

Chapter 1.3

Developing the Commitment to Virtual Community: The Balanced Effects of Cognition and Affect

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ABSTRACT

A virtual community (VC) of committed members is of great strategic value to online firms and vendors owing to its ability to attract and retain members. However, online firms and vendors find it difficult to instill commitment among their VC members. Therefore, this study examines the mechanism of customer commitment formation in a relationship-cum-interest based VC. By understanding the mechanism of customer commitment formation in a VC, online firms and vendors can enhance customer commitment to the VC. Using the theory of reasoned action, this study finds that encouraging participation among customers is the springboard for customer commitment to the VC. However, customer participation should be balanced with a proper mix of cognition and

affect enhancing aspects, particularly those aspects that arouse customers' interests and encourages relationship building among them. Online firms and vendors would thus benefit by encouraging personal relationships among their VC participants.

INTRODUCTION

A virtual community (VC) is a community of people with common interest or shared purpose, whose interactions are governed by policies in the form of tacit assumptions, rituals, protocols, rules and laws and who use computer systems to support and mediate social interaction and to facilitate a sense of togetherness (Preece, 2000). Traditionally, virtual communities (VCs) have

acted as a virtual meeting place for people to share interests, build relationships, create fantasies or conduct transactions (Armstrong & Hagel, 1996). Many people join such communities to fulfill their communication and social needs. The ability of a VC to attract and retain members has also attracted attention of online firms and vendors (Zingale & Arndt, 2001) who find the VC useful for developing deeper and broader relationships with their customers. For example, online firms and vendors can easily disseminate product related information, help their customers in troubleshooting and streamline the complaints and returns processes through a VC. Apart from providing better customer service, VCs can also be useful in product development, in advertising and sales, in gauging demand for products and in increasing barriers to entry for the competitors (Holmstrom, 2001). Thus, VCs could be of a great strategic value to the online firms and vendors. However, reaping such benefits from a VC is possible only when the customers are committed to the VC.

Although, a traditional VC (i.e., a noncommercial VC) attracts a large number of people who become committed to the VC, it has been found that online firms and vendors fail to instill significant commitment among their customers through a VC (Andrews, 2001). One of the reasons for such low commitment could be that the commercial goals of online firms and vendors do not match the goals of their customers. Understanding the mechanism behind commitment formation in traditional VCs would help online firms and vendors in addressing those aspects that motivate the customers to become committed to the VC. However, there is hardly any empirical research that studies the mechanism of customer commitment formation to the VC.

Commitment to a VC is characterized by the member's helping behavior and active participation (intense interaction) in the activities of the VC, based on a strong psychological attachment to the VC. Therefore, commitment to VC can be studied from the perspective of human behavior.

Most of the studies in information systems (IS) study human (or user) behavior from the perspective of the theory of reasoned action (TRA) and its derivatives, such as the technology adoption model (TAM). These theories, however, address only the cognitive aspects of human beliefs and behavior and do not consider the role of affect (e.g., customer emotion or feelings). One of the reasons for neglecting the role of affect may be that the software or IS under study (such as Word or Excel) is cognitive in nature. As the nature of IS is evolving to also include the affective aspects (e.g., chatting software), IS researchers are also recognize the importance of affect in influencing customer attitude and behavior. For example, Venkatesh (1999) considered the sequential role of affect on IS user attitude via cognition. As a VC has both cognitive (e.g., communication) and affective (e.g., enjoyment) aspects, affect may play an important role in influencing customer commitment to the VC. Since our study is related to consumer behavior, we will study the balanced role (as against sequential role) of cognition and affect, as advocated by consumer behavior researchers (Batra & Ahtola, 1990).

In view of the above discussion, the aim of this study is to examine customer commitment formation in a VC from the perspective of balanced cognition and affect. In this study, we examine two specific research questions. (1) *What are the cognitive and affective antecedents of customer attitude toward participation in the VC?* (2) *How does attitude toward participation in the VC influence customer commitment to the VC?* Understanding the mechanism underlying commitment formation will help online firms and vendors in enhancing customer commitment to the VC.

The rest of the article is organized as follows: we briefly review the evidence regarding commitment formation in a VC, followed by the theory of reasoned action and its application to our study. This is followed by the research model and hypothesis section. In the research methodology

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