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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction

One of the most interesting phenomena since the introduction of computer-mediated communication is the virtual community. Virtual communities can bring together individuals from all over the world who are interested in the same subject. Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002, p. 3) define virtual communities (VCs) as “…mediated social spaces in the digital environment that allow groups to form and be sustained primarily through ongoing communication processes.” VCs are formed around a broad range of topics varying from religion to sex, from music to money, and from trivial to serious. Within these communities members may obtain or provide information, share their experiences, and even develop relationships.

Although VCs are amongst the most visited websites, in most instances, financial viability is low (Balasubramanian and Mahajan 2001). Because of the seemingly endless stream of new VC-initiatives, a key factor for success is generating member satisfaction, repeat visits and active participation in order to create a community that offers value to both its users and administrators. However, the issue of e-satisfaction and loyalty has only been addressed for Internet environments in general (e.g., Szymanski and Hise 2000; Reibstein 2002; Wolfinbarger and Gilly 2002; Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Malhotra 2002), and not for VCs specifically. Due to the differences in structure between VCs and other e-business models, results may not be generalized.

To date, no studies have focused on the measurement of satisfaction within VCs and its impact on member participation. We draw on: (1) sociological and marketing literature on communities; (2) e-commerce literature; and; (3) customer satisfaction literature, to develop a four-dimensional conceptualization of members’ satisfaction with virtual community interaction and to investigate the effect of each satisfaction dimension on member participation.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

We used qualitative research to identify four essential elements describing the interaction structure within VCs: (1) interactions between the members; (2) interactions between the organizer and individual members; (3) interactions of the organizer with the community as a whole; and; (4) the community site that facilitates interaction between all constituents. We propose that satisfaction with VC-interaction is based on satisfaction with each of these interaction elements. In doing so, we assume that satisfaction with VC-interaction is a multi-dimensional construct (cf., Bolton and Drew 1994).

In our study, we explain member participation in the VC. Member participation refers to the amount of time a member spends in the community. It is operationalized as visit frequency and duration. In line with prior research in which satisfaction is found to positively affect service usage (Bolton and Lemon 1999), we expect that all four components of VC-interaction satisfaction are positively related to the level of member participation in the VC (H1).

When members first enter a VC, they are not familiar yet with the environment, the other members, and the “rules of the game”.

As a result, they have fewer social ties and are to a lesser extent embedded in the community (Walther 1995; Kozinets 1999). Compared to experienced members, novices lack knowledge needed to participate in the social interaction within the community. Their visits will therefore be mainly aimed at retrieving information. Over time, this lack of knowledge is overcome. Members are increasingly able to use the VC not only for topical information, but also for social and symbolic exchanges. Participation becomes more valuable, thus members spend more and more time in the community. Hence, we expect that membership length has a positive effect on member participation (H2a).

Social interactions among members develop and deepen over time. Besides, they are self-reinforcing, i.e., the value of each interaction increases with the number of interactions that precede it (Frenzen and Davis 1990). This may be represented by a positive quadratic effect of membership length on member participation.

Thus, we expect that the positive effect of membership length on participation becomes stronger as membership length increases (H2b).

Methodology

To test the hypotheses, we conducted a survey among 73,851 registered members of a VC aimed at youngsters (12-24 years). Topics of interest include dating, music, school, games, television, and jobs. Interaction takes place by means of boards, forums, email, personal web pages and chat. The community’s content is mainly generated by its members. The administrator acts as a moderator (e.g., filtering out racial comments). Commercial exploitation is limited. The survey resulted in 3,605 usable responses.

Items for measuring our constructs were generated using literature search, free-form interviews and online discussions. After pre-testing, we measured the four dimensions of VC-interaction satisfaction using twenty-eight items. Responses were recorded on Likert scales. Membership length, visit frequency and visit duration were assessed by self-reports using fixed categories. We used standard procedures and structural equation modeling to assess our measures’ psychometric properties.

Results

The results of OLS regression analysis show that members’ satisfaction with member-member interactions, organizer-member interactions, and the community site have a positive and significant effect on member participation. Members’ satisfaction with organizer-community interactions has no significant effect. Hence, H1 is supported for three of the four dimensions of VC-interaction satisfaction. The results further reveal that both the linear and quadratic effect of membership length on participation were positive and significant, which supports H2a and H2b.

Discussion

Our study highlights the complexity of conceptualizing satisfaction within VCs. This is evident from the support we obtained for our proposition that VC-interaction satisfaction is a four-dimensional construct of which the origin lies in the complex nature of the interaction structures within VCs. Against this background the use of a single item to measure satisfaction with VC-interaction seems...
inadequate. Additionally, our study sheds some light on the effect of satisfaction with VC-interaction and membership length on member participation. The findings underscore that satisfaction within VCs should be viewed as a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Moreover, results highlight the importance of long-time members for maintaining viable VCs. More research into other aspects of participation, such as online behavior, is needed for a more complete understanding of satisfaction effects. Besides, our study should be replicated with members of other VCs, that vary in size, uniqueness, target audience etc., before results can be generalized.

REFERENCES


