



Defining the virtual tourist community: implications for tourism marketing

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Abstract

The notion of community has been a central element of the Internet since its inception. Though research on virtual communities have been extensive the concept appears to be ill defined and the understanding of members' needs remains fragmented. The purpose of this article is to identify a theoretical foundation of the concept of a virtual tourist community based upon the core characteristics of virtual communities and the fundamental needs of community members. Perspectives of how one can define and interpret virtual communities within the tourism industry are discussed and issues related to the functions of virtual communities are explored from the member's viewpoint. Implications are made regarding virtual communities in the travel industry from marketing and design perspectives. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The notion of community has been at the heart of the Internet since its inception. For many years scientists have used the Internet to share data, collaborate on research, and exchange messages. Within the last few years, millions of computer users worldwide have begun to explore the Internet and engage in commercial online activities. Many have joined one or more of the online communities that have sprung up to serve consumer needs for communication, information, and entertainment. In the 1990s the convergence of e-mail, groupware systems, and the World Wide Web has given many people the experience of participating in groups where they have little or no face-to-face interaction (Cothrel & Williams, 1999). Kozinets (1999) estimated that by the year 2000 over 40 million people worldwide participated in 'virtual communities' of one type or another, and prodigious growth in the quantity, interests, and influence of virtual communities is guaranteed. Measured by this momentum, it is clear that virtual communities will gain greater importance in the future.

Starting in 1997 virtual communities began to be depicted as central to models of commercial Internet development as well as to the future of narrow casting and mass customization in the wider world of marketing and advertising (Werry, 1999). Armstrong and Hagel argue that traditional business functions, especially those in direct contact with customers such as marketing and sales, will be significantly transformed in a community environment. This fluid and dynamic revolution is also true in the travel industry when it is becoming easier than ever before to "travel" the world and stay in touch with people who live far away. In the travel industry the Web is becoming our collective "travel square" as more and more travelers are turning to online travel communities to fulfill their travel-related tasks, ranging from seeking travel information and tips, making travel transactions, fostering relationships with people from far away, finding travel companions, or simply playing games for entertainment purposes. At the same time, travel organizations are beginning to realize the importance of utilizing the power of virtual communities in their endeavor of relationship marketing.

However, for travel organizations including travel suppliers and intermediaries, establishing and maintaining such communities offer both special opportunities and challenges. On the one hand such a community

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erases boundaries created by time and distance and makes it dramatically easier for people to obtain information, maintain connections, deepen relationships, and meet like-minded souls that they would otherwise never have met. On the other hand, the successful operation of a virtual community depends largely on whether these organizations have a comprehensive understanding of the essence of a virtual community and how much they know their members in terms of who and what their fundamental needs are in the context of virtual communities. A basic understanding of the essence of a virtual community is a prerequisite for any organization operating a virtual community to be clear about their mission, purpose, and the right direction to take to achieve their goal. Understanding members and their needs is also essential in virtual community development since members are the pulse of any community and without them, there is no community (Preece, 2000). Unfortunately, the phrase ‘virtual community’ has been widely used by different people to denote different things, and there is a substantial confusion over the definition of the term ‘virtual community’. Moreover, though there is extensive research on virtual communities, this research appears fragmented given the importance of the understanding of the members’ needs in virtual community development. The purpose of this study is to identify the theoretical foundation for the concept of a virtual community, providing clarifications of the core characteristics of virtual communities and the fundamental needs of community members. Perspectives of how to define and interpret virtual communities are discussed and issues related to the functions of virtual communities are explored from the member’s viewpoint. Implications are made to virtual communities in the travel industry from marketing and design perspectives.

2. Theoretical foundations

People have different understandings of a virtual community, depending on their specific needs and the context in which they visit a virtual community. For some, it conjures up warm, fuzzy, reassuring images of people chatting and helping each other. For others, it generates dark images of conspiracy, subversive and criminal behavior, and invasion of privacy (Preece, 2000). Superficially, the term virtual community is not hard to understand, yet it is slippery to define. What makes it more difficult is owing to the fact that in a multidisciplinary field such as tourism, many definitions take a relatively narrow disciplinary perspective. Further complications arise when a topic suddenly becomes popular and the term takes on a buzzword status, such as the widespread use of the term by e-commerce entrepreneurs. However, what remains

stable as a reference point in the definition of virtual community is the notion of community within the physical world. Dictionary definitions, for example, describe a virtual community as groups living together and/or united by shared interests, common goals, activities, and groups and individuals who cooperate to share resources and satisfy each other’s needs. Some definitions include enjoyment and pleasure, while others strongly associate community with a physical locale, such as a village or town. The need to respect the feelings and property of others is also mentioned, along with the importance of governance systems to ensure that this happens. All these attributes appear to describe online communities, but their relative importance is debated.

Researchers in this field have been trying to abstract the essence of the virtual community and define it in a way that is acceptable to the majority of the people, if not all of them. Among them the most prominent ones include Fernback and Thompson (1995), Powers (1997), Armstrong and Hagel (1997), Rosenblatt (1997), Shelton and McNeeley (1997), Smith and Kollock (1999), and Preece (2000). The most often cited definition of a virtual community is first given by Rheingold (1994) as:

“social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feelings, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace. A virtual community is a group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks”. (p. 57–58)

Rheingold’s definition resulted from his seven-year involvement in the Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link (WELL), an early online community developed in the San Francisco Bay Area. He also tried to describe and explain activities that people engaged in, their reasons for participating, and the way they communicated in online communities. Rheingold captured the essence of online community in a way that endures today in a single paragraph. He wrote:

In cyberspace, we chat and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, perform acts of commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, play games and metagames, flirt... We do everything people do when people get together, but we do it with words on computer screens, leaving our bodies behind... our identities commingle and interact electronically, independent of local time and location (Rheingold, 1994, p. 58).

Rheingold’s description of his experience in the WELL is almost as relevant today as in 1994. But when a topic like online communities captures the enthusiasm of different groups with different expertise and goals,

inevitably, a range of definitions emerge that reflect these differences. As a result, the definition of an online community actually comes to reflect the perspectives taken by these different groups, ranging from multidisciplinary, sociology, technology, and e-commerce viewpoints. For example, key characteristics of online communities had been identified from a multidisciplinary perspective by a group of human computer interaction professionals in 1996 in a conference on the theory and practice of physical and network communities (Whittaker, Issacs, & O'Day, 1997), and these core attributes of online communities include: (1) members have a shared goal, interest, need, or activity that provides the primary reason for belonging to the community; (2) members engage in repeated, active participation, and often, intense interactions, strong emotional ties, and shared activities occur among participants; (3) members have access to shared resources, and policies determine the access to those resources; (4) reciprocity of information, support, and services among members; and (5) shared context of social conventions, language, and protocols (Preece, 2000).

From a sociological perspective, sociologists have been struggling to define community. For years, researchers have defined and redefined the concept (Wellman, 1997). Initially, communities were defined by physical features such as size and location; more recently, the strength and type of relationships among people seemed more promising criteria for defining communities when commuting became a way of life and cheaper transportation made it easier for people to join multiple communities to satisfy different needs. The focus on social interaction that sociologists bring to this new field is a welcome counterbalance to the intense technological hype often associated with the Internet (Preece, 2000). Unfortunately, many researchers studying online communities seem unfamiliar with the long history of studying community by sociologists (Wellman & Gulia, 1998).

At the opposite end of the social spectrum are the technology-oriented definitions. The software that supports online communities is a frequently used shorthand way of defining them. It is very common to hear "techies" refer to chat, bulletin board, listserv, Usenet News or Web-based community (Preece, 2000). Though such terms are concise and instantly meaningful to insiders and this "geek speak" is of value only to those who know about technology-related issues, little or nothing is said about social organization and interaction. In contrast, e-commerce entrepreneurs take a very broad view of community. Any chat or bulletin board or communications software can be regarded as the basis for an online community. For them, the important issue is what draws people to and holds people in a Web site, so that they will buy goods or services. The success of

America Online (AOL) proves that chatting online to friends, family, and new acquaintances is big business. E-commerce entrepreneurs anticipate that online communities not only will keep people at their sites, but will also have an important role in marketing, as people tell each other about their purchases and discuss banner ads, and help and advise each other (Preece, 2000). But it is still debatable as to whether this highly commercial perspective of online communities complements or devalues the concept of virtual community.

Online community has become a broad term to describe any collection of people who communicate online. These people can be special interest groups for education, professional issues, and hobbies who fulfill a specific, narrowly defined purpose, and aim to draw only members sharing that interest. The term online community is also often used to include community networks. An increasing number of physical communities have community networks to link and support community members. These networks like the WELL typically focus on local services and community issues. Citizens can link to the Internet but there is a strong focus on the local community. Schuler (1996) proposes the following core values for building community networks: conviviality and culture, education, strong democracy, health and human services, economic equity, opportunity and sustainability, and information and communication.

In her book *Online Communities: Designing Usability, Supporting Sociability*, Preece (2000) provides a working definition of online community; she states that an online community should consist of the following elements: people who interact as they strive to satisfy their own needs or perform special roles; a shared purpose such as an interest, need, information exchange, or service that provides a reason for the community; policies that guide people's interactions; and computer systems which support and mediate social interaction and facilitate a sense of togetherness. This definition provides a framework to guide developers in making operational decisions and can be applied to a range of different communities, including physical communities that have become networked, communities supported by a single bulletin board, listserv or chat software, those that are embedded in Web sites, multi-user dungeons or domains (MUDs) and object-oriented MUDs (MOOs), and others. Other researchers (Etzioni, 1995; Baym, 1995) are trying to apply traditional sociological terms to the patterns of human interaction that develop in the 'bodiless' province of cyberspace and approach computer-mediated communication (CMC) research with an eye toward the accepted wisdom of the tenets of ethnomethodology, observation, interpretation, and empirical verification. Cyberspace has been positioned as the town hall, the public sphere, the virtual agora, or just a fun "place" to gather and chat. Thus, community

and the various meanings that word evokes has become an efficacious symbolic term for characterizing virtual social relations.

According to these scholars, “virtual communities” can be described using key words such as “social”, “relationship”, “virtual”, “place”, “group of people”, “common interests”, and “communication”. However, like the terms religion or culture, community has proven to be difficult to define. The above description of virtual community proves that these terms have mutable definitions that can vary widely in different disciplines and among different individuals. Raymond Williams has, in an attempt to discover the “essence” of community, observed that community is not just a bounded locale but also the quality of holding something in common, as in community of interests, community of goods, a sense of community identity and characteristics. For scholars concerned with the human action in the domain of cyberspace, defining social patterns of behavior in a virtual realm can become very challenging, if not impossible. We need to ask ourselves questions like whether the same normative roles and modes of behavior that govern our physical social world also apply to the virtual world and whether we can seek empirical verification of hypotheses regarding social activity that involves communities that are not defined by place or time. We know already that many of the assumptions we hold about the negotiation and formation of social relationships, and particularly about community do not seem to apply in the complex realm of CMC (Fernback, 1999). Jones (1995) argues that with the emergence of CMC, there is a sense that we are embarking on an adventure in creating new communities and new forms of community, and the reproduction of space through CMC is the malleability with which identity can be created and negotiated, and consequently, one must question the potential of CMC for production of social space as to whether it could reproduce “real” social relations in a “virtual” medium. He suggests that it is more likely that social relations emerging from a virtual community are between the two poles of production and reproduction, and pushing too close to either pole puts at risk whatever new social construction of reality may arise (Jones, 1995).

Based on the examination of all these questions and discussions about the definition of virtual community from a variety of perspectives, and considering the unique characteristics of community in cyberspace, its functions and features viewed from both theoretical abstraction and empirical application, this paper proposes the following framework to define the virtual community concept: virtual community as place; virtual community as symbol; and virtual community as virtual. These sociological and theoretical notions of virtual community can only be made feasible by the presence of groups of people who interact with specific purposes,

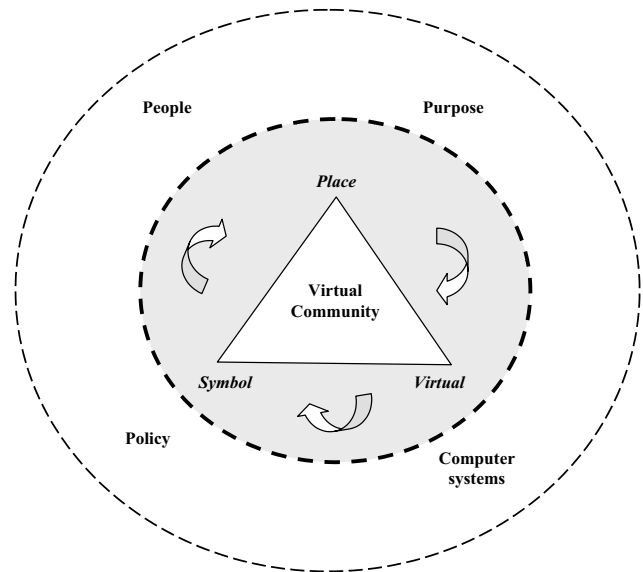


Fig. 1. A conceptual model for the definition of virtual community.

under the governance of certain policies, and with the facilitation of CMC. The interpretation and explanation of each term in the framework will be elaborated accordingly (see Fig. 1).

2.1. *Virtual community as place*

For the understanding of online community, people often make it analogous to physical community. In the latter, people group themselves into aggregated physical villages that they call communities—urban, rural, or suburban; people also group themselves into symbolic subdivisions based on lifestyle, identity, or character that they call communities—religious, professional, or philosophical. The community ideology has been deeply rooted in our society, and we have historically associated community with place (Fernback, 1999). Analogously, a virtual community can be conceived as a place where people can develop and maintain social and economic relationships and explore new opportunities. We can perceive virtual communities as social organizations centered around certain commonalities such as fellowship (e.g., Jewish or Amish communities), profession (e.g., WELL) or interest (e.g., wine.com). They are places where discussions about commitment, identity, conflict resolution, tensions between the collectives and the individual, and negotiation of community boundaries are conducted.

Part of the reason why these approaches to defining virtual community are attached to a sense of place might be the historic affiliation between place and community, despite vast societal and communication changes brought about by the communication technology advancement. It is appropriate to say that the essence

of community is making a home because it is one's heart that brings virtual community members together from near and far, whether it is based on interest, profession, or religion.

Though it seems difficult to conceive of cyberspace as a place for community when the creation and control of place itself is directed by concerns such as power, authority, and dominance, certain material dimensions of physical space can be reinvented in cyberspace. Benedikt (1991) argues that virtual space is parallel to physical space in that:

Cyberspace has geography, a nature, and a rule of human law. In cyberspace the common man and the information worker can search, manipulate, create or control information directly; he can be entertained or trained, seek solitude or company, win or lose power...indeed, can "live" or "die" as he will. (p. 123)

Thus, one cannot conclude that because we cannot see "it" so "it" does not exist. Hillis (1997) suggests that virtual worlds are being positioned as the ideal public sphere for imaginative subjectivities believing themselves virtually freed of bodily constraints. Virtual community as a place might be a slippery and an unimaginary notion for those outside of it, but to those insiders, it is a solid place in their hearts and souls.

2.2. *Virtual community as symbol*

Community, like other social constructs, embodies a symbolic dimension (Cohen, 1985). In the process of community creation, we tend to symbolically attach meaning to the community we belong to regardless the social or geographical characteristics of the community. In such an entity of community laden with symbolic meaning, we seek substance rather than form. One standard of measuring virtual community is to see whether the community constructed can provide meaning and identity to its community members. In this sense, virtual community is a very personal thing and only the individual can tell if he or she feels a part of the community. If that feeling is lacking, then for that person the community may as well not exist. Thus, the notion of virtual community addresses what Calhoun (1980) refers to as "community as a complex of ideas and sentiments" where virtual community exists in the minds of participants. It exists because participants define it and give it meaning. Virtual community has its own cultural composition; it has its own collective sense, and its own virtual ideology and symbol. It should be noted that the symbolic dimension of virtual community is made possible by CMC. As Jones (1995) points out, CMC not only structures social relations, it is the space within which the relationships occur. However, it is more than the context within which social relations

occur, since it is commented on and imaginatively constructed by symbolic processes initiated and maintained by the community between and among individuals and groups.

2.3. *Virtual community as virtual*

Being virtual is one of the most important defining characteristics which distinguishes virtual communities from physical ones. Virtual communities are characterized by common value systems, norms, rules, and the sense of identity, commitment, and association that also characterize various physical communities. However, the notion of virtual community is inherently unique because of the new element in the virtual community's definitional mix—computers which affect our ways we think about community, especially in a virtual way.

As suggested previously, the virtual community exists in the minds of participants; this, however, does not mean that virtual community exists solely in the minds of the participants. It also exists in the connection between what social constructs the user imagines and the CMC-generated representations of these constructs (Fernback, 1999). Thus if we log on, form relationships in cyberspace, and believe we have found community, it is real for us. In fact, Watson (1997) claims that there is no true distinction between "virtual" community and "real" community since the term "virtual" means something akin to "unreal" and so the entailments of calling online communities "virtual" include spreading and reinforcing a belief that what happens online is like a community, but isn't really a community. This may explain why people in the offline world tend to see online communities as virtual, but participants in the online communities see them as quite real. But if one agrees that communication is the core of any community, then a virtual community is real whether it exists within the same physical locality or half a world away.

3. **Operational elements of virtual tourist community**

It can be seen from the above discussion that a virtual community is place in manifestation, symbolic in nature, and virtual in form. Virtual community is not an entity but rather a process defined by its members. It possesses many essential traits as physical communities and the substance that allows for common experience and meaning among members. Judging by these criteria not all virtual social gatherings are virtual communities. Without the personal investment, intimacy, and commitment that characterizes our ideal sense of community, some on-line discussion groups and chat rooms are nothing more than a means of communication among people with common interests (Bromberg, 1996). In addition, a more comprehensive and complete

understanding of the virtual community requires an examination of elements at a more operational level. These elements include people, purpose, policy, and computer systems.

3.1. *People*

People are the heart of the community and without them, there is no community. Vibrant discussions, new ideas, and continually changing content distinguish online communities from Web pages (Preece, 2000). People in online communities play different roles, and such roles can have positive or negative impact on a community. Some roles that have been identified include: moderators and mediators, who guide discussions and serve as arbiters in disputes; professional commentators, who give opinions and guide discussions; general participants, who contribute to discussion; and lurkers, who silently observe.

3.2. *Purpose*

The purpose of a virtual community helps to understand what it wants to accomplish, who is the target audience, and how participating in the community would benefit the members. The purpose of the community also helps to define both its structure, and what resources (time, information, and expertise) will be needed to run the community. Communities that have clearly stated goals appear to attract people with similar goals; this creates a stable community in which there is less hostility. A successful community serves a clear purpose in the lives of its members and meets the fundamental goals of its owners. Though communities evolve, and the purpose will change along with the shifting social and economic landscape of the Web, articulating the purpose up front will help to focus thinking and create a coherent, compelling, and successful Web community.

3.3. *Policy*

Community needs policy to direct online behavior. Specifically, policies are needed to determine: requirements for joining a community, the style of communication among participants, accepted conduct, privacy policies, security policies, and repercussions for non-conformance. Unwritten codes of conduct may also exist. The nature of the policies that govern the community and how they are presented can strongly influence who joins the community and its character.

3.4. *Computer systems*

It is computer systems that make online community a new phenomenon by supporting and mediating social

interaction and facilitating a sense of togetherness. The Internet has two particularly important roles: to enable millions of people to access vast quantities of information and to enable them to communicate with each other. Both are important to the success of online communities.

4. **Functions of virtual communities from the users' perspective**

A successful virtual community must attract and keep enough members to make it worthwhile, and consequently a community builder has to focus on the specific benefits the members will realize by joining the community. The community will be doomed to fail if the basic needs of its members have not been met. The answers to questions regarding why people go to an online community and what draws them there are not simple ones and the reasons usually vary. Some may want information or support, to interact with others, others may want to have fun, meet new people, voice their own ideas, or make transactions. These questions may even become more complex owing to different purposes of virtual communities and the personality of their members. Communities that have clearly stated goals appear to attract people with similar goals and needs which ultimately influence their online behavior. Preece (2000) identified four basic purposes of online communities based on the tasks in which they are involved: exchange information, by which the primary goal is to get answers to questions or to send out information which can be either unidirectional or multidirectional; provide support, which conveys empathy, expresses emotion verbally or nonverbally; chat and socialize informally through synchronous communication; and, discuss ideas which usually requires guidance from a moderator.

The needs of online community members may also be determined by the members themselves. It goes without saying that members come in all shapes and sizes with different personalities, abilities, experiences, and resources (Preece, 2000). They also have many things in common in that they share common emotional, psychological, and physiological characteristics, just by virtue of being human. Yet within these general categories, individual differences of community members will strongly impact how their needs will be defined. Considerable well-documented research has been conducted by psychologists and physiologists in an effort to understand human characteristics and their diverse needs (Jefferies, 1997; Dix, Finlay, Abowd, & Beale, 1998). Shneiderman (1998) discussed the dimensions of human diversity and how this diversity results in their diverse needs. These dimensions include physical, cognitive and perceptual, personality, cultural, experience, gender, age, and capability.

In their book *Community of Commerce*, Bressler and Grantham (2000) suggest that when belonging to a community, be it physical or online, people fulfill a number of basic psychological needs. It's because of this social psychology that communities have become such a powerful organizing force in the world of commerce. For all of human history, communities have provided the "where" of learning new roles, coping with changes, and finding places of refuge in difficult times. They claim that virtual community meets four basic psychological needs: identification, unity, involvement, relatedness. By providing a sense of identification, communities help us answer the question, "Who am I?" By providing evidence of our unity with other people, values, and norms, communities help us answer the question, "What am I a part of?" In feeling united with a group, one not only gains a sense of belonging, one also gains a sense of oneself. By giving us avenues for involvement, communities also answer the questions, "What connects me to the rest of the world?" and "To what degree am I in contact with other people in the community?" And, by showing us clear signs of our relatedness to people like ourselves, communities help us answer the question, "What relationships matter to me in the world?" However, being connected to people is not quite enough. There has to be some feeling of reciprocity: that is, a network of mutual understandings, obligations, and expectations of behavior on the part of others. One achieves a sense of wholeness by being part of a community.

One concern community members have when they conduct online activities is the sense of trust. When there is trust among people, relationships flourish; without, they wither (Preece, 2000). Most interactions among people or organizations involve some level of trust. Telling someone your innermost thoughts, empathizing about a medical problem, cooperating on a project, or purchasing a product from an e-commerce company all require trust. Researchers posit that members go to virtual communities for consumption purposes. Clerc (1996) concluded that millions of consumers are forming into groups that "communicate social information and create and codify group-specific meanings, socially negotiate group-specific identities, form relationships which span from playfully antagonistic to the deeply romantic and which move between the network and face-to-face interaction, and create norms which serve to organize interaction and to maintain desirable social climates." Research has also indicated that Internet users progress from initially asocial information gathering to increasingly affiliative social activities (Walter, 1995). At first, an Internet user will merely "browse" information sources, "lurking" to learn about a consumption interest. However, as the online consumer becomes more sophisticated in his/her Internet use, they begin to visit sites that have "third party" information,

and eventually may make online contact with consumers of that product. The pattern of relationship developed in virtual communities of consumption is one in which consumption knowledge is developed in concert with social relations. Consumption knowledge is learned alongside knowledge of the online group's cultural norms, specialized language and concepts, and the identities of experts and other group members (Kozinets, 1998). Eventually, what began primarily as a search for information transforms into a source of community and understanding.

In this process of consumption a lasting identification is being established. The formation of this identification as a member of a virtual community of consumption depends largely on two nonindependent factors. The first is the relationship that the person has with the consumption activity. The second factor is the intensity of the social relationships (involvement) the person possesses with other members of the virtual community, and the two factors will often be interrelated. Consequently, the interaction modes the members take will move from informational to relational, recreational, and transformational.

In one of the most influential books on virtual community *Net Gain: Expanding Markets Through Virtual Communities*, Armstrong and Hagel (1997) discussed the need for virtual community from both the vendors' and members' perspectives. They believe that virtual communities are not about aggregating information and other kinds of resources; rather, virtual communities are about aggregating people. People are drawn to virtual communities because they provide an engaging environment in which to connect with other people. The basis of this connection is essentially based on people's desire to meet four basic needs: interests, relationship, fantasy, and transaction. As consumers most of us have passionate interests, may it be sports, entertainments, travel, or other professional interests. Virtual communities have created on-line services that enable members to share information on topics of common interest. At various stages in life, we encounter new and intense experiences that may draw us to others who have had a similar experience. Virtual communities enable people with similar experiences the opportunity to come together—freed from the constraints of time and space, and form meaningful personal relationships. Besides, the network environments also give people the opportunity to come together and explore new worlds of fantasy and entertainment where they can "try out" new persons and to engage in role-playing games where everything seems possible. We have seen a lot of this in MUDs and MOOs. Virtual communities can also meet the members' needs to transact by meeting on-line through the trading of information between participants. Members with a strong interest in certain kinds of products and services are gathering to

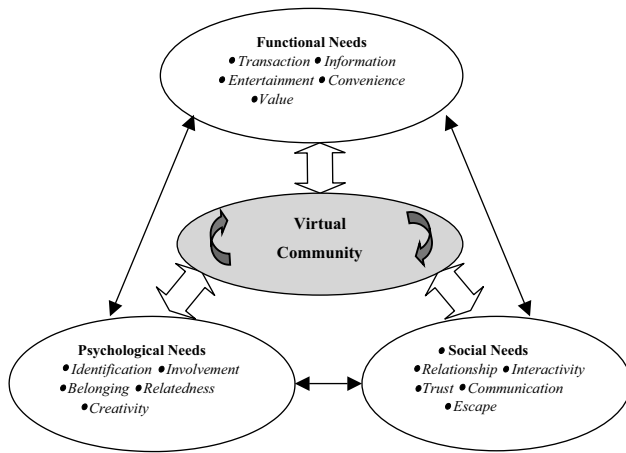


Fig. 2. A tentative model for the functions of virtual communities from the users' perspective.

exchange information and experiences regarding purchasing.

The discussion and elaboration of members' needs in virtual communities throughout the community literature abounds but remains fragmented, and more work at the conceptual level is needed. Thus, this paper proposes a model that relates three fundamental needs of virtual community members in their on-line activities: functional needs, social needs, and psychological needs (see Fig. 2).

4.1. Functional needs

Functional needs are met when community members go online to fulfill specific activities. It can be a transaction in which members buy and sell products or services (Armstrong & Hagel, 1996). It also can support information gathering and seeking for both learning purposes and facilitating decision-making. It can be entertainment and fantasy or the convenience or value the virtual community provides to its members where information can be accessed without concerns about time and geographical limits.

4.2. Social needs

Virtual communities are socially structured, convey social meaning, and meet social needs. These social needs may include relationship and interactivity among members since virtual communities give people with similar experiences the opportunity to come together, form meaningful personal relationships and communicate with each other in an interactive way; it may include trust between members and community owners and among community members which is the starting point in online communication; it may also include the

fundamental function of any virtual community—communication.

4.3. Psychological needs

Besides fulfilling their functional and social needs, another basic contention of this paper is that virtual communities can also meet some basic psychological needs of its members and thus make the community a part of their lives. It is because of this social psychology that communities have become such a powerful organizing force in the world of commerce. Specifically, these psychological needs contain identification (who are they), involvement (what connects them), unity/belonging (what are they part of), relatedness (what relationships matter to them in the world), creative forms their communications can take, and the “there” provided by virtual communities in which they can learn new roles, cope with changes, and escape their everyday lives.

It should be noted that tourism virtual communities maintained by different organizations will differ significantly in terms of relative focus on these basic needs. Some will emphasize one need more than the others. But few will be able to succeed if they address one need to the exclusion of the others, because the strength of virtual communities rests in their ability to address multiple needs simultaneously.

5. Implications for marketing and design

Virtual community is regarded as one of the most effective business models in the information age and the rise of virtual communities in on-line networks has provided great opportunities for both business organizations and their customers (Armstrong & Hagel, 1996). Virtual communities create new activities and powerful capabilities by bringing together a network of users and resources. Companies can use it to create new types of services and to enhance their existing products and to create new divisions and capabilities. This new business model has substantial implications within the travel industry in terms of their marketing strategies and the development and design of virtual tourist communities. For tourism organizations, virtual communities have broadened their marketing horizon and are having a great impact on marketing, sales, product and service development, supplier network, information quality, and distribution channels. Specifically, the following implications can be drawn.

5.1. Brand building

Virtual community provides tourism organizations a more effective method for communicating what their products and service are all about. This brand-building

process can bring brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand associations. In the travel industry, the presence of the Web has already created quite a number of strong new brands such as Travelocity and Expedia, and these brands can be enhanced to a great extent by integrating community functions. Other travel companies have already benefited in their brand-building endeavor by adopting virtual community as their business model such as *virtualltourist.com* and *lonelyplanet.com*.

5.2. Relationship building

A virtual community is regarded as the most effective way of relationship marketing, since it blurs the line between customers, allies, and partners. Tourism organizations can create virtual community environments which may contain valuable options to make the product and service better, to provide more specialized and personalized services and thus build strong customer loyalty. This loyalty built upon the strong relationship between customer and travel companies can, in turn, lead to more consumption and sales of travel products and services. It can also reduce marketing costs in terms of developing new markets and retaining the existing markets.

5.3. Category building

Tourism organizations can use virtual communities to educate visitors about their entire category of products and services, making them aware of new provision of products and services. This is especially important for market leaders, since they always need to make the customers aware of the most recent advancement and renovations in the development of new products and services. At the same time, travel companies can build their new product or service categories through the mutual communication with customers or by analyzing the communication between customers to find out what they really want and need.

5.4. Cost reduction

Virtual communities can be the cheapest form for information dissemination and customer interaction. This is especially true for tourism organizations considering the large amount of information consumption and the information-intense nature of tourism products and services (Buhalis, 1998). This cost reduction can be more pronounced given the ubiquity of the information which is made possible by the ever-present power of a communication network by all in a virtual community. Cost reduction has provided the hard numbers to justify many of the Web-based community investments by companies and this has led to commer-

cial application for many commercial companies. Travel companies are in a more advantageous position in comparison to other commercial companies to reduce their cost, since their products or services are mainly composed of information. Furthermore, cost reduction can be achieved through increased effectiveness of the information distribution process of the travel companies.

5.5. Revenue provision

Since tourism virtual communities can attract a variety of companies specialized in core and periphery tourism products, it is possible for the organizers of the community to adopt provider-based revenue models in which fees are paid to the community by other companies wanting to reach the community members. These revenues may include content sponsorship, banner advertising, prospect fees, and sales commissions. Of course, all these will be dependent on the success of the virtual community and the volume of the traffic.

5.6. Community design

Understanding the marketing potential of a virtual community is only half way to capitalizing on the benefits it can generate; the other half mainly depends on the design and maintenance of the community. The appropriate design of the virtual tourism community is based on a comprehensive understanding of the consumers' functional, social, and psychological needs as well as how these needs interact with each other. Such a travel community should be an integration of content and communication that takes direct communication, individual choice, friendly technology, and diversity of information into consideration. Specifically, a travel community should bring together a broad range of published content, ranging from conventional travel guides to travel magazines and specialized newsletters, as well as on-line brochures and information from tourist bureaus and specific vendor information like airlines schedules and hotel reservation. At the same time the community should provide a rich set of forums for communication between travelers such as bulletin boards and chat rooms where travelers can share their travel experience, provide travel information and tips, and post questions. As these communities evolve, the range, richness, reliability, and timeliness of information available to members is likely to be far greater than that of any information available through more conventional means.

6. Conclusion and discussion

Rapid growth and change are the major components of today's Internet economy, and tourism organizations

should respond by developing new models of doing business and new ways of making and delivering products and services. There are a number of forces encouraging the tourism industry to adopt different business models and to develop different markets. Information technology has made it possible for anyone to be in contact with any other person. As a result, technological and business applications are literally changing everyday and new cultures are evolving. These technology-nurtured cultures, like the community culture in the cyberspace, have new sets of symbols and rituals of interaction, and they construct their own meaning among themselves. These new cultures will inevitably form strong forces that will lead businesses into new ways of operating, learning and governing themselves in the new commercial forefront. Tourism organizations should understand how to adapt, react and take advantage of these forces so that they can become the water which will sail their business to a new horizon, instead of ruin it.

Since tourism is traditionally studied and examined in relation to geographic places or space, it is understandable that some tourism marketing organizations lack confidence in and basic understandings of how a virtual community can be used as a marketing tool. However, we cannot afford to ignore the revolutionary changes information technology brings us, which inherently affect the ways we think of linking up to each other and our notion about place and space. Fortunately, human beings always react, consciously and unconsciously, to the places where we live and work, in ways we scarcely notice or that are only now becoming known to us. As places around us change—both the communities that ‘shelter’ us and the large social environments that support them—will all undergo changes. Since people now can surmount time and space and ‘be’ anywhere, marketing organizations should adapt accordingly and embrace this new space as a marketing tool capable of organizing people’s knowledge about, and desires for, the places they may wish to visit.

It is believed that community will gain more importance as the Internet becomes even more pervasive in the new global economy, and it will become the dominant organizing metaphor in the next decade, just like connected desktops as the organizing metaphor for business in the 1980s and 1990s. It can be expected that network technology will further empower people to become more connected and more related to one another. To a large extent these connections and relationships are being formed by customers themselves, and are no longer controlled by the providers of products and services. In order to be successful, tourism community organizers need to provide their customers with shared interests a way to come together, express themselves, conduct easy and secure transactions with

goods and services they provide, and try to match and expand upon the various needs of the community and the functional aspects of the Internet. At the same time, they need to adopt different ways of dealing with their stakeholders to facilitate the creation, nurturing, and preservation of intellectual capital in the community building process so that they can enhance their value for the members of the community. The emerging challenge for destination marketing organizations, indeed all members of the tourism industry, is to focus attention on the challenging nature of the tourism business and highlights the tension this change brings about. It is clear, however, that because of the experiential nature of tourism, virtual tourism communities will provide a substantial foundation with which to foster communication among and between travelers and the industry.

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