

Trust in Virtual Communities



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INTRODUCTION

Individuals are increasingly turning to computer-mediated communication in order to get information on which to base their decisions. For instance, many consumers are using newsgroups, chat rooms, forums, e-mail list servers, and other online formats to share ideas, build communities and contact other consumers who are seen as more objective information sources (Kozinets, 2002). These social groups have been traditionally called *virtual communities*.

The virtual community concept is almost as old as the concept of Internet. However, the exponential development of these structures occurred during the nineties (Flavián & Guinalíu, 2004) due to the appearance of the World Wide Web and the spreading of other Internet tools such as e-mail or chats. The justification of this expansion is found in the advantages generated by the virtual communities to both the members and the organizations that create them.

First of all, the concept of virtual community is defined by Rheingold (1993) as a social group that is originated in the Internet when people discuss in this communication channel. With a greater degree of complexity, Preece (2000) states that a virtual community is formed by:

- People with a wish for interaction among them in order to satisfy their needs
- That share a particular interest, which is the reason for the community
- With certain norms that guide the relationships
- With computer systems that favour interaction and cohesion among the members

In addition, if these communities are developed around a brand, they are marked by three key aspects (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001):

- **Consciousness of kind.** It refers to the feeling, which binds every individual to the other community members and the community brand. It is determined by two factors: (1) legitimization, the process of establishing a difference between true and false members, that is, those who have opportunist behaviours and those who do not; and (2) opposition to other brands.
- **Rituals and traditions.** These are processes carried out by community members who help to reproduce and transmit the community meaning in and out of the community. Members relate to each other with the memory of major events in the history of the brand and certain behaviours. All these processes help to reinforce brand consciousness and improve instruction on communal values.
- **Sense of moral responsibility.** This reflects the feelings that create moral commitment among the community members. Sense of moral responsibility encourages conjoint behaviours and enables stronger group cohesion. As a result of moral responsibility, there are two types of fundamental actions: (1) integration and retention of members, which guarantees the community survival; and (2) support in the correct use of the brand.

One of the main advantages of virtual communities is the fact that it is possible to overcome the space and time constraints that exist in traditional communities (Andersen, 2005). In sum, thanks to the virtual communities the barriers for interaction are reduced. Besides,

the importance of virtual communities is increasing every day because of three key aspects:

- Virtual communities can be used by individuals to take part in discussions in order to inform and influence fellow individuals about products, brands or organizations (Kozinets, 2002). These social groups have a real existence for their participants, and therefore, they can affect their members' behaviour (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).
- Virtual communities may help to identify and understand the needs, desires, relevant symbol systems and influences of particular individuals or groups of people (Kozinets, 2002).
- Active participation in virtual communities may favour higher levels of individuals' loyalty to the interest (e.g., a brand, a product, etc.) around which the community is developed (Koh & Kim, 2004).

However, the question of what encourages individuals to take part of a virtual community has not been analyzed yet. Following the trust-commitment theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), we consider that trust placed by an individual in the other party of a relationship is a key antecedent of the individuals' commitment to this relationship. Therefore, to participate actively in a virtual community, an individual will need to trust first in that virtual community and in its members. In this respect, Ridings et al. (2002) found that trust placed in the other members of a virtual community is a predictor of the individual's desire to exchange information in the community. Thus, trust helps to guarantee the community survival, as it promotes the participation in the community activities. Consequently, due to the importance of the concept of trust, this work analyzes the main antecedents of trust placed by an individual in a virtual community. To be precise, we consider that satisfaction, perceived reputation, perceived privacy, perceived security, shared values, communication and propensity to trust are the main precursors of trust placed by individuals in a virtual community.

Taking into account the previous considerations, this work is structured as follows. Firstly, we carry out an in-depth review of the relevant literature concerning the concept of trust. Secondly, we formalize the relationship among trust and its antecedents. Lastly, the main conclusions of the work are discussed and the future research is presented.

THE CONCEPT OF TRUST IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

The concept of trust has often been associated with the achievement of long lasting and profitable relationships (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Dwyer et al., 1987; Andaleeb, 1991). According to Ridings et al. (2002), trust is especially important in the context of virtual communities due to the fact that it can help to rule out opportunistic behaviours that can be carried out by some members of the community (e.g., providing member e-mail addresses to external organizations without permission). More specifically, the importance of trust in this context is based on some special characteristics of virtual communities (Ridings et al., 2002). For instance, the lack of face-to-face contact in virtual communities increases the perceived risk of the relationship between the individual and the community members. In sum, trust serves to decrease the perceived risk of the relationship when there is no sufficient guarantee that others will behave as they are expected to. Thus, trust in virtual communities and in its members is a main precursor of the individuals' participation in the virtual community activities and, consequently, its management must be a crucial aspect for the organization that creates the virtual community.

Traditionally, trust is seen as being made up of two basic components: cognitive and behavioural (Moorman et al., 1992; Moorman et al., 1993). Several authors (e.g., Anderson & Narus, 1990; Mayer et al., 1995; Doney & Cannon, 1997; Ganesan, 1994) have proposed that the cognitive component reflects the result of the assessment that one party makes of the credibility and goodwill of the other party. The behavioural component assimilates trust with the willingness or desire to follow a particular behavioural pattern.

The literature reflects a more habitual use of the cognitive component. In fact, Morgan and Hunt (1994) note that the inclusion of the behavioural component may be redundant, as it is a consequence of the cognitive component, but it can not be considered as a distinctive element of the concept of trust. Consequently, we believe that trust may be defined as a set of beliefs, which can be differentiated on the levels of competence, honesty and benevolence, as perceived by the consumer.

In general, *competence* is related to the individual's perceptions of the other party's knowledge and skills to complete a relationship and satisfy the needs of the individual (Coulter & Coulter, 2002). In the context

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