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IT'S THE COMMUNITY!
- UNDERSTANDING BOUNDARIES BEYOND THE USERS
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ABSTRACT

Keywords: virtual community, user-driven innovation, systems theory

CONTEXT

Communities and firms increasingly gather in collaborations in order to enhance value and produce innovation. It is in the interfaces between community and firms the potential for innovation lies (Jarvenpaa & Lang 2011). However, it is also in these interfaces that different rationales clash and conflicts arise (Dahlager & Magnusson 2005). In order to improve connections and collaborations across interfaces, it is therefore necessary to improve our understanding of community boundaries. < distinction of what is part of the community and what is not. This gap is intensified by the emergence of virtual communities, where the notion of boundary is even more distorted.

The paper suggests a new definition of virtual community boundaries that sets up the distinction between community and its environment differently from existing studies of virtual communities. Instead of taking its starting point in the users, the paper focuses on the *function* of community boundaries. Such a perspective exposes transborder dynamics and gives new perspectives to management of interactions across interfaces.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to develop a conceptual model of virtual user communities that specifically focuses on the concept of boundary. The paper follows the existing line of thought that community boundaries are enabling for community growth and follow the notion of Jarvenpaa and Lang (2011) that virtual community boundaries have still not been fully described in the existing literature. Our intention is to take the premise of systemic boundaries from the systems theory – in particular the concept of environment (Luhmann 2006) and test its applicability in explaining the concept of virtual community boundary. By introducing systems theory to the user innovation field, the paper develops propositions that can explore and enrich existing community theories. The proposed conceptual model gives a richer explanation than what is currently offered regarding the complex and transformative dynamics at stake when communities and firms interact.

LITERATURE GAP

Existing studies of virtual communities mostly apply a managerial and user-centric perspective on community boundaries as mechanisms for encouraging user participation and boundaries have predominantly been related to the logic of power (West & O'Mahony 2008, Dutton 2008), identity (Ren, Kraut & Kiesler 2007) and particular user attributes (Jeppesen & Frederiksen 2006).

Although the existing literature has provided valuable insights on reasons for user participation and contribution, boundaries have typically been studied isolated relating to singular issues of interest (Jarvenpaa et al 2011) and predominantly within open source software. Thus, community boundaries appear context specific and hard to apply in general terms (West & Lakhani 2008). Furthermore, the focus on community boundaries is limited to individual cognitions and intentions and communities are indicated as merely a product of the users. Thus, a clear definition of community boundaries that can visualize conflicting dynamics and transgressions of the interfaces between communities and firms is lacking.

METHOD

The paper makes an extensive review of the user innovation literature on virtual community boundaries. Then, the premises of systems theory are modified in order to explain boundaries of virtual communities beyond the users. On the basis of systems theory, the aim is to develop a boundary concept that can be first abstracted to a general concept and then re-specified to a variety of community types that represents the empirical field. We derive propositions concerning the distinct boundaries of virtual communities.

RESULTS

A conceptual model is developed to analyze boundary issues. Hereby, potentials and challenges in the interaction between communities and firms are clarified, leading to a better basis for collaboration.

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