

Chapter XV

Conclusion, Book Limitations and Future Directions

INTRODUCTION

Social capital in virtual communities offers a useful conceptual and practical tool to help us gain insights into the way people interact with each other, share information and knowledge among themselves and work together. This book has synthesized and brought together a massive volume of current and past work on social capital in geographical or place-based communities. The results of the analysis helped to extend the theory of social capital to virtual communities. It has also provided basis for e researchers, policymakers and systems designers to explore social issues that are likely to have an impact on information and knowledge sharing. The book provides useful information for people concerned with how social capital may be used to answer key questions about its fundamental components, how to study and model it within the contexts of virtual learning communities and distributed communities of practice. The main thrust of this book is the ability to identify the critical components of social capital in virtual communities and the use of modelling techniques—Bayesian Belief Network to analysis of interactions of the components of social capital. The components identified in the book serve as important proxies for examination of how social capital will operate in virtual communities.

Moreover, the conceptualization of social capital in virtual communities as a common social resource that facilitates information exchange, knowledge sharing and knowledge construction achieved through continuous interaction and engagement,

built on trust and maintained through shared understanding represents an interesting and important theoretical departure, from the original role of social capital in more conventional communities. It is hoped that this fresh conceptualization of social capital in virtual communities prepares scholars to engage in useful and productive discussions on how to hone the potentials of this theory. This chapter summarises the key issues presented in the book and outlines important future directions for the discussion of social capital in virtual communities.

COMMUNITIES AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

For many years the notion of community served as a powerful but also an elusive construct for addressing social issues in many societies and is being considered as a social research pillar for understanding the operational success of many societies. For over hundred years, several scholars, especially Sociologists and Anthropologists have intense discussions around what exactly constitutes a community. Though no precise agreement is available, most writers tend to elude towards an understanding that a community is a social system composed of individuals who live in the same area, neighbourhood, city or town and who for some biological or social reasons share common values, norms, beliefs and cultural practices. As discussed in chapter I, this idea of a community based on geography and ascribed rather than achieved status and rules of socialization and engagement has been challenged by the emergence of the “information age”.

Marked by rapid development in telecommunication and global communication networks, the “information age” has contributed to the mutation of an idea, that a community is limited to geographical locality. The mutation has resulted into a new definition of a community, one that takes into account human gathering and interaction and celebration in what can be described as abstract virtual spaces—virtual communities.

Virtual communities as real addition to human communities are on a rise and they have overall come to support various forms of social interaction, communication and social engagement, radically transforming the traditional structures of what we previously consider as communities. Today different forms of computer mediated communication systems are freely available to engage people in social interactions from the distance through various patterns of communication. People join virtual communities for a number of reasons. Among many others, they want to take part participation that can lead to building reciprocal relationships with likeminded peers. In other words, people are motivated to contribute to the communities they belong to in the expectation that they will receive useful help and information in return. Other factors include increased sense of recognition, the desire to obtain prestige, personal visibility to others and the powerful effects of seemingly trivial markers of

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