INTRODUCTION

With exponential growth of virtual communities, more and more studies are carried out to examine how they change people’s life (Bieber et al., 2002; Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Bruckman, 2002; Burnett, 2002; Burnett, Dickey, Kazmer, & Chudoba, 2003). Among those studies, many researchers focus on the architectures and infrastructures to enable knowledge sharing, such as Bieber et al. (2002), Bruckman (2002) and Marshall (2000). The human behavioral side of virtual communities, however, still remains mysterious. While virtual communities are inconceivable without the technological infrastructure and protocols that support them, they are equally inconceivable without human users. It is the users or the sense of community rather than the technologies that give virtual communities their significance (Burnett, 2002). The interactions of users in electronically mediated environments bring up new challenges and questions for researchers. For example, how do we understand culture in virtual communities? What kind of cultural issues are involved in virtual communities? Interacting with people from all over the world, how does one’s national and ethnic culture background influence his or her activities in the virtual communities (Burnett et al., 2003)? The list of questions can go on. This article proposes one possible way to answer the first question of how to understand culture in virtual communities. We argue that the culture model by Schein (1992) can be applied to obtain an understanding of culture in virtual communities.

In this article, we first review relevant research on cultural issues in virtual communities. Then we propose that Schein’s model can be applied to understand culture in virtual communities. Next, we analyze the trends for research on the topic and discuss our conclusion.

BACKGROUND

Virtual communities started to form when development of Internet technologies enabled people to exchange information regularly. The term is attributed to a book of Howard Rheingold, in which he discussed a range of computer-mediated communication and social groups (Rheingold, 1993). Since then, virtual communities have experienced rapid development. A simple search of keyword “virtual communities” in Google.com resulted in nearly 3 million entries. Despite the widespread use of virtual communities, however, there is a dearth of academic research on the topic (Lee, Vogel, & Limayem, 2003). A search of keyword “virtual communities” for peer-reviewed publications in the ABI/INFORM database resulted in only 57 articles1. The development of research, however, is very promising in that more studies are being carried out to look at virtual communities. As indicated in Figure 1, the number of academic publications has been on the increase. Also, we can foresee that the publication of this book will certainly contribute greatly to the field and draw more attention to the fascinating phenomena of virtual communities.

Figure 1. Academic publications on virtual communities