

Highlighting the necessity of a Holistic Model for Online Communities

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Abstract

Knowledge sharing in online communities has been the focus of many studies. Theoretical and empirical research has been conducted to explain the internal dynamics that occur inside the boundaries of online communities. Some research on online communities for instance have examined 1) the different benefits that people obtain when they participate in online communities such as tangible returns, intangible returns and community-related benefits (McLure Wasko and Faraj, 2000); extrinsic and intrinsic benefits (Kankanhalli et al., 2005) 2) the participants' motivations that enhance participation such as individual motivations (McLure Wasko and Faraj, 2005; Dholakia et al., 2004), social capital-related motivations (McLure Wasko and Faraj, 2005; Dholakia et al., 2004), individual and community-related outcome expectations (Chiu et al., 2006; Hsu et al., 2007) 3) the costs and barriers to participate in online communities (Kankanhalli et al., 2005; Ardichvili et al., 2003), and 4) the community's features and processes that encourage or inhibit willingness to participate (de Souza and Preece, 2004).

Despite the growing interest in online communities' literature there has been little empirical research related to the external context in which these communities reside. Current theory and research offer only a limited perspective of the ever-changing social environment that affect the success or failure of online communities. Focusing on online communities as static and isolated entities undermines our ability to understand the effect of the environment of online communities. In order to explain how the presence of other similar communities compete for members to survive (Butler, 2001, Wang, 2007, Gu et al., 2007), how multi-memberships of participants may increase or decrease participation in certain communities (Bogenrieder and van Baalen, 2007) and how previous history participation and future needs of members affect the success of online communities (Wang, 2007), it is required a holistic model in which both, internal and external community dynamics are considered. Even though these phenomenons have been receiving recently attention by researchers, it is still lacking a model able to explain the complexity of online communities.

In this paper I conduct a review of online communities' literature highlighting the necessity to give more attention to the dynamics of the environment in which communities are embedded and claiming for the necessity of a holistic model of virtual communities to better understand why some communities succeed and others fail.

A holistic model of online communities remains as a critical challenge to clearly understand the success/failure of online communities.

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