Chapter 8

The Development of Trust in Virtual Communities

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This empirical study applies an existing scale to measure trust in the context of virtual communities on the Internet, and explores factors that build trust in this unique environment. The results show that trust is composed of two dimensions: trust in others’ abilities and trust in benevolence/integrity. In addition, this research found that trust has relationships with perceived responsiveness, disposition to trust, and perceptions regarding the degree to which others confide personal information. Trust itself affected participants’ desire to get and to provide information to others in the online community.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of virtual communities on the Internet (Gross, 1999) and accompanying research expansion (Hiltz and Wellman, 1997; Wellman and Gulia, 1999) provides a fertile area of study. Virtual communities arise as a natural consequence of people coming together to discuss a common hobby, medical affliction, or other similar interest. 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.

Given that trust is among the most important antecedents of interpersonal interaction in general (Luhmann, 1979), and affects online behavior in particular...
(Gefen, 1997; Gefen, 2000), this study examines the role of trust in virtual communities and how it affects the participants’ desire to provide and receive information. The research also examined effects of group behavior and disposition to trust on the development of trust in other community members. The research model proposed by this study is presented in Figure 1.

THE CONCEPT OF TRUST

The definition of trust is dependent upon the situation in which it is being considered (Luhmann, 1979). Extending this logic, trust in virtual communities is likely to be better understood in the context of interpersonal relationships, i.e., trust between human beings (Rotter, 1971), or what Luhmann (1979) terms personal trust. His definition positions trust as a mechanism required to reduce social complexity and uncertainty, conditions that exist in virtual communities.

In this context, trust has been defined as the willingness to take a risk (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995). This definition has been also used in the study of trust in virtual teams (Jarvenpaa, Knoll and Leidner, 1998). Giffin (1967) has defined trust as “reliance upon the communication behavior of another person in order to achieve a desired but uncertain objective in a risky situation” (p. 105), further emphasizing that inherent in the notion of trust is some element of risk. Trust is thus a set of beliefs about others that will justify this risk (Giffin, 1967).

Trust is a pivotal and essential element in long-term social relationships (Blau, 1964; Luhmann, 1979). Individuals will often refrain from any interaction with others whom they do not trust (Luhmann, 1979). Trust is the confidence an individual has in that another person or persons will behave only as they are expected to and will do so in a socially acceptable and ethical manner (Lewis and Weigert, 1985; Luhmann, 1979; Mayer et al., 1995). This confidence is essential in long-term relationships because in the lack of a comprehensive set of rules to govern such relationships (Blau, 1964). Trust also reduces the fear that the trusted party
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