

CURRENT PRACTICES OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITY AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON SOCIAL COHESION

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Abstract. This paper aims to determine whether social cohesion can be informed by current practices of virtual community members represented by four research variables namely experiences in using the social media, the types and preference of social media used, and their involvement in certain categories of virtual community. These four research variables were tested against the virtual community cohesion constructs to determine significant relationships and to predict their influence on social cohesion in the virtual community environment. Results of this study show that Experience, Types of Social Media and Virtual Community Involvement are current practices in the virtual community that can influence social cohesion. Social Media Preference was however not found to be significant in influencing social cohesion.

Keywords: social media, online community, community cohesion, involvement, preference

INTRODUCTION

Building community cohesion is about building better relationships between people from different backgrounds including those from new and settled communities. Social cohesion can simply be referred to as a concept that relates to how well people and communities get on together for the benefit of all (Turok et al. 2006). It is a popular concept that is used to describe the strength of human relationships and the stability of a more differentiated society. A number of studies have found that social cohesion is important for the well-being and prosperity of a society (Healy & Côté 2001; Putnam et al. 1993; Ritzen et al. 2000; Ruiters 2008; Stiglitz et al. 2009; Wilkinson & Marmot 2003). Easterly et al. (2006) state that “a country’s social cohesion is essential for generating the confidence and patience.” This is crucial to gain citizens’ trust on the government particularly when reforms are implemented. Lack of cohesion may be reflected in a weak social fabric, with the relationships between different groups being exclusive, impermeable and susceptible to tension and conflict. People may be kept apart through fear, resentment, competition for scarce resources, or protection of privilege. Social cohesion is sometimes used casually as a label for social success or stable race relations, without any pretence of understanding what lies behind this. Relating to the use of globally distributed information systems, teams working over such platform need high degree of unity to be successful (Wright & Sarker 2009).

The advancement of the Internet technology allows a new communication medium becomes possible resulting in the emergence of virtual communities. As a result of the intersection of humanity and technology, virtual community emerged. Virtual community exists in

cyberspace where words, human relationships, data, wealth and power are manifested by people using such computer-mediated technology. The impacts of such medium are similar to the impacts of the telephone, radio, and television when they were once in ubiquity. People adopt to new communication media and redesign their way of life with surprising rapidity. Internet technology has brought about the extensive use of social network sites such as Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, and various discussion boards or forums by the community and thus creates multiple types of virtual community. The Internet World Stats (2015) reported that there is significant growth in the number of Facebook users around the world. The number of Facebook users increases from 664.0 million end of Q1 of 2011 to nearly 835.6 million by end of Q1 2012, and this number is expected to increase further. This is an indication that virtual community is very vital in many people's lives and has become a necessity in some sense.

It is often mentioned that virtual community (or online social media) brings about social problems particularly in the ethical use of the media. Despite that, the capacity of such media in enabling and enhancing social connections is also apparent. With the Internet as the medium for social networking, it is believed that the virtual community could be a medium of social cohesiveness. The aim of this study is to determine whether social cohesion can be informed by the current practices of virtual community users in using the social media. Such current practices include their experience in using the social media, the types of social media used, their social media preference, and their involvement in virtual community. This will be determined using the virtual community cohesion (VCC) model developed by Zulkhairi et al. (2014).

VIRTUAL COMMUNITY COHESION (VCC) MODEL

The VCC model was developed based on the traditional social cohesion framework developed by Chan et al. (2006) and reviews of related literature (Jenson 1998; Community Cohesion Unit 2003; Jeannotte 2000; Turok et al. 2006; MacCracken 1998; Schmeets & Riele 2010; Friedkin 2004; Ottone et al. 2007; Bollen & Hoyle 1990; Maxwell 1996; Easterly et al. 2006; Mukherjee & Saraswati n.d). It comprised of eight components namely General Trust with fellow Citizen, Willingness to Cooperate and help fellow citizens, including those from 'other' social groups, Sense of Belonging or Identity, Social Participation and Vibrancy of Civil Society, Voluntarism and Donations, Presence or Absence of Major Inter-Group Alliances or Cleavages (Inter-Group Alliances), Trust in Public Figures, and Political Participation. In accordance with the original physical social cohesion model by Chan et al. (2006), these inter-related components are classified into two dimensions of interaction namely the horizontal interaction, and vertical interaction. The horizontal interaction aims at deliberating the members' attitudes and behaviours towards other members; and the vertical interaction looks into members' attitudes and behaviours towards their superiors.

The first component, General Trust with Fellow Citizen, is to assess mutual trust amongst fellow members in a virtual community. The second component, Willingness to Cooperate and Help Fellow Citizens, is to obtain information about members' attitudes in helping and cooperating with other members in the virtual community. The third component, Sense of Belonging and Identity, intends to seek the value of relationships among members of the community. The fourth component, Social Participation and Vibrancy of Civil Society is included with the aim to assess members' behaviour towards the participations in various community groups, political parties, pressure groups, trade unions, professional societies and others. The fifth component, Voluntarism and Donation has the objective to examine the act of volunteerism and donation of members of the community, both in organized and self-initiated forms. The sixth component, Presence or Absence of Major Inter-group Alliances or Cleavage has the purpose to seek whether there are "voluntary collaboration between business and

social enterprises addressing social problems”, that is social alliances as defined by Sakarya et al. (2012), and division of people within the group that is a situation that defines social cleavage (Malandra, n.d.). The seventh component is Trust in Public Figures. The objective of this component is to assess the relationships between public figures and members of a virtual community. Within the original context, public figures are looked into as existed in the relationship between government and society, and state and citizen. However, in virtual community context, similar relationship refers to the relationships between the authorized personnel of the virtual community (i.e the administrator) and the member of the community. In line with the suggestions of Jeannotte (2000), Chan et al. (2006), and Schmeets and Riele (2010) for physical community context, we include the following to represent this component: political leadership of the virtual community, the trust towards the administrator of the virtual community, the confidence in the services rendered, the enforcement of law, and the accountability of the authorized personnel. The eighth and last component is Political Participation. Jenson (1998) refers to participation as involvement/relationship of individuals with central and local government. Hence, similar indicators are used to get the relevant information pertaining to this component namely involvement of individuals with central and local government (Conge, 1988; Jenson, 1998), expression of political views through mass media (Conge 1988; Schmeets & Riele 2010), and involvement in political activities (Berger-Schmitt 2000; Schmeets & Riele 2010).

METHODS

To determine the influence of current practices on virtual community cohesion, a survey was conducted where questionnaires were given to a valid sample of 235 respondents representing users of the social media. Based on statistics from the Internet World Stats (2014), there are 13.6 million Facebook users in Malaysia, which may give an indication of the population size of users of the social media in the country. Following the recommendation by Hair et al. (1995) a sample size of 100 to 200 respondents is considered appropriate for very large or unknown population. Current practices were measured based on the four research variables, which are Experience in using the Social Media, Types of Social Media used, Social Media Preference, and Virtual Community Involvement. Details of these variables are described in the operationalization of the research variables section of this paper. The instrument used to measure the Virtual Community Cohesion (the dependent variable) was adopted from a prior study (Zulkhairi et al. 2014). The instrument consists of eight constructs namely, General Trust, Willingness to Cooperate, Sense of Belonging, Social Participation, Voluntarism and Donations, Inter-Group Alliances, Trust in Public Figures, and Political Participation. The overall mean score calculated from the total mean scores of the eight constructs was used to represent the virtual community cohesion measure.

Figure 1 presents the research model that relates current practices of the virtual community to the virtual community cohesion.

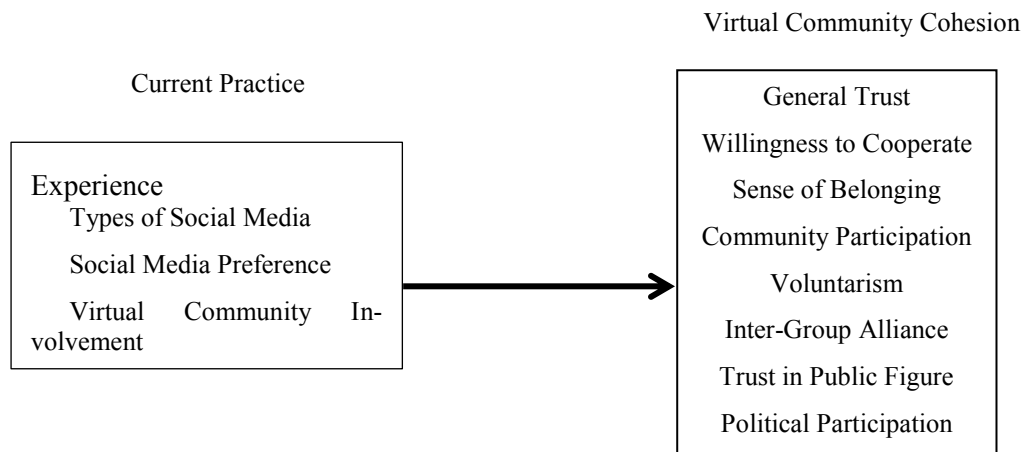


Figure 1. Research Model on the Influence of Virtual Community Practice on Social Cohesion

OPERATIONALIZATION OF THE RESEARCH VARIABLES

The four research variables were operationalized in the form of items in the survey questionnaire. The first item, Experience, was coded in the form of ordinal scale in the order from “less than 1 year” experience to “1 to 2 years”, “2 to 4 years”, and “more than 4 years” experience using the social media. The second item, Types of Social Media, consisted of 11 types of social media listed in the questionnaire where respondents selected those that they used. In addition, respondents may also write those that were not in the list. The third item was Social Media Preference, that is, the most preferred social media used by the respondents using the same 11 types of social media listed. The fourth and last item representing current practices of virtual community members is Virtual Community Involvement. Respondents were asked to indicate which categories of virtual community they have been involved with. Among the categories were Politics, Business, Education, Games, Religion, Hobby, Social, and Others. The purpose was to determine the variety and intensity of involvement in the various virtual community groups.

To determine the reliability of the responses to the questionnaire, Cronbach’s alpha values were calculated on the virtual community cohesion constructs. The results show alpha values ranging from 0.755 to 0.949 for all the constructs. According to Hair et al. (2006) values of greater than 0.6 indicate the responses were reliable with acceptable internal consistency. Hence, this enables further analysis of the data to be carried out.

FINDINGS

The report of the findings in this section is based on 235 respondents. Majority of the respondents classified themselves as experienced users of social media whereby 65.4% of the respondents have 4 years or more of experience, 24.7 % have 2 to 4 years and 9.9 % have less than 2 years. This indicates that the questionnaire has been answered by experienced users in social media and should be capable of giving meaningful feedbacks.

Further investigation showed that the four most popular types of social media being used by the respondents were Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Twitter. Facebook has been chosen by 228 respondents followed by WhatsApp (179), Instagram (108) and Twitter (104). The rests in the list are Blog (76), Google+ (48), WeChat (49), BlackBerry Messenger (BBM) (39) and WordPress (23). The same trend appears when the respondents were required to

specify their frequently used social media. Similarly, Facebook has been chosen as the most popular with 72.8%, followed by WhatsApp (11.9%) and Twitter (3.0 %).

In order to determine whether there is significant relationship between the current practices of members of the virtual community with cohesiveness of the virtual community they participated, correlation analysis was carried out. Table 2 presents the results of the correlation analysis.

Table 1. Correlation Analysis of Current Practices of Social Media with Overall Cohesion

		Experience	Type of Social Media	Social Media Preference	Virtual Community Involvement
Overall Cohesion	Pearson Correlation	0.168*	0.165*	0.128	0.159*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.010	0.012	0.060	0.015
	N	231	232	218	232

* Significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Overall, results of the correlation analysis show there are significant relationships between current practices of the virtual community with social cohesion. Out of the four observed variables representing the current practices of the virtual community, experience in using the social media, the types of social media used, and involvement in the virtual community groups were significantly related to social cohesion. However, the result show there was no evidence to support the relationship between social media preference with social cohesion. Additionally, based on the direction and strength of the relationships represented by the correlation coefficient *r*, they were all categorized as positive but weak.

Whilst experience in using social media, varieties of social media used and active involvement play a significant role in the virtual community cohesion, preference in choosing a particular group may not be significant for social cohesion to exist. This may imply that social cohesion may not be the intention of members of the virtual community when choosing a particular social media group.

In order to determine the effect of current practices of the virtual community on social cohesion, a regression analysis was carried out. Multiple linear regressions were done on all four variables of current practices to determine their effect on social cohesion. Result of the multiple regressions is presented in table 2.

Table 2. Model Summary of result for Current Practices in Using Social Media

Model	Predictors	R	R2	F	Sig.F
1	Experience No. of Social Media Used Type of Social Media Preferred Virtual Community Involvement	.344	.118	6.102	.000

The result shows a significant relationship between Current Practices and Social Cohesion at $p < 0.01$. However, the regression coefficient *R* is 0.344 which is considered moderate and accounts for 11.8% of the variance. This means that current practice in using the social media has a significant but moderate effect on social cohesion.

CONCLUSION

The objective of the study is to explore current practices of users of the virtual community and their influence on social cohesion. Findings from this study show social cohesion can be

influenced by the current practices of users of the virtual community. Specifically, the experience of the users, types of social media used and users' involvement in certain virtual community groups were found to be likely predictors that can influence social cohesion. However, more studies need to be carried out to examine other social media variables that may affect social cohesion since the current practices of social media users used in this study only account for a small percentage (11.8%) of the variance in social cohesion. The ubiquitous use of the social media by the virtual community will attract more new users to use the social media at the same time keep the faithful to become more experienced. Lessons that can be learnt from this study is that creating different types of social media to suit people with diverse background and needs appear to be in the right direction for promoting social cohesion. Likewise participating in different virtual community groups with diverse interests should be encouraged as opposed to focussing on a single group which is consistent with the study by Easterly et al. (2006).

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