

# Culture in Virtual Communities

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## INTRODUCTION

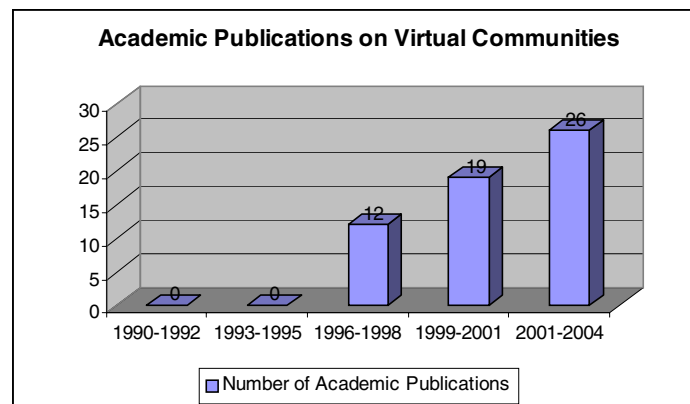
With exponential growth of virtual communities, more and more studies are carried out to examine how they change people's life (Bieber et al., 2002; Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Bruckman, 2002; Burnett, 2002; Burnett, Dickey, Kazmer, & Chudoba, 2003). Among those studies, many researchers focus on the architectures and infrastructures to enable knowledge sharing, such as Bieber et al. (2002), Bruckman (2002) and Marshall (2000). The human behavioral side of virtual communities, however, still remains mysterious. While virtual communities are inconceivable without the technological infrastructure and protocols that support them, they are equally inconceivable without human users. It is the users or the sense of community rather than the technologies that give virtual communities their significance (Burnett, 2002). The interactions of users in electronically mediated environments bring up new challenges and questions for researchers. For example, how do we understand culture in virtual communities? What kind of cultural issues are involved in virtual communities? Interacting with people from all over the world, how does one's national and ethnic culture background influence his or her activities in the virtual communities (Burnett et al., 2003)? The list of questions can go on. This article proposes one possible way to answer the first question of how to understand culture in virtual communities. We argue that the culture model by Schein (1992) can be applied to obtain an understanding of culture in virtual communities.

In this article, we first review relevant research on cultural issues in virtual communities. Then we propose that Schein's model can be applied to understand culture in virtual communities. Next, we analyze the trends for research on the topic and discuss our conclusion.

## BACKGROUND

Virtual communities started to form when development of Internet technologies enabled people to exchange information regularly. The term is attributed to a book of Howard Rheingold, in which he discussed a range of computer-mediated communication and social groups (Rheingold, 1993). Since then, virtual communities have experienced rapid development. A simple search of keyword "virtual communities" in Google.com resulted in nearly 3 million entries. Despite the widespread use of virtual communities, however, there is a dearth of academic research on the topic (Lee, Vogel, & Limayem, 2003). A search of keyword "virtual communities" for peer-reviewed publications in the ABI/INFORM database resulted in only 57 articles<sup>1</sup>. The development of research, however, is very promising in that more studies are being carried out to look at virtual communities. As indicated in Figure 1, the number of academic publications has been on the increase. Also, we can foresee that the publication of this book will certainly contribute greatly to the field and draw more attention to the fascinating phenomena of virtual communities.

*Figure 1. Academic publications on virtual communities*



As the research on virtual communities receives more attention, the trend of the field to integrate with other areas is emerging (Lee et al., 2003). For example, Bieber et al. (2002) studies application of virtual communities for knowledge management. Cummings, Butler, and Kraut (2002) examines the social relationships established through virtual communities. Blanchard and Markus (2004) investigates the sense of communities and behavior in virtual communities. The trend of integrating different fields in virtual communities research not only demonstrates the extensive growth of the field (Lee et al., 2003), but also indicates that the behavioral side of virtual communities is drawing more attention of researchers (Burnett, 2002).

Among the studies on the behavioral side of virtual communities, research on cultural issues in virtual communities is much called for. Lyman and Wakeford (1999) shows that research on culture should be included in the interdisciplinary field of virtual communities. As Bruckman (2002) depicts, culture and technology co-evolve. New technology artifacts foster new social practices and cultures. McLoughlin (1999) describes how culture and technology impact each other in communications.

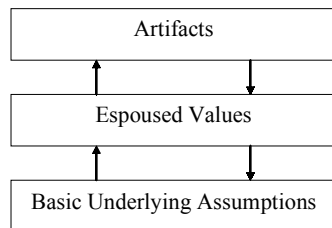
To examine the cultural issues involved in virtual communities, we propose that the culture model by Schein (1992) can be used to understand the culture in virtual communities.

**SCHEIN’S CULTURE MODEL**

According to Schein, culture exists simultaneously on three levels: artifacts, espoused values and basic underlying assumptions (Figure 2). Schein believes the essence of culture is the basic underlying assumption, which represents the unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs about reality and human nature. Values are social principles, philosophies, goals and standards considered to have intrinsic worth. Artifacts are the visible, tangible and audible results of activity grounded in values and assumptions.

From our perspective, we propose that Schein’s model can be applied to the virtual community environment to understand the culture there.

*Figure 2. Model of culture (Schein, 1992)*



**FUTURE TRENDS**

While technologies are developing rapidly to improve performance of infrastructure and protocols that support virtual communities, the human behavior in virtual communities is not well understood and calls for more research, especially on cultural issues. Although cultural issues have tended to be considered as a separate sub-discipline within the IS field until now, more and more researchers have begun to realize the importance of incorporating them in their studies. Examples include the articles in the recent special issue on cultural issues and IT management in the *IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management* journal, such as Rose, Evaristo, and Straub (2003) and Ford, Connelly, and Meister (2003). Martinsons and Davison (2003) calls to integrate cultural issues in IS research.

On the other hand, as researchers look more deeply at cultural issues involved in virtual communities, the focus of research on culture gradually changes from “what” and “where” to “how” and “why” (Martinsons & Davison, 2003). It is generally accepted that IS practices including virtual communities are far from universal. When looking at the cultural issues in virtual communities, we need to go beyond such questions as what are the differences and where are the differences across different communities, and examine the reasons behind the phenomena. We need to find the espoused values and the underlying assumptions beneath the manifested artifacts or practices of culture (Schein, 1992).

**CONCLUSION**

Virtual communities provide an exciting platform for knowledge sharing and relationship building, as well as new questions for researchers and practitioners. To obtain an understanding of human behavior in virtual communities, especially the culture in virtual communities, will enable us to seek to improve the performance of virtual communities to serve users better and to improve profitability of businesses. We believe the perspective proposed in this article will be a good starting point to understand culture in virtual communities and solve cultural issues involved.

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