Chapter 11
Identification vs. Self-Verification in Virtual Communities (VC): Theoretical Gaps and Design Implications

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ABSTRACT

Identity-related processes have been identified as important in explaining virtual community (VC) member behavior as well as informing system design of VCs. In particular, the two distinct identity processes of self-verification and identification have been identified and investigated separately, portrayed as two distinctive or contradictory identity processes with different practical implications. This chapter compares and reconciles these two theoretical perspectives in explaining VC participation. Based on a critical and comprehensive review of prior literature, the author identifies three major theoretical gaps that suggest how VC research and management can be advanced through an identity perspective. Finally, the chapter is concluded by discussing key implications of applying identity perspectives in VC research and future research agenda.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual communities (VCs), sometimes called online communities, describe the mediated social spaces in the digital environment that allow groups to form and be sustained primarily through ongoing virtual communication processes (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). Much evidence has shown their potent influence in bringing together far-flung, like-minded individuals (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997) and their commercial and/or social values (Gupta & Kim, 2004). A growing number of companies are building VCs to facilitate peer-

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to-peer help, foster new ideas and innovation, and build knowledge competencies. VCs are also used to reap the knowledge located in customers. Many firms are hosting online user communities to collect feedback and ideas and to strengthen their innovation process. Additionally, VCs have emerged to leverage the knowledge embedded in professionals, e.g., open-source communities and communities of practice. Such communities are sustained by their members' voluntary participation to generate content (Lee, Vogel, & Limayem, 2003). Thus, a key challenge for most VCs is to ensure on-going participation.

Prior research in information systems has demonstrated Identity-related processes to be important in explaining VC member behavior as well as informing system VC design. Particularly, two distinct identity processes have been discussed, e.g., identification and self-verification. Identification means that the individual defines him/herself in terms of the membership in the group. The resulting perceptions of oneness with or belonging to the group provide a more autonomous motivation resulting not only in a higher quality of engagement (e.g., greater persistence, effort) but also in more positive experiences such as enjoyment, sense of purpose, and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). In contrast, self-verification assumes that stable self-views provide people with a crucial source of coherence, an invaluable means of defining their existence, and guiding social interaction (cf. Swann Jr., Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2003). Thus, people are motivated to validate and confirm their self-concepts, even when those self-concepts are negative (McNulty & Swann Jr., 1994), which also drives member participation and active social exchange in VCs (Chan, Bhandar, Oh, & Chan, 2004; Ma & Agarwal, 2007). Different from identification that reflects influences exerted from the collective; self-verification focuses on the communication of self-concepts defined by individuals.

In most IS research, identification and self-verification have been investigated separately and portrayed as two distinctive or contradictory identity processes with different practical implications. Research on identification usually emphasizes the collective influences and anonymity of individuals and agrees that the salient personal identity would undermine the identification with the collective (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998). But research on self-verification argues for making personal/role identity salient and recognized (Ma & Agarwal, 2007). While identity confirmation emphasizes an individual's self-concept; most prior studies on identification assume antagonism of individuality in the formation of identification, and agree that the salient personal identity would undermine the identification with the collective (Postmes et al. 2000).

Since VCs usually integrate various IT features which may incur complicated community dynamics with diversified social psychological consequences, it is likely that both identity processes co-exist to influence VC members' interaction within VCs. Thus, it is necessary to examine these competing identity processes simultaneously in driving community participation and informing system VC design. Moreover, integrating these identity processes will offer a more holistic understanding about group dynamics in VCs, which entails important managerial implications.

In this chapter, the author will compare and reconcile these two theoretical perspectives in explaining VC participation. The main objective of this chapter is to inform how VC research and management can be advanced from identity perspectives. This chapter is organized as follows. The following two sections provide a thorough review of two research streams: identification and self-verification. Theoretical models and empirical work in organizational, community, and general group contexts are identified and discussed. Although limited research has been conducted in the context of computer-mediated communication (CMC), prior research from multiple disciplines in different physical settings may provide insights in understanding identity processes in VCs. The