The Effects of Community Characteristics and Member Retention of Virtual Communities

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the antecedents of member retention for virtual communities. This research theorizes the motivating mechanism from both perspectives of the information seekers and providers. Four antecedents - communication breadth, depth, responsiveness, and cross-posting - have a statistically significant influence on member retention. Furthermore, we have found that communication breadth and depth have a diminishing effect on the marginal impact on member retention as well as the interaction between these factors has a negative impact on member retention although each of them separately has a positive impact. The implications of this study help understand the dynamics of knowledge sharing in virtual communities.

Keywords: Communication, Knowledge Sharing, Member Retention, Usenet, Virtual Community

INTRODUCTION

A virtual community (VC) refers to “groups of people who communicate and interact with each other via electronic media” (Romm, Pliskin, & Clarke, 1997). On an average day approximately 199 million American adults use the Internet (Pew/Internet, 2012). Among them, 181 million or 91% are involved in, at least, one virtual community activity (Pew/Internet, 2012). The type of media utilized by VCs spans a broad spectrum, including social networking services, blogs, e-mail listservs, business Web sites, and instant message groups. As can be inferred from these activities, internet based virtual community activities have become a part of our daily routine (Fallows, 2004; Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, & Abras, 2003).

Researchers have studied a variety of subjects including the definition and classification of VCs (Lee, Vogel, & Limayem, 2003; Long & Baecker, 1997; Romm, Pliskin, & Clarke, 1997; Schubert & Ginsburg, 2000); the motivation for participation in VCs (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004; Millen, Fontaine, & Muller, 2002; Preece, 2002; Ridings & Gefen, 2004; Tillquist, 1996; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2003), the communication environment in terms of social presence and the communication medium (Erickson, Halverson, Kellogg, Laff, & Wolf, 2002; Surinder S. Kahai & Avolio, 1998; Surinder S Kahai & Cooper, 2003).

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1999; Miranda & Saunders, 2003; Pinsonneault & Heppel, 1997), and message tone (C. B. Smith, McLaughlin, & Osborne, 1997). Yet, there have been few empirical studies evaluating and measuring the VC success factors from both the participants’ and the providers’ perspectives (Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, & Abras, 2003), which in our opinion is necessary in order to obtain a balanced view of the phenomena.

There are three keys to creating and sustaining a VC: (1) member development, implying that communities require critical mass to remain active and hold the attentions of members; (2) asset management, referring to tangible or intangible resource bases generated within a VC; and (3) community relations, pointing out the group norm structures and guidelines to avoid unnecessary conflicts among VC members (Williams & Cothrel, 2000). It has been noted that the membership size of a community is essentially the potential energy of knowledge available to a potential participant in a VC, and a stable and steady core of community members is important to the development of a sustainable community (Butler, 2001). Yet, it is this area that is under-explored, as we know little about what factors encourage people to participate and eventually become a steady member of a VC. This study attempts to address the dearth of theory and supporting empirical analysis and by developing a research model that investigates the antecedents of member retention in virtual communities in the context of USENET.

USENET has become a prominent stereotype of VCs because of size, diversity of community characteristics, and multi-faceted nature of dynamics in social interaction across various VCs. USENET is one of the largest worldwide online social interaction systems consisting of newsgroups of various topics such as computer (comp.), recreation (rec.), science (sci.), social (soc.), and controversial (talk.). Figure 1 and 2 present an example of various topics and an extended discussion thread of a USENET

Figure 1. An example of a topic list of a USENET group
Building a Virtual Environment for Diabetes Self-Management Education and Support
www.igi-global.com/article/building-a-virtual-environment-for-diabetes-self-management-education-and-support/111359?camid=4v1a