. The major definitions are as follows:

Social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace (Rheingold, 1993, p. 5).

Groups of people who communicate with each other via electronic media, rather than face-to-face (Romm, Pliskin, & Clarke, 1997, p. 1997).

Computer mediated spaces where there is a potential for an integration of content and communication with an emphasis on member generated content (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997, p. 134).

Virtual Publics are symbolically delineated computer mediated spaces, whose existence is relatively transparent and open, that allow groups of individuals to attend and contribute to a similar set of computer-mediated interpersonal interactions (Jones & Rafaeli, 2000, p. 215).

While Rheingold (1993) provides one of the earliest definitions of the term, and one that is most quoted in the literature (Kozinets, 1999), many may question whether “with sufficient human feeling” is a necessary conditions for virtual community formation. Romm, Pliskin, and Clark’s (1997) definition may not sufficiently distinguish it from general Web sites. Hagel and Armstrong (1997) emphasize member-generated content, while Jones and Rafaeli (2000) use the term *virtual publics* instead of virtual community. Based on these definitions, the term may be simply defined as follows:

A group of individuals with common interests who interact with one another on the Internet.

Typologies of Virtual Communities

Virtual communities come in different shapes and

sizes and may have memberships of a few dozen to millions of individuals. These communities may extend from active forums like discussion groups and chat rooms to passive ones like e-mails and bulletin boards. Given that these communities are not geographically constrained, their size can be much bigger than typical physical communities, and many millions of them exist on the Internet. Uncovering archetype or gestalt patterns is fundamental to the study of social science and research, and several authors have proposed classification schemes for configurations of virtual communities.

Lee, Vogel, and Limayem (2003), in their review of classification schemes of virtual communities, identify Hagel and Armstrong's (1997) and Jones and Rafaeli's (2000) typologies as being the most popularly referenced. Kozinets (1999) also delineates four kinds of virtual communities. These three typologies are reviewed, and a further popular typology of affinity groups proposed by Macchiette and Roy (1992), as applied to the virtual environment, is also proposed.

Hagel and Armstrong (1997) propose four major types of virtual communities based on people's desire to meet basic human needs: interest, relationship, fantasy and transaction. Jones and Rafaeli (2000) further segment these communities by social structure (i.e., communities formed based on social networks, such as virtual voluntary associations, cyber inns, etc.) and technology base (i.e., types of technology platforms, such as e-mail lists, Usenet groups, etc.).

Kozinets (1999) proposed the four types of communities as dungeons (i.e., virtual environments where players interact, such as for online video games); circles (i.e., interest-structured collection of common interests); rooms (i.e., computer-mediated environments where people interact socially in real time); and boards (i.e., virtual communities organized around interest-specific bulletin boards).

Finally, Macchiette and Roy (1992) proposed a typology of affinity communities that also can be used for classifying virtual communities. They defined communities as either being: professional (e.g., doctors, lawyers, etc.), common interest (e.g., hobbies, interests), demographic (e.g., by gender, age, etc.), cause-based (e.g., Sierra Club, Green Peace), and marketer generated (e.g., Disney, Nintendo) communities. These communities also may be constructed in the virtual environment.

It is also interesting to make other dichotomous distinctions of virtual communities such as (a) formal (e.g., associations) vs. informal communities; (b) commercial (offers goods and services to make revenues that, in turn, fuel community operations) vs. noncommercial (communities created from the ground up by a group of individuals, such as one interested in stamp collection); and (c) open or public (where everyone, regardless of their qualifications and individual profile, can enter the community and participate) vs. closed or private (where outsiders are not allowed into the community, or where membership is very difficult to obtain).

Virtual Communities: Motivations, Mode of Participation, Characteristics, and Benefits

Rayport and Jaworski (2004) present a model of how the various components of a virtual community can be integrated. An adapted version of the model is shown in Figure 1. The model illustrates how members' motivations for joining the virtual community, their mode of participation, and the community's degree of connectedness, in many ways determine the characteristics of the community, which, in turn, influence the benefits sought by the members in these communities. The various components of the model are discussed next.

Motivations

A member's reasons for joining a community may depend on a wide range of factors, such as affiliation (others like them are members of the community), information (about experiences, ideas, and issues), recreation (meeting people, playing around, sharing stories, etc.), or transaction (e.g., those who join a Web site for buying and trading possessions).

Mode of Participation

Participation can occur in a myriad of ways (e.g., through e-mails, chat rooms, discussion groups, online events, bulletin boards, etc.). Some (i.e., discussion groups, chat rooms) have more active members than passive members (e.g., e-mail or bulletin board).

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