Chapter XXV
Sense of Virtual Community

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ABSTRACT

Sense of virtual community is an important component of successful virtual communities. Defined as members' feelings of belonging, identity, and attachment with each other in computer-mediated communication, sense of virtual community distinguishes virtual communities from mere virtual groups. Sense of virtual community is believed to come from members' exchange of social support as well as creating their own identity and learning the identity of others members. It is believed to lead to positive outcomes such as increased satisfaction and communication with the virtual community as well as to greater trust and social capital in the larger face-to-face community or organization. Future research will be able to further develop the theoretical and empirical contributions of sense of virtual community in computer-medication communication research.

INTRODUCTION

The term virtual community is used to refer to many different forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) groups. Examples include e-mail discussion groups, Internet discussion boards, social chat rooms, online classrooms and even eBay (Barab, MaKinster, Moore, & Cunningham, 2001; Boyd, 2002; Easterling, 2001; Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; Rothaermel & Sugiyama, 2001). Because of the overuse of this term, virtual community has become synonymous with virtual group. While all virtual communities are virtual groups, not all virtual groups are virtual communities.

One reason for this overuse is the positive connotations of the term "community" (cf., Harris, 1999). Whereas some fear that a proliferation of virtual groups will lead to isolated individuals tapping at their computer keyboards in dark, lonely rooms, a proliferation of virtual communities are believed to lead to increased health, civic engagement and even democratic functioning (Wellman & Guilia, 1999; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hamp-

ton, 2001). However, just as every neighborhood is not a community, every virtual group is not a virtual community.

What distinguishes virtual groups from virtual communities? One potentially discriminating characteristic is the members' sense of virtual community (SOVC) defined as members' feelings of identity, belonging and attachment with each other (Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Koh & Kim, 2003). By examining SOVC, researchers have a metric to determine if members are experiencing feelings of community with each other. SOVC can also be used as a measure of virtual group success, with members' higher SOVC as an indicator of greater member participation and higher levels of group functioning.

The objectives of this chapter are to define SOVC and to examine what the potential antecedents and outcomes of SOVC are. First, I will present how the SOVC construct has developed and our current knowledge of it. Then, in the main focus of this chapter, I will discuss the current issues and controversies surrounding SOVC. Next, I will present a program of research that could help us develop our understanding of SOVC, and finally, the conclusions to this chapter.

BACKGROUND

Sense of community (SOC) has an extended history in the community psychology literature. Sarason (1986) was one of the first researchers to identify that community members' feelings about each other and their face-to-face (FtF) community are important to the community's successful functioning. SOC is desired in a community because it leads to satisfaction with and commitment to the community, and is associated with involvement in community activities and problem-focused coping behavior (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

McMillan and Chavis (1986) developed the SOC construct by defining it as an individual's

feelings of membership, identity, belonging, and attachment with a group. Their SOC descriptive framework has been widely accepted because of its theoretical base and its qualitative empirical support (Chipuer & Pretty, 1999; Obst & White, 2004). This framework has four dimensions:

- **Feelings of membership:** feelings of belonging to, and identifying with, the community.
- **Feelings of influence:** feelings of having influence on, and being influenced by, the community.
- **Integration and fulfillment of needs:** feelings of being supported by others in the community while also supporting them.
- **Shared emotional connection:** feelings of relationships, shared history, and a "spirit" of community.

Sense of community is also gaining attention in virtual communities, although it is referred to as sense of virtual community. In this chapter, SOC will refer to sense of community in an FtF community and SOVC will refer to sense of community in a virtual community.

Most researchers continue to use McMillan and Chavis' (1986) conceptualization as a starting point in understanding SOVC (e.g., Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Forster, 2004; Koh & Kim, 2003; Roberts, Smith, & Pollock, 2002). Roberts and her colleagues examined SOVC in a chat room where participants used text to create objects with which they interacted. Through a qualitative study, they found that the virtual communities they examined differed from FtF communities, but members still experienced a sense of community similar to that defined by McMillan and Chavis. Likewise, Obst, Zinkiewicz, and Smith (2002) compared the senses of community between members' online science fiction fan group and the members' neighborhoods. By comparing item loadings on a factor analysis of a SOC measure, they found similar structures between the two groups; items for the

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