Collective Intentional Action in Virtual Communities

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INTRODUCTION

The Internet is an important innovation in information science and technology and profoundly affects people in their daily lives. To date, these effects have been construed in overly individualistic ways and often all too negatively. For example, the Internet is seen by many as an individual means for obtaining or sending information flexibly and efficiently (e.g., Dreyfus, 2001). Some researchers also claim that participation on the Internet often leads to feelings of isolation and depression and even negatively affects relationships with one's family members and friends (Kraut et al., 1998; cf. Kraut et al., 2002; UCLA Internet Report, 2003). Likewise, Dreyfus (2001) takes a generally pessimistic tone with regard to Internet usage and worries that when we engage the Internet, it "diminishes one's sense of reality and of the meaning in one's life" and "…we might…lose some of our crucial capacities: our ability to make sense of things so as to distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant, our sense of the seriousness of success and failure that is necessary for learning, and our need to get a maximum grip on the world that gives us our sense of the reality of things."

In contrast to individualistic construals of Internet usage, we claim that the Internet often is a medium for group action ("collective intentional action") whereby people function in virtual communities to fulfill not only individual but jointly conceived and mutually beneficial ends (e.g., Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). Furthermore, participation on the Internet need not function negatively to harm people and their relationships with others. Instead, participation, particularly in virtual communities, can enhance one's personal well-being and promote positive social values and outcomes.

Our purpose in this article is to consider the emerging ideas and research concerning collective intentional action in virtual communities. We begin with a discussion of collective intentions of virtual community participants, and then study their antecedents and consequences. We conclude with a discussion regarding the importance of studying participants' emotions in enabling collective intentional action in virtual communities. Figure 1 sketches the primary variables and processes under consideration.

COLLECTIVE INTENTIONS OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITY PARTICIPANTS

Virtual communities are mediated social spaces in the online environment that allow collections of people to form and be sustained through ongoing communication processes. Two kinds of virtual communities are the network-based and small-group-based virtual communities (Dholakia, Bagozzi & Klein Pearo, 2004). The former is a specialized, geographically dispersed virtual community based on a structured, relatively sparse and dynamic pattern of relationships among participants sharing a common focus. Common examples include e-mail lists, Web site bulletin boards, and Usenet newsgroups. Members of network-based virtual communities typically view the community in terms of venue and only superficially identify with particular individuals within the community.

The small-group based virtual community is a handful or so of persons with a dense web of relationships, interacting together online in order to accomplish a wide range of jointly-conceived goals and to maintain the functioning of the group. Common instances of such communities are real-time, online-chat systems, Web-based chat-rooms, multi-player virtual games, and multi-user domains (MUDs). Members of small-group-based virtual communities typically engage often and intensely with the same specific individuals whom they know by name and to a certain extent personally, and they may even on occasion also meet face-to-face in certain communities.

Many behaviors involved in virtual communities, and which form the focus of the present article, are described by their actors through the use of collective concepts, based on a strong sense of "we-ness." Gilbert

Figure 1. Intentional social action and social identity in virtual communities plus key antecedents and consequences
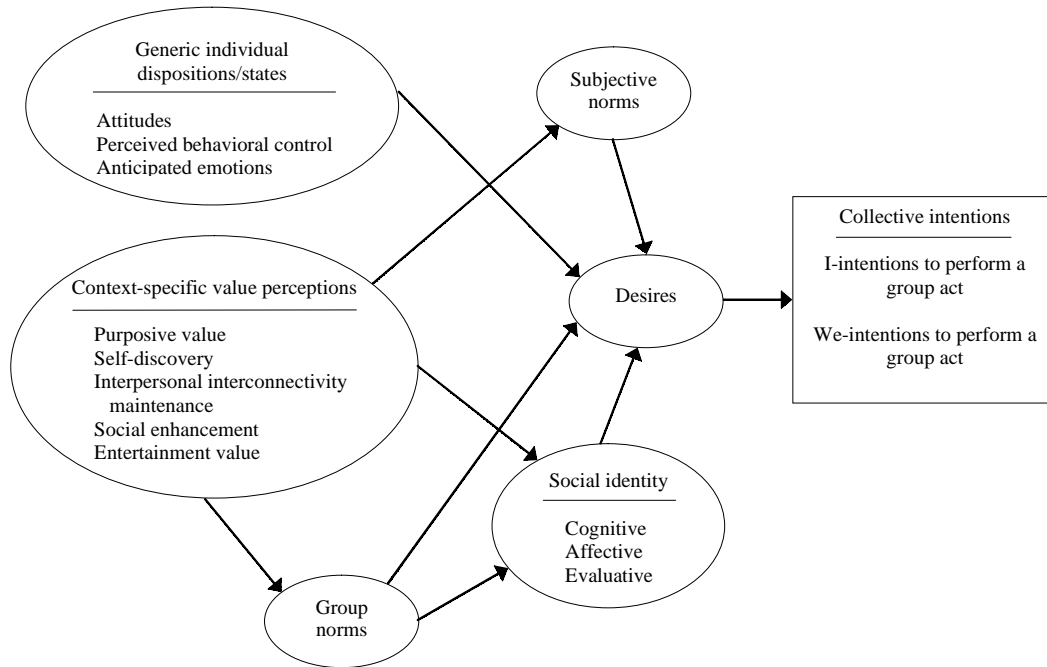
(1992) suggests that "we" can mean the self and one or more others "that share in the action of a verb." Volitionally, we may equate a plural subject with "the concepts of a pool or sum of wills, dedicated, as one, to a certain 'cause'," e.g., promotion of a group goal (Gilbert, 1992). Then, "our wanting X is a reason for me to exercise my will in order to get X" (Gilbert, 1992).

Recently, philosophers have developed elaborate expositions of the logical foundations of collective intentions (Bagozzi, 2000). In abbreviated forms, two formulations of note are Tuomela's (1995) notion of a we-intention ("a commitment of an individual to participate in joint action [that] involves an implicit or explicit agreement between the participants to engage in that joint action" and Bratman's (1999) idea of shared intentions("for you and me to share an intention" means "first, we each recognize the other as a participant whose intentions in favor of the shared activity are partly constitutive of the shared intention. Second, we each intend that the other person's relevant intentions be effective in our joint activity. Third, we each intend that we each fill in and execute each of our individual plans for participating in the joint activity in ways that mesh with and do not thwart each other).

Philosophers have understandably not been concerned with operationalizing collective intentions and developing hypotheses for empirically testing the relationships of collective intentions to antecedents and

consequences. Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002) used two measures of collective intentions, which they termed "we-intentions," in their investigation of virtual chat room participation: "We (i.e., I and the group of online friends that I regularly chat with) intend to chat in the virtual chat room together sometime during the next two weeks" and "I intend that our group (i.e., I and the group of online friends that I regularly chat with) chat in the virtual chat room together sometime during the next two weeks." Although not investigated to date in virtual community research, a third operationalization of collective intentions is possible to study: namely, a member's "I-intention" to do his/her part in a joint action of a virtual community. This latter intention might be termed a group-oriented I-intention to contrast it with both the more common I-intention (i.e., an individual person's intention to perform an individual act by him or herself alone and not as part of a group) and we-intentions and shared intentions, as defined above (see Bagozzi & Lee, 2002).

In sum, collective intentions capture a central aspect of purposive social interactions in virtual communities. Members of the community see themselves as either (a) acting as an agent of the group or as an intrinsic part of the whole group which itself acts or (b) acting as a person contributing individually to a group goal or action. We turn now to an analysis of the antecedents of collective intentions.

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