Chapter 3
Redefining Participation in Online Community:
Some Neglected Topics

Gibrán Rivera Gonzalez
University of Sheffield, UK

Andrew Cox
University of Sheffield, UK

ABSTRACT

To be sustainable, online communities must have the ability to attract and retain members, who in turn must be willing to participate by giving their time, knowledge, and effort to provide benefits to others and themselves. Yet, many studies look at participation from a static point of view and disregard different levels of participation. There is a need to redefine the concept of participation. Furthermore, many studies explaining participation in virtual communities have focused their attention on the internal characteristics of these communities neglecting the importance of the external environment such as the competition that exists between online communities and alternative media; the multiple memberships people simultaneously have in different communities/practices; the organizational and social context in which online communities exist; and the social practices online communities support. By looking at participation as an evolving process instead of as a one-time event; by giving voice to all participants of the community; and by studying the context within which communities emerge, understanding of participation can be improved. To illustrate how these topics reshape a research agenda, the authors offer examples from a current study they are undertaking shaped by these concerns. By presenting the example the authors show how awareness of the "neglected topics" identified - as sensitizing ideas - expands research method and deepens understanding of participation in online communities. A practice-based approach is suggested as a useful theoretical tool to deepen current understanding of online community participation.

INTRODUCTION

Although there is no consensus regarding the concept of online communities (Komito, 1998; Lee et al., 2002; Ellis et al., 2004; Porter, 2004; Hansen, 2007), nobody questions that these social arrangements have been demonstrated to be a powerful opportunity to promote interaction and collaboration between individuals and organizations. Within the non-organizational context, for example, previous studies have explored how people interact in online communities in different ways such as providing emotional and informational support to others with similar diseases (Turner et al., 2001; Cummings et al., 2002); how people participate as volunteers to support survivors of natural disasters (Torrey et al., 2007); how open source software of high quality is developed (Lakhani and von Hippel, 2003; Lee and Cole, 2003); how people exchange stock-related information (Campbell, 2001; Gu et al., 2007); how people discuss TV programmes of which they are fans (Baym, 2000); how software programmers share knowledge (Wasko and Faraj, 2000), to name just a few. In the corporate context, organizations have found new opportunities in online communities and have been increasingly making significant investments to support them (Bateman, 2008). To name a few, multinational organizations such as Toyota (Dyer and Nobeoka, 2000), Siemens (Tiwana and Bush, 2005), Ford, Xerox (Mahar, 2007), Chevron. Raytheon, (Ellis, 2001), IBM (Gongla and Rizzuto, 2001; Mahar, 2007) (Ellis, 2001), Hewlett Packard (Devenport, 1996), Caterpillar (Ardichvili et al., 2002; Ardichvili et al., 2003), United Nations (Stoddart, 2007) have made of online communities a fundamental organizational tool through which they can get a wide range of benefits. Organizations have used online communities to facilitate their knowledge management strategies (Dyer and Nobeoka, 2000; Ardichvili et al., 2003; Tiwana and Bush, 2005; Bogenrieder and Baalen, 2007; Stoddart, 2007); to strengthen their innovation processes via firm-hosted user communities (Jeppesen and Frederiksen, 2006); to build brand loyalty (Porter and Donthu, 2008)

Because members' active participation in online communities is a key resource for them to succeed, much of the previous literature has focused its attention on understanding the benefits, motivations and barriers that lead (or prevent) online community members actively participating. Some of these studies for instance, have explained the different benefits that people obtain when they participate in online communities such as tangible returns, intangible returns and community-related benefits (Wasko and Faraj, 2000), extrinsic and intrinsic benefits (Kankanhalli et al., 2005), visibility, information, social and altruistic benefits (Butler et al., 2007). Others have focused on the motivations that enhance participation in online communities such as individual motivation n (Dholakia et al., 2004; Wasko and Faraj, 2005), social capital-related motivations (Dholakia et al., 2004; Wasko and Faraj, 2005; Chiu et al., 2006), individual and community-related outcome expectations (Chiu et al., 2006; Hsu et al., 2007); relational capital-motivation (Tiwana and Bush, 2005). Studies focusing on the costs and barriers to participate in online communities are also extensive in the literature (Ardichvili et al., 2003; Kankanhalli et al., 2005), just to name a few. Although still remains in the literature to develop a clear understanding of the motivational forces that affect people's decisions to participate in online communities (Ridings et al., 2002; Ardichvili et al., 2003; Ardichvili, 2008), some have suggested that an increasing consensus is being achieved (Faraj et al., 2011)

Without disregarding the relevance of active participation but at the same time acknowledging that some topics have been neglected in online community literature and thus have hindered our understanding of why people contribute to their communities, this chapter attempts to elaborate on the concept of participation by:

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