Antecedents of Trust in Online Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Online virtual communities have existed on the Internet since the early 1980s as Usenet newsgroups. With the advent of the World Wide Web and emphasis on Web site interactivity, these communities and accompanying research have grown rapidly (Horrigan, Rainie, & Fox, 2001; Lee, Vogel, & Limayem, 2003; Petersen, 1999). Virtual communities arise as a natural consequence of people coming together to discuss a common hobby, medical affliction, or other similar interest, such as coin collecting, a devotion to a rock group, or living with a disease such as lupus. Virtual communities can be defined as groups of people with common interests and practices that communicate regularly and for some duration in an organized way over the Internet through a common location or site (Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002). The location is the “place” where the community meets, and it can be supported technologically by e-mail listservs, newsgroups, bulletin boards, or chat rooms, for example. The technology helps to organize the community’s conversation, which is the essence of the community. For example, messages in a community supported by a listserv are organized in e-mails, sometimes even grouping together several messages into an e-mail digest. In bulletin board communities, the conversation is organized into message threads consisting of questions or comments posted by members and associated replies to the messages.

Virtual community members form personal relationships with strong norms and expectations (Sproull & Faraj, 1997; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991), sometimes developing deep attachments to the communities (Hiltz, 1984; Hiltz & Wellman, 1997). These developments are interesting, because the members of virtual communities are typically strangers to one another and may never meet face to face. Additionally, the nature of computer-mediated communication is such that nonverbal cues that aid in the interpretation of communication, such as inflections in the voice, gestures, dress, tone, physical personal attributes, and posture, are missing (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991), making the communication open to multiple interpretations (Korenman & Wyatt, 1996). Yet, despite these limitations, many virtual communities flourish by exchanging messages and building their conversation base. A key ingredient in sustaining the conversation in the community is the existence of trust between the members. Trust has a downstream effect on the members’ intentions to give and get information through the virtual community (Ridings et al., 2002).

This chapter examines emergent virtual communities, that is, those arising without direction or mandate from an organization, government, or other entity for an expressed economic or academic purpose. For example, a discussion board for a strategic partnership work group between two companies or a chat room for a class taking a college course would not be considered emergent virtual communities. However, an online forum established by the Breast Cancer Young Survivors Coalition so that women could discuss their battles with the disease would be considered an emergent virtual community.

BACKGROUND

Trust is an essential ingredient in social relationships (Blau, 1964; Luhmann, 1979), and understanding and defining trust are dependent upon the situation in which they are considered. In communities, in general, trust is an integral part of interpersonal relations among members and defines an individual’s expectations and behavior (Luhmann, 1979; Rotter, 1971). Trust has many definitions. It has been defined as a willingness to take a risk associated with the behavior of others (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995) and, more generally, as a method of reducing social uncertainty (Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub, 2003; Luhmann, 1979). In this sense, trust is used in the virtual community to reduce social complexity associated with the behavior of other members, and as a way of reducing the fear that the trusted party will take advantage by engaging in opportunistic behavior (Gefen et al., 2003), much as it does in communities in general (Fukuyama, 1995).

Participating in a virtual community entails exposure to risk. Opportunistic behaviors could include selling personal information that was confidentially provided, adopting a fictitious persona, deliberately and stealthily