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## A social influence model of consumer participation in network- and small-group-based virtual communities

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### Abstract

We investigate two key group-level determinants of virtual community participation—group norms and social identity—and consider their motivational antecedents and mediators.

We also introduce a marketing-relevant typology to conceptualize virtual communities, based on the distinction between *network-based* and *small-group-based* virtual communities. Our survey-based study, which was conducted across a broad range of virtual communities, supports the proposed model and finds further that virtual community type moderates consumers' reasons for participating, as well as the strengths of their impact on group norms and social identity. We conclude with a consideration of managerial and research implications of the findings.

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A web of glass spans the globe. Through it, brief sparks of light incessantly fly, linking machines chip to chip, and people face to face (Cerf, 1991, p. 72)

### 1. Introduction

Marketers have become more and more interested in learning about, organizing, and managing

virtual communities on their internet venues (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001). Such an interest stems not only from their ability to influence members' choices, and to rapidly disseminate knowledge and perceptions regarding new products (e.g., Dholakia & Bagozzi, 2001), but also from the numerous opportunities to engage, collaborate with, and advance customer relationships actively in such forums. In the current research, consistent with the prevailing view (e.g., Rheingold, 2002; Wellman & Gulia, 1999), virtual communities are viewed as consumer groups of varying sizes that meet and

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interact online for the sake of achieving personal as well as shared goals of their members.

Researchers have employed various theories such as social network analysis (e.g., Wellman & Gulia, 1999), life cycle models (e.g., Alon, Brunel, & Schneier Siegal, 2004), and motivational theories (e.g., Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002) for studying virtual communities, examining such issues of marketing relevance as what draws participants to such communities, what they are used for, and how they influence the subsequent knowledge, opinions, and behaviors of participants. A common theme underlying many of these investigations is to better understand the nature and role of the social influence exerted by the community on its members (Alon et al., 2004; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2000; see Dholakia & Bagozzi, 2004 for a review).

Bagozzi and Dholakia's (2002, hereafter B&D) study provides a useful starting point for framing our discussion since it adopted a marketing lens to identify two key social influence variables, group norms, and social identity, impacting virtual community participation. Using the social psychological model of goal-directed behavior (e.g., Perugini & Bagozzi, 2001) and social identity theory (e.g., Tajfel, 1978) as underlying frameworks, B&D conceptualized participation in virtual chat rooms as "intentional social action" involving the group. They modeled participants' "we-intentions," i.e., intentions to participate together as a group, to be a function of individual (i.e., attitudes, perceived behavioral control, positive, and negative anticipated emotions) and social determinants (i.e., subjective norms, group norms, and social identity).

Despite the insights derived from their theorizing and empirical analysis, the following two limitations of the B&D framework are noteworthy and provide the motivation for the present research. First, B&D viewed the social influence variables to be *exogenous constructs* in their framework, i.e., they did not consider the antecedents of either group norms or social identity, two important predictors in their model. Understanding the antecedents of social influence is important since it is likely to provide significant managerial guidance regarding how to make virtual communities useful and influential for their participants. Second, B&D's empirical study was limited to virtual chat rooms and did not consider or

elaborate on the distinctions between different types of virtual communities or their implications for marketers. Indeed, marketers have narrowly conceived of virtual communities as commercially sponsored bulletin-boards or chat rooms on company websites (e.g., Thorbjørnsen, Supphellen, Nysveen, & Pedersen, 2002; Williams & Cothrel, 2000; cf. Catterall & Maclaran, 2001). Addressing these limitations, our objectives in the present research are three-fold.

First, building upon the B&D (2002) framework, we develop a social influence model of consumer participation in virtual communities. Like B&D (2002), the central constructs in our model are group norms and social identity, but unlike B&D, we not only consider the antecedents of social influence, but also include such mediating constructs as mutual agreement and accommodation among group members. We draw upon existing communication research regarding the motivational drivers of media use (e.g., Flanagin & Metzger, 2001; McQuail, 1987), philosophical writings on group action (Bratman, 1997; Tuomela, 1995) and social psychological research on social identity (e.g., Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999; Tajfel, 1978) to develop our theoretical model.

Second, we present a marketing-relevant typology to conceptualize virtual communities within a firm's internet venues that makes and elaborates on the distinction between network- and small-group-based virtual communities. In doing so, we also make the conceptual distinction between the venue where the virtual community meets, and the networks or small groups of individuals constituting the community. In our survey-based study conducted across a broad range of virtual communities, our proposed model is supported. We also find virtual community type—network- or small-group-based—to be a moderator, influencing both, the reasons why members participate, and the strengths of their impacts on group norms and social identity.

Finally, we consider the implications of our framework and the distinction made between network- and small-group-based virtual communities, for marketing practice. We elaborate on some of the trade-offs that may be involved, and on issues that must be considered, when organizing and managing these two types of virtual communities effectively.

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