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USING IT APPLICATIONS TO PROMOTE KNOWLEDGE SEEKING AND KNOWLEDGE CONTRIBUTION IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

The Internet has facilitated the emergence of online interactions among geographically distributed groups of people with similar interests or goals. These online groups, known as virtual communities, are defined as "the cyberspace supported by computer-based information technology, centered upon communication and interaction of participants to generate member-driven contents, resulting in a relationship being built up" [9]. Surfing the Web, one can easily discover the great diversity of virtual communities serving various purposes, from interest groups focusing on the discussion of specific topics like Google Groups, to online marketplaces that facilitate transactions and delivery such as Amazon.

Virtual communities have changed the way we communicate, and thus, our knowledge sharing processes and outcomes [11]. Online knowledge communities are a form of virtual community where people share their knowledge for mutual learning or problem solving. They have significant source of value for knowledge building and exchange. For example, online knowledge communities shrink the world by gluing worldwide individuals interested in particular knowledge domain [6] [8] [12] [14]. Also, they are found to support organizational knowledge flows between dispersed research and development efforts [1].

Most virtual communities for knowledge exchange are online-originated, that is, people interact predominantly and exchange knowledge with those whom they have little or no prior interaction. In these communities, individuals' participation is voluntary and they have high autonomy over their knowledge sharing acts [2]. While virtual communities offer a source of value for knowledge sharing and creation, such value can not be realized unless community participants are willing to exchange knowledge themselves. As knowledge inherently resides within individuals [10], the movement of knowledge across them greatly depends on their knowledge exchange behaviors – their seeking and contributing of knowledge within the virtual community.

With the proliferation of virtual communities, many studies have been conducted to examine the drivers that facilitate knowledge exchange among individuals. Some salient factors identified as motivating knowledge exchange include the social capital embedded in the relationships among individuals, their anticipated extrinsic benefits (e.g. reputation), and intrinsic benefits (e.g. enjoyment derived from learning or helping others) [3] [4] [5] [7] [13].

Despite the insights that social capital and individual motivations are crucial in facilitating knowledge exchange, existing literatures have not addressed the way of fostering them in a computer-mediated environment. This leaves a gap in understanding how technologies can enhance knowledge exchange in virtual communities. Regarding this issue, this research attempts to create a framework for building effective online knowledge communities by examining the role of technology in these communities. We aim to understand what steps can be taken to foster social capital and individual motivation so as to encourage knowledge seeking and knowledge contribution in virtual communities.

Keywords: Virtual community, online community, knowledge sharing, knowledge exchange, knowledge seeking, knowledge contribution, social capital, IT artifacts.

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