Chapter 1
Understanding Trust in Virtual Communities: Revisited

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ABSTRACT

With people participating in various virtual communities in everyday life, trust building between participants is significant and indispensable in order to maintain communication in both traditional and virtual communities. In particular, virtual communities provide a platform or network through which members can communicate with faster and more simultaneous interactions in invisible ways. Since the importance of trust in virtual communities has been widely recognized, trust as a complex, multi-faceted, and context-dependent concept has been examined by many researchers in several disciplines. In this chapter, the authors aim to examine the definitions and characteristics of trust in the context of virtual communities and discuss terms relevant to the concept of trust. Different types of trust are investigated. Issues, challenges and future research directions revolving around trust are discussed. In examining the concept of trust, this chapter focuses on social rather than technical aspects of trust and trust building in virtual communities.

INTRODUCTION

With the widespread use of the Internet and the rise of social computing in recent years, people are becoming more engaged by participating in various virtual communities in everyday life. Unlike traditional communities, virtual communities have their own unique characteristics such as anonymity and lack of physical presence. Virtual communities are not confined to specific

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geographical locations. This makes it possible for people who share similar values, interests, experiences, and knowledge and have similar beliefs and personal views, to come together, although their background and motivations may differ. People can interact with other members of a virtual community anywhere at any time. People can also be involved in multiple virtual communities and communicate with members of other virtual communities simultaneously. In doing so, trust and trust building between participants become significant and indispensable in order to maintain communication in both traditional and virtual communities. In particular, virtual communities provide a platform or network for members to communicate through faster and simultaneous interactions in a variety of ways. Although the importance of the concept of trust in virtual communities has been widely accepted, it still remains a complex, multifaceted and context-dependent concept (Kelton, Fleischmann, & Wallace, 2008; Stabb, Bhargava, Lilien, Rosenthal, Winslett, & Sloman, 2004).

In this chapter, firstly we examine the terms *community* and *virtual community* and describe their characteristics. Then, we examine the definitions and characteristics of the term *trust* in the context of virtual communities and review relevant issues related to the concept of trust. Different types of trust and trust building are also investigated. Major research issues, challenges, and further research directions revolving around the term *trust* are discussed. In examining the concept of trust, this chapter focuses on the social aspects rather than the technical side of the terms.

BACKGROUND

Community

There have been several definitions of the term *community*, which reflects the fact that there may be difficulties and confusion in defining the term (Bhattacharyya, 2004). Since a community seemingly refers to geographic proximity and the characteristics of defining *community* are similar to those of *group* (Christenson, Frendley, & Robinson, 1994), the term *community* is used interchangeably with the term *group*. Let us first examine the term *group* in order to understand the term *community*. Brandon and Hollingshead (2007) define the term *group* as "an entity comprised of people having interdependent goals, who are acquainted, interact with one another and have a sense of belonging associated with their membership" (p.106). Wilson and Ryder (1996) also agree that groups become communities, "when they interact with each other and stay together long enough to form a set of habits and conventions, and when they come to depend upon each other for accomplishment of certain ends" (p. 801).

Turning to the term *community*, it is defined as "a constructed arena where multiple people with shared interests interact with each other" (Dehnart, 1999, A standard definition of community, para. 5). In comparing these definitions, we see that three components are shared: people, interaction, and a sense of belonging. In other words, community is composed of people who join as members, they socially interact, and their members have a set of shared denominators as their social identification or a sense of belonging to the community (Christenson et al., 1994). This third component is considered important since people need to have a sense of belonging by occupying a mutual and collective interest or intention to form a community. In line with this notion, the following definitions emphasize a sense of sharing, by saying that community is "any social configuration that possesses shared identity and norms" (Bahattacharyya, 2004, p. 12), or "a social organization of people who share knowledge, value and goals" (Jonassen, Peck, & Wilson, 1999, p. 118). To see whether the characteristics of the term *community* may apply to another term, *virtual community*, we