Consumer’s Participation Model in Virtual Communities

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ABSTRACT

Virtual communities are very impressive in the activities associated with the business using facilities provided on the Web and broad access to consumers. More access to users also helps virtual communities to be leading in attracting more users in competition with the other virtual communities. In this regard, providing the model of consumers’ participation in virtual communities can be effective in the competitive environment from the cognitive aspects of consumer behavior. The aim of this study is to design consumers’ participation model in virtual communities. The mixed method is selected as the research method and in the qualitative section, semi-structured interviews were conducted among the panel of experts; after analyzing the results using the content analysis, the designed model was finally tested. The results showed that in addition to personal and social factors and the services offered by the website, the other factors such as attitudes and we-intentions have also significant impact on the consumers’ participation.

KEYWORDS

Attitude, Desire, Participation Behavior, Website Services, We-Intentions

INTRODUCTION

For a long time, new technologies have not only led to transformation of the type of business and reproduction of its related definitions, but also have changed the social environment. Aligning Internet and World Wide Web has created such a specific phenomenon with these facilities; since, it created a new perspective from both commercial and social point of view.

Virtual communities, using facilities provided by the Internet, are not only powerful tools for the members’ communication, but they are also an opportunity for companies, manufacturers, merchants and marketers who have a broader communication with their customers by proper information and advertising about their products and services to target members of these communities and they have provided the grounds to meet the expectations, that ultimately has led to more profit for these activities (Dehdashti and Poursaeed, 2015).

Given the increasing importance of virtual communities’ sites and the extensive use of them by consumers, despite strong infrastructure and large number of virtual community sites in Iran, the number of users of these sites is very low; because, despite 30 million Internet users, who are active at least at one of these virtual communities, less than 10% of them are members of Iranian virtual communities (www.ispa.ir). Looking at the statistics on the users of sites active in the field of virtual communities, it can be concluded that these sites are faced with the problem of attracting users; in other words, they do not recognize their consumers’ behavior, how to increase user engagement on their site as well as the factors affecting engagement and attracting them.

Improper use and lack of understanding about the potential of the virtual communities in the marketing field in Iran is another issue; due to the several reasons including lack of awareness of these

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communities, as well as marketers lack of attention to the environment, they have not properly used in business. In addition, because of filtering of many of these virtual communities in the country, there is negative mental background that prevents attracting researchers’, users’ and marketers’ attentions to these environments.

Given the importance of virtual communities and the growing emergence of them on the Internet, the empirical studies that examine the new way of communications, especially on virtual communities are limited in Iran. Also, most existing models only examine the social factors and its analysis has been conducted in this field (Oliveira and Huertas, 2015; Han, et al., 2015; Zhou, 2011; Cheung Chiu and Lee, 2011; Li, 2011).

The main purpose of this research is to design the model of consumer participation in virtual communities to help the active sites in this area offer better services by achieving better understanding about them. Therefore, the main research question is what are the criteria and dimensions of the consumers’ participation model in virtual communities?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the field of participation behavior, numerous theories have explained the behavior; among them, theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) is one of the most influential theories in explaining and predicting behavior; it is proven that the model has the potential to predict behavior in many situations (Van, 2011; McConnon et al. 2012). TPB is the extensive version of the theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) that combines involuntary elements to predict the behavior. TPB and TRA support the relationship between subjective norms and behavioral intention in online communities (Zhou, 2011). Also, Wang, Ma, and Li (2015) used the Theory of planned behavior to prove the relationship between continuing intention and actual participation in virtual brand communities. The other mostly used model by researchers is the technology acceptance model that was presented for the first time by Davis (1989) in the field of social psychology. If we want to find the origins of the technology acceptance model, we reach two models of TRA and TPB; because, these models are the bases of social psychology and they lead to the creation of TAM. In the TAM, we can clearly see the behavior prediction and its role in making decisions and accepting the use of a special technology; since, the model claims that a person’s decision to use a technology is based on two important factors. These two factors include perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. In addition, Li (2011) and Lin & Lu (2011) believe that the pleasure to use can be achieved in positive and direct relationship with the intention of using social network sites. TAM has also a prediction aspect in addition to descriptive aspect. The theory has been also used for adopting technology in virtual environments as the technologies provided by Web site (Li, 2011). Technology Acceptance Model has constantly been evolved and many factors are involved in its development. For example, researchers concluded that Web services not only have an impact on consumer satisfaction, but also affect his/her return (Lujun et al., 2016). In another study, Chou and Swang (2015) examined the impact of service quality in virtual communities and its impact on consumer repurchase.

Uses and gratifications theory proposes a suitable and comprehensive framework of personal needs and motivations in using new media. The foundation of this theory is based on the principle that, users have their free active choices in using media purposefully, and also, the fact that people can communicate with each other via the intended media, receive and interpret the intended messages (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 2007). The members of active audience are not passive who just have a reactive trend toward media, but rather, they are purposeful and cognizant choosers who are trying to satisfy their personal needs (Meyrowitz, 2002). Generally, this theory proposes five key values in using virtual communities. These values include: purposive value, self-discovery, social enhancement, maintaining interpersonal interactivity, and the value of entertainment (Dholakia et al., 2004).

If we decide to acquire a proper definition about the social factors, the theory of social influences extensively explains both collective and group behavior (Bagozzi and Lee, 2002). Moreover, social
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