Forming relationship commitments to online communities: The role of social motivations

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ABSTRACT

Although administrators of online communities (OCs) may focus on improving their OCs through upgrading technology and enhancing the usability of their OCs to attract additional users, the level of OC participation may be associated with social motives. The purpose of this study is to understand how social motivations (that is, network externalities and social norms) affect members committed to OCs. This study tests the hypotheses on data collected from 396 undergraduate students. Data analyses show that network externalities and social norms directly influence social interaction ties, which subsequently results in commitment toward a community. Social norms also directly influence relationship commitments to a community. The results provide insights into how social motivations lead to commitment to an OC, reminding OC administrators to encourage member commitment to the OC from the perspective of social motivations.

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1. Introduction

Online communities (OCs) are an important resource for people with various interests, goals, and needs (Kim, Park, & Jin, 2008). In contrast to participants of a physical community, who physically gather at the same place and time, OC members are not physically colocated; thus, technology is used as the primary method of communication (Chu, 2009). However, regardless of whether the location is online or physical, a community is primarily based on a mutual interest among the participants. Because Internet media are used increasingly to share ideas and communicate, the global number of OCs has risen rapidly in recent years (Smedberg, 2008). Thus, the growth of online social networking sites, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter (Rizavi, Ali, & Rizavi, 2011), has created a new world of communication (Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011). Despite significant growth in the number of OCs, OC administrators have difficulty obtaining member commitment (Gupta & Kim, 2007). Relatively few communities retain sustained, active use among existing members.

Member commitment to the OC is vital for administrators (Gupta, Kim, & Shin, 2010). Therefore, from a managerial perspective, OC administrators aim to encourage active member participation, create greater site stickiness (Misra, Mukherjee, & Peterson, 2008), and develop member commitment to the OC. Accordingly, researchers have investigated how to retain OC members. For example, one researcher suggested that social interaction ties influence people's intentions to remain in a professional OC, where members share an interest and expertise in a specific topic (Chen, 2007). However, antecedents that influence social interaction ties in OCs should be explored.

Although a previous study indicated that social norms and network externalities motivate the adoption and valuation of communication technology, such as e-mail and instant messaging (Dickinger, Arami, & Meyer, 2008), comprehension of the influence of network externalities and social norms on member participation and commitment to an OC remains limited. Thus, the aim of this study is to determine how encouraging active interaction between current members develops commitment to an OC. This study integrates social motivations as the antecedents to social interaction ties, and examines the links among network externalities, social norms, social interaction ties, member trust, and intention to commit to OCs.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

The Internet can be a valuable tool for expanding a user's personal network (Ishii & Ogasahara, 2007). OCs occur in a virtual space, enabling communication and supporting interpersonal interaction that extends over time (Chu & Chan, 2009; Martínez-Torres, Toral, Barrero, & Cortés, 2010), and forming networks of personal

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relationships (Jung & Kang, 2010; Wellman et al., 1996). The popularity of user-to-user interaction on the Internet is increasing, and members demonstrate a highly positive tendency to share opinions and comments with other members in OCs (Kimiloglu, 2004). Thus, though OCs facilitate conversations among members and foster member-to-member interaction within the community (Szmigin, Canning, & Reppel, 2005), the factors essential to members participating in OCs require greater understanding (Lin, 2006).

Social motivation refers to how other people influence an individual's decisions (Grenny, Maxfield, & Shimberg, 2008). Explanations based on social influence and the effect of network externalities should be expected because the more people use a product/service, the more useful it will be for an individual (Dickinger et al., 2008). Thus, network externality occurs when a member's use of a product or service increases with the number of other users (Chun & Hahn, 2007). According to management literature, the concept of network externalities is increasingly influential in explaining the numerous market outcomes of modern information technology (Joe, Lin, & Chiu, 2010), and is used to enhance understanding of network goods valuation (Dickinger et al., 2008) and e-business adoption (Lai, Wang, Hsieh, & Chen, 2007), such as online instant messenger services and network gaming (Chun & Hahn, 2007).

Social norms, however, refer to the degree to which people perceive that other people they consider important expect that he/she should perform a specific behavior (Gerow, Galluch, & Thatcher, 2010). Thus, social norms are the common beliefs and acceptable behavioral standards of the social group. Social norms have been found to influence individual perception and behavior. For example, Dickinger et al. (2008) found that social norms are a significant driver of usefulness and the perceived enjoyment of highly interactive services (for example, Push-to-Talk). Results of a previous study also show the significant influence of social norms on community loyalty behavior (Lin, 2010).

2.1. The role of network externality on social interaction ties

Network externalities occur when participation in a network benefits others in the network, and the value of the network grows as the number of members in the network increases (Song & Walden, 2007). That is, people use a particular system more when more people also use it, and when more people in their social group use it (Kraut, Rice, Cool, & Fish, 1998). Thus, network externalities occur due to social considerations (Janssen & Mendys-Kamphorst, 2007). A previous study suggested that positive network externalities improve the performance of an increasing network (Asvanund, Clay, Krishnan, & Smith, 2004), and are vital for intended future or continued participation in an OC service (Chun & Hahn, 2007; Chung & Hossain, 2010; Lin & Lu, 2011).

Based on marketing literature, social interaction is interpersonal action or a relationship between an individual and others (Varey, 2008). In this study, we define the term *social interaction ties* as the level of frequency and time investment of OC member interactions. Chun and Hahn (2007) suggested that the total network size and the number of active members in the "buddy list" are significant network externality factors. Members' tend to seek more accessible and helpful relationships with their friends, family, and/or co-workers (Chu & Chan, 2009). Thus, when people perceive that not only numerous people but also their friends and acquaintances are joining and interacting in an OC, their willingness to interact and communicate within the OC increases. Based on this finding, this study reasonably expects the following.

Hypothesis 1. Network externalities positively influence social interaction ties in an OC.

2.2. The role of social norms in social interaction ties and relationship commitments

Within theory of planned behavior (TPB), social norms (also referred to as "subjective norms") are defined as individual perception of social pressure, or indication from significant reference individuals whether to perform a particular behavior (Rosenthal, Seeman, & Gibson, 2005). In OC context, social norms refer to individual user perception regarding norms and the opinions of external referents that are believed to understand and have previously used the OC (Song & Kim, 2006). Research found that social norms directly affect enduring involvement (Iwasaki & Havitz, 2004). Management literature has documented that buyer perceptions of social norms can result from ongoing interaction with sellers or other buyers (Lee, Murphy, & Neale, 2009). Thus, under a social norm, an individual may perceive social pressure to frequently interact and communicate with some members in an OC to conform to the expectations of external referents. Hence, the following hypothesis can be inferred.

Hypothesis 2. The social norms of individual users positively influence social interaction ties in an OC.

Regarding OCs, social norms involve perceived pressure from relatives, friends, or colleagues that either approve or disapprove of the user's intentions. Social norms reflect the effect of significant social pressures on individual behavior. Based on social influence theory, when the majority of the people significant to a person recommend they join a community, they may comply with the suggestion (Zhou, 2011). Thus, social norms are an external force comprising the contextual factors in which a behavior occurs (Gerow et al., 2010). Zhou (2011) suggested that social norms influence online community users' participation intention. Previous marketing studies also suggested that social norms relate positively to customer loyalty (Lee et al., 2009) and commitment (Moliner, Sánchez, Rodríguez, & Callarisa, 2007). Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3. The social norms of individual users positively influence their relationship commitment to an OC.

2.3. The relationship among social interaction ties, member trust, and relationship commitments

Social interaction ties are associated with the level of closeness and communication frequency among the members of an OC. Through close social interaction, a member can enhance the interpersonal relationship between two parties. Service researchers have suggested that customer-to-customer interaction may affect customer evaluation of the service experience (Wu, 2008). A previous study indicated that an OC supported by a Web site improves the relationships among members, consequently fostering trust (Sicilia & Palazón, 2008). Social interaction ties may also stimulate trust in other members (Law, 2008). When two parties frequently interact, their relationship becomes more definite, and the likelihood they perceive each other as trustworthy increases. Thus, the following can be inferred.

Hypothesis 4. Social interaction ties positively influence trust among members of OCs.

Researchers also documented that encouraging member participation is a facilitator for commitment to an OC (Gupta & Kim, 2007). Management literature has suggested that social interaction induces social benefits, which are subsequently positively related to a buyer's commitment to a relationship (Doney, Barry, & Abratt, 2007). Casaló, Flavián, and Guinalíu (2008) further reported that