

Sense of Virtual Community

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INTRODUCTION

Virtual communities have been an issue in academic research since the 1990s (c.f., Fernback & Thompson, 1995; Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; Preece, 2000; Rheingold, 2000). In the simplest terms, a virtual community could be defined as a group of people who communicate with each other via electronic media (Romm et al., 1997, p. 261).

It was recognized early on that a virtual community may foster a “sense of belonging” (Figallo, 1998), “a social contract” (Sproull & Faraj, 1997) or “an internal set of social norms” (Burnett & Bonnici, 2003). It has also been suggested that these attributes would make such a community more powerful (Figallo, 1998) and successful (Wallace, 1999), representing the glue that keeps people together. According to a recent empirical study (Leimeister et al., 2004), members of virtual communities value these issues highly; for instance, establishing codes of behavior and building trust among members were evaluated among the most important success factors of virtual communities.

These feelings of membership have recently (e.g., Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Koh & Kim, 2003) been conceptualized as a *sense of virtual community* (SOVC). This concept expands and modifies the classic concept of a sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) to incorporate virtual settings such as discussion forums (Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Koh & Kim, 2003), listservs (Blanchard, 2006) and blogs (Blanchard, 2004). It has been argued that in-depth understanding of this sense of virtual community is a prerequisite for the study of virtual collaboration and virtual organization (Koh & Kim, 2003). However, we find the extant literature on the subject eclectic and diverse: there is, as yet, no established definition of the concept.

The purpose of this article is to provide a synthesis of existing knowledge of a sense of virtual community, and to present a framework representing its antecedents, dimensions and possible outcomes. We then explore its presence and relevance in our case community, an active virtual community we call Baby and Pregnancy Discussion forums (BAP). We conclude with a discussion and suggestions for future research.

BACKGROUND

The number of studies focusing on SOVC is still limited (Blanchard, 2004, 2006; Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Koh & Kim, 2003). However, as Blanchard (2004) notes, several researchers have reported findings in closely related contexts, such as the existence of membership and a sense of boundaries, influence, mutual support, shared emotional connections and group affiliation (Rheingold, 2000; Slevin, 2000; Wellman & Gulia, 1999; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002), suggesting that it exists in virtual communities. We will now briefly review the literature on SOVC, focusing on its antecedents, dimensions and outcomes. We will then summarize our findings in the form of a framework (*Figure 1*).

Antecedents

The need to “belong” as such is one of the most basic human needs: it is a feeling that one is a member of a group sharing similar interests (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and the perception of such membership is argued to be sufficient for a social group to exist (Turner, 1982). Member expectations of needs fulfillment (Koh & Kim, 2003) have been identified as antecedents of

SOVC, and the more the members perceive similarity with others in the community, the more they are able to trust them (see Blanchard & Horan, 1998). Koh & Kim found evidence of several other antecedents, such as the enthusiasm of community leaders, off-line activities, and communal enjoyment. Yoo et al. (2002) also found that a sense of community could be enhanced if an appropriate managing strategy were adopted. Blanchard (2004) implies that a large enough group of participants is needed, which suggests that community size and active conversation are further antecedents of SOVC. According to Roberts (1998), the time and effort individuals put into their online discussion groups are the best predictors of the sense of community they perceive, although even lurkers have been reported to experience it (Nonnecke & Preece, 1999).

Dimensions

Researchers have adopted SOVC from McMillan and Chavis' (1986) sense-of-community concept. Koh and Kim (2003) describe three dimensions, namely membership, influence and immersion, while Blanchard and Markus (2004) suggest five: recognition of members, exchange of support, attachment & obligations, identity & identification, and relationships with other members. Blanchard and Markus' dimension of attachment & obligations is closely related to Koh and Kim's membership dimension in that both deal with feelings towards the *community*. In our view, recognition of other members is also closely tied to identity of the self and identification with others, as they concern the identification and recognition of *individual members* of the community.

Outcomes

We suggest that the outcomes of SOVC could be analyzed from three different perspectives. The first of these concerns its significance to the community members. Wellman and Gulia (1999) state that reciprocity is more common among frequent contributors to newsgroups: people with a strong attachment to a virtual community are more likely to provide assistance to others, and to have their questions answered more quickly and more widely. This is in line with findings that a stronger sense of virtual community leads to more active participation, which in turn improves the value of the community (Yoo et al., 2000), and to increased

face-to-face communication (Blanchard, 2006). In sum, a sense of virtual community is the "glue" that attaches individual members to the social collective, thus contributing to the social capital of the community (see Preece, 2000).

The second perspective is that of the community organizer. As we understand it, the significance of SOVC to the community organizer indirectly follows from the above-mentioned phenomena, and the organizer will therefore value the impact in statistical terms. SOVC is seen as a prerequisite in sustaining a virtual community (Blanchard, 2004). In a listserv context, it has also been suggested to lead to increased knowledge about the sponsoring organization (Blanchard, 2006).

Koh and Kim (2003) also argue that a sense of virtual community can be used to predict the future economic behavior of virtual-community members in terms of community promotion (word-of-mouth). This notion is in line with the findings of Rothaermel and Sugiyama (2001), who propose that the continued interaction and the perceived value of the collectively held knowledge are positively associated with the members' e-commerce activities in the community.

The third perspective is that of the researcher: it has been suggested that SOVC distinguishes true virtual communities from mere virtual settlements (Blanchard and Markus, 2004). It is also seen as a focal construct in research on virtual communities and their dynamics.

Figure 1 summarizes the above discussion.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE ARTICLE

Research Strategy and Methodology

As noted above, there is very little research focusing on SOVC. We therefore chose an explorative, qualitative research strategy to shed light on the phenomenon, and decided to use a single case study as our underlying method for analyzing a contemporary phenomenon within its real-time context (Yin, 2003).

The main methods used for collecting the data were participant observation, semi-structured interviews and narratives written by BAP members. BAP was closely observed for a period of 14 months (November 2003 - December 2004). A field diary was kept on the findings, and posted messages were collected and classified based on their tone and purpose. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five

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