Online Communities and Social Networking

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INTRODUCTION

Technology has enabled communities to move beyond the physical face-to-face contacts to the online realm of the World Wide Web. With the advent of the highways in the 1950s and 1960s, "communities" were created in suburbia. The Internet, on the other hand, has over the last two decades, enabled the creation of a myriad of "online communities" (Green, 2007) that have limitless boundaries across every corner of the globe.

This essay will begin by providing a definition of the term "online communities" and then describing several typologies of this phenomenon. The various motivations for joining communities, how marketers create social bonds that enhance social relationships, as well as strategies used by firms in building online communities are also discussed. We conclude by discussing strategies for managing online communities, leveraging them for social networking, researching them, as well as directions for future research.

DEFINITION

A "community" refers to an evolving group of people communicating and acting together to reach a common goal. It creates a sense of membership through involvement or shared common interests. It has been considered to be a closed system with relatively stable membership and demonstrates little or no connection to other communities (Anderson, 1999).

With the rapid growth of the Internet, the geographic boundaries constraining the limits of communities are no longer a factor, and the functions of maintaining a community can be fulfilled virtually from anywhere in the globe. This is the basic essence of an online community, which is also synonymous with e-community or virtual community. Several authors have attempted to provide a formal definition of the term for semantic clarifications. The major definitions are as follows:

- Social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough , with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace. (Rheingold, 1993)
- Groups of people who communicate with each other via electronic media, rather than face-to-face. (Romm, Pliskin, & Clarke 1997)
- Computer mediated spaces where there is a potential for an integration of content and communication with an emphasis on member generated content. (Hagel & Armstrong 1997)
- Online Publics are symbolically delineated computer mediated spaces, whose existence is relatively transparent and open, that allow groups of individuals to attend and contribute to a similar set of computer-mediated interpersonal interactions. (Jones & Rafaeli, 2000)

While Rheingold (1993) provides one of the earliest definitions of the term, and one that is most quoted in the literature (Kozinets, 2002), many may question whether "with sufficient human feeling" is a necessary condition for online community formation. Romm et al.'s (1997) definition may not sufficiently distinguish it from general Web sites. Hagel and Armstrong (1997) emphasize member generated content, while Jones and Rafaeli (2000) use the term "virtual publics" instead of online community. Others, like Bishop (2007), have pointed to the phenomenon of "de-socialization" or less frequent interaction with human in traditional settings, as a consequence of an increase in virtual socialization in online communities. Based on the above definitions the term may be simply defined as a group of individuals with common interests who interact with one another on the Internet.

TYPOLOGIES OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Online communities come in different shapes and sizes and may have memberships of a few dozen to millions of individuals. These communities may extend from active forums like discussion groups and chat rooms to

passive ones like e-mails and bulletin boards. Given that these communities are not geographically constrained, their size can be much bigger than typical physical communities and many millions of them exist on the Internet. Uncovering archetype or gestalt patterns is fundamental to the study of social science and research, and several authors have proposed classification schemes for configurations of online communities.

Lee, Vogel, and Limayem (2003) in their review of classification schemes of online communities identify Hagel and Armstrong's (1997) and Jones and Rafaeli's (2000) typologies as being the most popularly referenced. Kozinets (2002) too delineates four kinds of online communities. These three typologies are reviewed, and a further popular typology of affinity groups proposed by Macchiette and Roy (1992) as applied to the online environment is also proposed.

Hagel and Armstrong (1997) propose four major types of online communities based on people's desire to meet basic human needs: *interest, relationship, fantasy,* and *transaction.* Jones and Rafaeli (2000) further segment these communities by *social structure*, that is, communities formed based on social networks, for example, online voluntary associations, cyber inns, and so forth, and *technology base*, that is, types of technology platforms, for example, e-mail lists, Usenet groups, and so forth.

Kozinets (2002) proposed the four types of communities as *dungeons*, that is, online environments where players interact, such as for online video games, *circles,* (interest structured collection of common interests), *rooms* (computer-mediated environments where people interact socially in real time), and *boards* (online communities organized around interest specific bulletin boards).

Finally, Macchiette and Roy (1992) proposed a typology of affinity communities that can also be used for classifying online communities. They defined communities as either being: *professional* (e.g., doctors, lawyers, etc.), *common interest* (e.g., hobbies, interests), *demographic* (e.g., by gender, age, etc.), *cause-based* (e.g., Sierra Club, Green Peace), and *marketer generated* (e.g., Disney, Nintendo) communities. These communities may also be constructed in the online environment.

It is also interesting to make other dichotomous distinctions of online communities such as: (a) between *formal* (e.g., associations) vs. *informal* communities, (b) *commercial* (which offers goods and services to make revenues that in turn fuels community operations) vs. *noncommercial* (communities created from the ground up by a group of individuals, e.g., with an interest in stamp collection), and (c) *open or public* (where everyone regardless of their qualifications and individual profile can enter the community and participate) vs. *closed or private* (where outsiders are not allowed into the community, or where membership is very difficult to obtain).

ONLINE COMMUNITIES: MOTIVATIONS, MODE OF PARTICIPATION, CHARACTERISTICS, AND BENEFITS

Rayport and Jaworski (2004) present a model of how the various components of an online community can be integrated. An adapted version of the model is shown in Figure 1.

The model illustrates how members' motivations for joining the online community, their mode of participation, and the community's degree of connectedness in many ways determine the characteristics of the community, which in turn influences the benefits sought by the members in these communities. The various components of the model are discussed next.

Motivations

A member's reasons for joining a community may depend on a wide range of factors, such as affiliation (others like them are members of the community), information (about experiences, ideas, and issues), recreation (meeting people, playing around, sharing stories, etc.), or transaction (e.g., those who join a Web site for buying and trading possessions).

Mode of Participation

Participation can occur in a myriad of ways, for example, through e-mails, chat rooms, discussion groups, online events, blogs, social networking Web sites (e.g., *MySpace, Facebook, Orkut,* etc.), sharing photographs (e.g., *Flickr*), wikis (e.g., *Wikipedia*), bulletin boards, and so on. Some (such as discussion groups, chat rooms) have more active members than passive members (e.g., e-mail, bulletin board or posting, or watching viewing content on *You Tube*).

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