

Chapter 5.17

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

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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 chapter 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

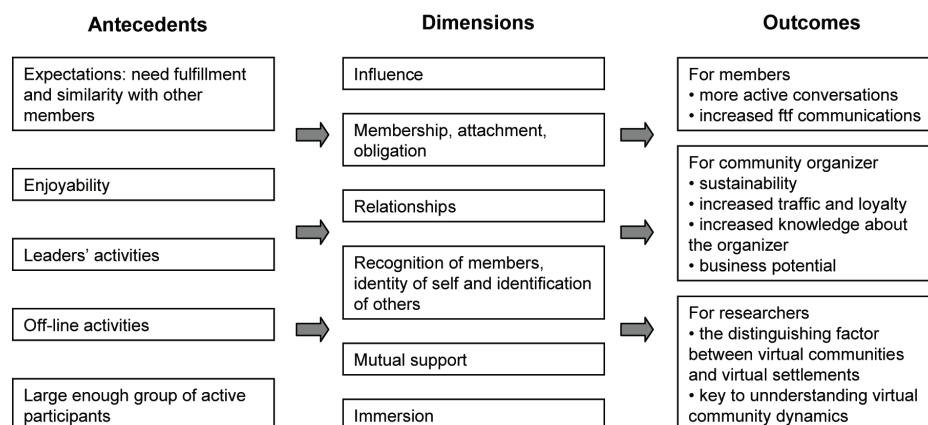
The number of studies focusing on SOVC is still limited (Blanchard, 2004, 2006; Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Koh & Kim, 2003). However, as Blanchard (2004) notes, several researchers have reported findings in closely related contexts, such as the existence of membership and a sense of boundaries, influence, 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

Figure 1. The antecedents, dimensions and outcomes of SOVC



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