

Preface

As an emergent field still in development, virtual community studies have been withstanding the growth of Internet itself. It has attracted a bundle of scholars from diversified fields, as shown in this book, to devote their time and energy to investigate all kinds of fascinating virtual community phenomenon. Starting around the early 1990's, various articles discussing virtual communities, debating its validity, and exploring human's behaviour difference in an seeming new world, have never ceased. Although the academic definitions on virtual communities are controversial and have never been concluded, the virtual community itself is growing to satisfy all kinds of human needs at individual, organizational, or societal level. Researches on virtual communities thus move away from virtual community definitions to virtual community design, management, and business functions.

Among all topics on virtual communities, virtual community participation, virtual involvement, or virtual community behavior, describing members' various activities including posting messages, browsing messages, post diaries, blogs, etc., in virtual communities is of essential importance for a virtual community to sustain and grow. The virtual community participation is also the prerequisite for knowledge accumulation of a community of practice. For this reason, virtual community participation has gained large attention from researchers from diversified disciplines from psychology, communication, sociology, education, information systems, business, marketing, engineering, and many other fields around the world. The motivations behind virtual community participation have accordingly been explored from communicational, psychological, social psychological, educational, informational, economical, information systems, marketing, engineering, and many other perspectives. This cross-disciplinary discussion of virtual communities provides an interesting and exciting angle to look at the virtual community itself considering the fact that virtual communities have been used for multiple functions in these disciplines. Theories explored in this book are in the very early stage in providing a sketch of the current virtual community participation research.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS BOOK?

The motivations and theories behind virtual community participation serve as not only a starting point to explore other potentials of virtual communities but also a guideline to direct practitioners to design, manage, and operate their virtual communities. The theories either generated or developed out of multiple disciplines lay the ground for further exploration of virtual community growth. The book targets readers who are interested in virtual community research and development. Researchers who would like to have an in-depth understanding of the development of the virtual community and members' partici-

pation, postgraduate students who would like to devote their efforts in pushing the field forward, and those practitioners, especially virtual community organizers, who want to explore members' participation beyond the superficial level of the behavior itself, would expect to enrich their knowledge on both virtual communities and virtual community participation by reading this book.

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK CHAPTERS

The book is divided into two sections based on the characteristics of the chapters. The first section gives readers an overview of the virtual communities and virtual community participation from different theoretical angles. The second section investigates various reasons and motivations behind virtual community participation framed up by cross-disciplinary theories.

Chapter 1 starts the book with the discussion of the evolution of virtual communities which could be traced back to the originality of communities, the development of Internet technologies, and the interactions between communities and the Internet. The most important function internet provides is communication! Building on the communicational perspective, this chapter played an important role by introducing readers to the perception of internet as both technology and culture, based on which virtual communities are evolving. It then further explored the evolution of the concept of community and how it has been changed in the modern civilization process from the sociological perspective. The psychological view of virtual communities on identities, imagined communities, online/offline intermix raised very interesting issues for the reader to ponder. Lastly, the author provides opportunities and challenges brought by virtual communities, i.e., Internet and community interactions at the macro level and Internet individual interactions at the micro level.

Chapter 2 extends chapter one by further discussing the concept of community and virtual community, and proposes an ethnography framework for analysis of a specific virtual community, Gossip Girl. The chapter has used the media coverage process to support the virtual community evolution process through an example. The characteristics of this chapter lies in the author's unique angle of viewing virtual community through the communicational perspective by tracking the origin of virtual communities back into the text-based community. By comparing the virtual community with the traditional media, such as TV through the media coverage theory, the author provides a very innovative perspective connecting the new media with the old media.

Chapter 3 illustrates a virtual educational learning community in Brazil and discusses several issues arising from virtual community environment. The author describes how a virtual community is forced, based on learning needs, in an executive MBA class. The virtual community shaped during the learning process could be categorized into the community of interest and is helpful in the collaborative learning process. The paper raises several interesting issues regarding virtual community participation based on number of messages analysed. Firstly, the author observes those members' participation level increases with the degree of distance. Secondly, the participation level increases greatly with the moderator's intervention. The empirical evidences in this chapter serve as a very good starting point for the opening of the theoretical exploration of virtual community participation.

Chapter 4 leads readers to ponder on news applications and products accompanying virtual communities by illustrating how virtual communities could generate metadata through demonstrating two research projects. User-generated contents are important to the future development of virtual communities and its importance grows along the growth of virtual communities. This chapter highlights how a small area

of virtual community member participation could lead to changes in the traditional method of metadata generation process. This chapter will serve as a starting point for readers to explore more of such changes.

Chapter 5 redefines the virtual community participation in a more meaningful and rich context. In past literature, virtual community participation is generally categorized as either lurking or active participation, or no distinguishing between these two, and measured by time spent on virtual communities or frequency of visiting virtual communities, following the information systems traditional method of measuring information technology adoption approach. This chapter attempts to raise the issue that virtual community participation is different from general information technology adoption behavior and should be refined in a more meaningful way. The chapter brings forth the idea that virtual community participation should be viewed in a more dynamic angle and be treated as an evolving process.

Chapter 6 introduces an ethnographical method of narrative network analysis to systemically analyse virtual community contents. This method has been used in the management field and is applied to analyse the discursive contents generated in virtual communities. Three virtual communities are analysed to demonstrate the method. The method enlightens authors to further explore new methods to systemically analyse virtual community participation behavior.

Chapter 7 introduces infrastructural approach to understanding virtual communities and demonstrates how to analyse virtual communities with this new approach. The author provides many implications for future researchers to analyse virtual communities using this approach.

Chapter 8 poses the following question: how are virtual communities embodied? The author discusses a theoretical framework of subjective performance and argues that members' subjectivity is the key factor in the formation, functioning, and interpretation of virtual community.

Chapter 9 proposes a theoretical framework of subaltern public spheres and analyses how this framework could be applied to the Chinese internet environment, leading to diversified online communities. Specifically, the virtual community participation behavior of Chinese web-surfers could be traced back to their culture origins, and these cultures could confine and even diversify their behaviour. This chapter demonstrates how virtual community participation can be explained in an interesting and unique, yet academically systematically method.

Chapter 10 brings forth the issue of virtual community participation from a new angle. While previous studies tried to explain theoretical motivations for participation by focusing on the active participation, this paper explores the neglected de-friending behaviour in virtual communities and illustrated it by 'The Gamified Flow of Persuasion' model. The paper studies the lurking, defriending, and trolling behaviour, based on which the participation level could be increased. There are several interesting conclusions from this paper, particularly the effective management of lurking, trolling, and defriending behaviour could increase participation.

Chapter 11 further explores the strategy of increasing participation by studying a virtual learning community. The chapter reports that students' awareness of their own learning needs and attitudes are very important to their participation level, based on which the concept of focal awareness is developed and discussed. The focal awareness of the virtual community member is important to increase virtual community participation.

Chapter 12 introduces a systematic method to investigate online sharing motivation by incorporating rhetorical analysis and gift research. Based on these two theories, the chapter argues that virtual community participation is not only self-contained by members but also should consider the situational and cultural factors. The chapter highlights an important concept in virtual community participation- the

social situation and the social context of virtual communities, from where future research could explore further and deeper in this area.

Chapter 13 describes a virtual community participation model for the student holistic development. The modern educational process calls for more community support for students and virtual educational community could serve as this purpose. The chapter illustrates the virtual community participation model by a campus project in the University of Macau educational system. The chapter provides a starting point for readers to ponder the links between virtual life and real life.

Chapter 14 seeks to explain the continuous virtual community participation through the social capital perspective. Although virtual community participation has been investigated by many studies, few have explored the continuous virtual community participation behaviour. This paper fills the gap by looking at the continuous involvement in the virtual community through the multiple dimensions of social capital theory.

Chapter 15 is another paper devoting to investigate the continuous virtual community participation behaviour through the information adoption perspective. The information adoption model was used to discuss the motivations for continuous virtual community participation. The paper is similar to chapter 14 by empirically testing the model using data collected from virtual community members. The results show that members' satisfaction and perceived usefulness are important factors in influencing members continued use of virtual communities.

Chapter 16 reports and analyses the data mining results of a virtual learning environment. The paper analyses the log records and participatory data from a master student programme's virtual learning environment. Several interesting findings show that participation is meaningful in predicting students' performance. The most interesting conclusion is that students with higher involvement have better performance and vice versa. The conclusion based on real data analysis leads us to ponder whether every part of our social life is meaningful or produces value in certain way.

Chapter 17 continues the discussion of value creation of virtual community participation activities. The paper investigates the Facebook activities with the immaterial labour theory and their analysis indicated that the respondents conscious of their time on Facebook as labour. The discussion here further opens new areas for us ponder on the values of virtual community participation. Will time and energy spent virtually produce values?

Chapter 18 raises an unnoticed issue in previous virtual community study—the death. While researchers are still trying to figure out the motivations for members' involvement in virtual communities, this paper demonstrates how death is dealt with in virtual communities through ethnography studies. The author himself has been in a Listserv for several years and observed the behaviour of members there. The paper has a unique perspective on culture development and shaping process interwoven with death.

Chapter 19 finishes the book with an exploration of the motivations for virtual world participation, a typical type of virtual community participations. Virtual world might be the future popular virtual communities. One of the interesting findings from this chapter lies in the social interaction patterns identified in virtual world despite the studied virtual world is intended for the purpose of business and entertainment.

This book is the first edited book to aim at giving readers a comprehensive view of virtual community participation. It pieced together theoretical reasons and motivations for virtual community participation from different disciplines with different research methods. When all these theories are compiled together to explain virtual community participation, they generate a dynamic picture of virtual community participation. Firstly, virtual community is still in development and the virtual community participation evolves

with the development of the virtual community technology. For example, the virtual world participation in Second Life might be dramatically different from Listserv participation. Secondly, virtual community participation is better explained by social psychological, communicational, and psychological theories, supporting by various theories. Thirdly, the virtual community participation is closely associated with culture, social interactions, and interpersonal relationships. This opened the way for further exploration of virtual community participation theories.

Honglei Li
Northumbria University, UK