Virtual Community of Consumers: Why People are Willing to Contribute?

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Abstract

Nowadays, many commerce web sites have set up virtual community for their customers, which allow them to share information or knowledge for self-helping. Prior research studies show that the Virtual Self-Help Community (VSHC) is beneficial for both companies and consumers. Understanding consumers’ sharing behaviour in VSHC is critical for practitioners to encourage sharing. In this paper, we develop a model to examine how systems factors and self-motivation factors affect consumers’ attitude in contributing to a VSHC by integrating the theory of TAM and Helping theory.

Keywords: Virtual Community of Consumers, Knowledge Sharing, Motives to share

1. Introduction

Due to the revolution of the Internet, people are able to interact and exchange information and knowledge electronically without any physical contact. These interacting groups are called “Virtual Communities” (VCs). Among different types of VCs, community of interest and community of practice for instance, the Virtual Self-Help Community (VSHC) for consumers is set up mainly for consumer-to-consumer interactions. A pool of products or services related information could be shared among consumers for self-helping. Prior research studies indicated that both companies and consumers would be beneficial by introducing the VSHC. Customers always appreciate the VSHC because they can share and access to valuable information or knowledge with other customers. It acts like a solution pool where customers can find required information easily. At the same time, companies save cost and time when handling consumers’ enquiries (Gartner 2002). VSHC is also a good place to get feedback from customers (Vence 2002). Feedback, or so-called customer knowledge, is useful to customer knowledge management. It has been a popular marketing concept recently. It enhances organizational performance (e.g. innovation and organizational learning etc.) (Gibbert et al. 2002).

Despite the advantages VSHC brings, they do not guarantee a success. As Dixon (2000) argued, the successful functioning of a knowledge-sharing community relies on the active participation of members. Within a virtual community, two types of players are identified: seeker and contributor. Seekers look for advice or information, post questions and problems in the community, and they represent the demand side of knowledge sharing (Ardichili et al. 2003). These people are able to receive tangible rewards from the community. The contributors, on the other hand, stand for the supply side. They post knowledge entries and personal comments to answer seekers’ questions.

Seekers are always willing to participate and raise questions because they can get their problems solved and learn from others’ valuable experiences (Wasko et al. 2000). For contributors, most of the time, they contribute knowledge without receiving any tangible returns. In addition, they
have to spend time and effort to put their experiences online. An interesting question arises: why are consumers willing to contribute to the virtual community?

In the following sections, we will first describe briefly the VSHC and its values to both companies and individual consumers. Then, by integrating two theoretical models, we aim to provide explanations to contributors’ participation in the VSHC.

2. Virtual Self-Help Community for Consumers

Nowadays, many commercial websites have set up virtual community for their customers to interact with each other and discuss issues related to the products or services. There is no coherent term to describe such kind of virtual community. Some researchers regard them as “electronic commerce user communities” (Vence 2002; Tiwana et al. 2001) while others call them “virtual communities of consumption” (Kozinets 1998). To truly reflect the communication behavior among these people, users assist each other by answering specific questions without the involvement of any company staff, we refer it to the “Virtual Self-Help Community” for consumers. In this study, VSHC is defined as an electronic commerce site-specific community where users are self-helping with the topics related to the products or services offered on the site. A VSHC is public accessible and no user identity verification is required. It also belongs to virtual community of transactions because the discussion topics are associated with the pre-transaction and post-transaction information exchange and it resembles the discussion group communication structure which on-going give-and-take between participants is found (Hagel et al. 1997; Kollock et al. 1999).

2.1 VSHC’s Benefits to Organizations

An organization can receive many advantages by providing the VSHC for consumers. First, VSHC helps reducing cost and saving time when dealing with customers’ enquiries. Workload of customer service center is greatly reduced since most customers are able to find solutions on the VSHC (Vence 2002). In Gartner’s (2002) study, “fifteen to forty percent of call volume will move to the Internet as consistent, less-complex problem types are solves via self-service at the web site.”

Second, VSHC collects feedback from customers. Vence (2002) claimed that consumers are often better consultants and better advisers than the marketing consultants themselves. A company can analyze customer’s feedback and their wants and needs directly through the postings in the VSHC. With the popularity of customer knowledge management, companies have paid more attention to the knowledge from customers rather than the knowledge of the customers (traditional CRM). It has many benefits such as customer success, product innovation and organizational learning (Gibbert et al. 2002). VSHC provides a cost-effective medium for customer knowledge management, i.e. companies can easily capture and store knowledge from customers.

Third, positive endorsements from community users can help to promote a company by words of mouth advertising. According to a study related to Internet shopping, 62 percent of Internet purchasers found customer reviews and recommendations drive them to purchase online. From this finding, we know how powerful the customers’ words are. In fact, many research studies have shown that word-of-mouth communication plays an important role in shaping consumers’ attitudes and behaviors.
Fourth, the level of trust between customers and company increases and better customer relationship is built by demonstrating a willingness to be open about customers’ experiences (Vence 2002).

2.2 VSHC ‘s Benefits to Individual Users
With the virtual self-help community, consumers can freely post their problems or they can respond to others’ questions with their own experience. Thus, VSHC is acting as a medium for knowledge sharing between the community users. Nowadays, information cannot satisfy people, they demand knowledge. Access of knowledge rather than information overflow is always welcomed by customers. As a result, individual users get benefit from the VSHC, gain others’ experience or advices, and have their problems solved. Although weak ties relationship are formed within the VSHC (ties with people whom they do not know well) (Ardichvili et al. 2003), VSHC is inevitably a good place for self-helping. The theory of “the strength of weak ties” (Granovetter 1973) suggested, when looking for some advices or information, ideas from a pool of strangers could offer an advantage over friends and colleagues. In weak tie relationship, the group of people as well as their expertise is likely to be heterogeneous. This range of diversity helps to provide non-redundant advice and increases the completeness of a solution. Seeking solutions from experienced users is usually more efficient and effective.

3. Theoretical Models
In this section, two models from IS and psychology, namely Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and helping theory, are discussed. At the initial stage, whether or not people use the system is largely depends on their adoption of the technology. In the case of VSHC, if people adopt the virtual community; they are more likely to participate. Thus, we first apply theory of TAM to investigate how system factors affect people’s predisposition towards VSHC.

3.1 Technology Acceptance Model
From systems perspectives, Davis’s intention-based model (TAM) suggests that IS adoption can be predicted by perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. It is frequently applied to examine IT usage phenomenon and receives considerable empirical supports as well (e.g. Davis 1989; Davis 1993; Taylor et al. 1995). In TAM, perceived usefulness refers to “the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance” (Davis 1989). Perceived usefulness has consistently been found to have significant influence on IS adoption because the more positive a user believes in the technology is perceived useful to be, the more positive attitude towards such a technology and in turn, the stronger the behavioural intention will come to adopt the particular technology. Perceived ease of use refers to “the degree to which the prospective user expects the target system to be free of effort” (Davis 1989). It represents an individual’s self-efficacy and assessment that interacts with such technology will be effort free, easy to learn, use and operate.

Therefore, we propose:
Proposition 1: If the community member perceives the VSHC is useful, his/her positive attitude towards VSHC will be higher.
Proposition 2: If the community member perceives the VSHC is easy to use, his/her positive attitude towards VSHC will be higher.
Proposition 3: If the community member has a positive attitude towards VSHC, his/her intention to contribute will be higher.
3.2 Helping Theory

Even people has adopt the technology (i.e.VSHC), the systems factors alone, whether this community is easy to use and whether this community as a whole is useful to oneself, may not be sufficient to stimulate people’s contribution act. There must have some other motivation factors that initiate people’s contributions. To understand the question of “why are people willing to contribute?”, the Helping Theory from the psychology discipline can be used. It addresses the self-motivating factors that affect people’s attitudes towards contribution. From the social perspective of the helping behavior, Batson (1994) has distinguished four different motives: egoism, altruism, collectivism and principalism. Each of these motives is differentiated by different unique ultimate goals. The ultimate goals of egoism, altruism, collectivism and principalism are the increase of welfare of oneself, the increase of welfare of others, the prosocial acts contribute to the welfare of a group, and the uphold of moral principals respectively. Each of these goals influences people’s attitude towards their helping behavior. The Helping Theory is popular and has been used for years in explaining why people act for public goods, in other words, helping others. Hence, we adopted this theory in the context of VSHC for consumers. The contributors are actually acting for the public good, because they contribute their ideas or experience to increase the welfare of others. Thereby, they increase the total welfare of the community. Drawing from the four basic principles of the Helping Theory, our research model incorporates four specified self-motivation factors - expected intrinsic self-reward; expected enjoyment in helping; expected community welfare, and expected moral obligation- that pose effect on people’s attitude towards contributing to the VSHC for consumers.

Expected intrinsic self-reward is derived from the concept of Egoism. Egoism is the prosocial acts contribute to the welfare of oneself. People work for public goods because of one’s self-interest (Batson 1994; Vaughan et al. 2002). For example, the ultimate goal for contributors who expend a lot of energy in answering questions is to build their own reputation and identities within a community (Kollock et al. 1999) There are many different kinds of self-interest such as praise, reputation, and status. Previous research showed that the reason why people share their knowledge in the virtual community is because they can receive some intangible returns in the form of intrinsic satisfactions. For instance, they can show-off and gain status related to their professional position, they can enhance their self-efficacy and also they can receive the enjoyment in sharing (Wasko et al. 2000). Personal benefit such as self-respect is also used by Constant, Lee and Kiesler (1996) to explain why experts offer help through the medium of computer network even in the absence of personal acquaintance, similarity, or the likelihood of direct reciprocity. Moreover, people would have an expectation of getting useful advice and information in return for the future, which is so-call anticipated reciprocity. The more the intrinsic self-reward people believe they will receive, the more the positive attitude of contributing in VSHC. Therefore, we proposed,

Proposition 4: If the community member expects to receive intrinsic self-reward from his/her contribution, his/her positive attitudes towards contributing in VSHC will be higher.

Expected enjoyment in helping is derived from Altruism. Altruism is the prosocial acts that contribute to the welfare of others. That means people act for the public goods to benefit one or more others. This motivation is held in high esteem and enjoyment in helping (Batson, 1994;
Vaughan et al. 2002) For example, people may contribute their experience for a simple reason that they think someone needs it. This concept corresponds to their ultimate goal, strives for the benefits of others. (Kollock et al. 1999) Although Batson (1994) does not deny that even in altruism, self-benefits still exist, this self-interest is only the foundational and in very simple form. It may limit to the enjoyment of helping and self-esteem enhancement in demonstrating his or her own altruistic behavior (Kollock et al. 1999; Wasko et al. 2002). As Constant et al. (1994) and Jarvenpaa et al. (2000) concluded from their studies, people are more likely to exchange their knowledge for intangible returns such as self-esteem. The more the enjoyment in helping people they will have, the more positive attitude of contributing in VSHC. Hence, we postulate, 
Proposition 5: If the community member expects to receive enjoyment in helping from his/her contribution, his/her positive attitude towards contributing in VSHC will be higher.

Expected community welfare is derived from the principle of Collectivism. Collectivism is the prosocial acts contribute to the welfare of a group. People help because they get benefit out of the group (family, country etc.) (Batson 1994; Vaughan et al. 2002). In the context of VSHC, although the community provider is the company itself, members of the community would always have a sense of belongings or attachments towards the community. It is because VSHC is a place for them to meet and share experiences, important issues can be discussed, and useful information, and ongoing record of the group discussion can be displayed. (Kollock et al. 1999) Therefore, people may like to work for the benefits of the community in order to sustain the discussion. According to a study conducted by Wasko et al. (2000), the respondents reported that they participate in the knowledge exchange community because they think active participation would advance the community and benefit the community as a whole. The more the welfare people believe the community will get, the more positive attitude of contributing in VSHC. Accordingly, we have the sixth proposition,
Proposition 6: If the community member expects to increase the community welfare from his/her contribution, their positive attitude towards contributing in VSHC will be higher.

Expected moral obligation fulfilled is derived from Principalism. Principalism is the prosocial acts that follow moral principal (Batson 1994; Vaughan et al. 2002). That means people acting for the public goods because they would like to uphold some principals or obligation. For example, people who have received help or have got some useful information from the community in the past, they would feel obliged to contribute something they know. As Wasko et al. (2000) reported from their studies, people may feel obliged to contribute knowledge if they have adopted others’ suggestions from the VSHC in the past. In addition, as we mentioned above, people have attachments and commitments to the community (Kollock et al. 1999), they may feel obliged to contribute as a member in the community. In Wasko et al. (2000)’s study, the respondents reported that they had participated in the community because of moral obligation. They think it is a part of being a member in the community. The more the moral obligation people believe they will fulfill, the more positive attitudes of contributing in VSHC. Here, we come to the seventh proposition, 
Proposition 7: If the community member expects to fulfill moral obligation from his/her contribution, his/her positive attitudes towards contributing in VSHC will be higher.
Some motives (expected intrinsic reward and expected enjoyment in helping) not only have a direct effect on people’s attitude towards the VSHC, but also have an indirect effect through perceived usefulness. It is because such motives can be viewed as some kinds of benefits. If the community member believes there are benefits that could be received from the community, his/her perceived usefulness of the community would be higher. Thus, we come to the last two propositions,

**Proposition 8:** Expected intrinsic rewards would have an impact on community member’s attitude towards VSHC through perceived usefulness of the community.

**Proposition 9:** Expected enjoyment in helping would have an impact on community member’s attitude towards VSHC through perceived usefulness of the community.

The research model is summarized in figure 1 below.

4. **Research Design**
Survey research method will be use to collect data for testing our theoretical model. Due to the time and cost efficient of online survey, we will employ Internet questionnaire. We believe it will be easier to reach our target audience (online community users) through Internet because it is more difficult for us to have their mailing address. Our study is focus on the VSHC for consumers; we will select some relevant communities (such as the consumer forum of a particular mobile model) and send the participants an invitation via the community site. The name of the community will be asked in order to cluster the respondents and act as a control of the study. In addition, a screening question of respondent’s previous contribution frequency will be used to filter those non-contributors from contributors. Corresponding questions for each construct will be asked through the online questionnaire and the completed survey will automatically sent to the database for future analysis.

5. **Conclusions**
This study has advanced our understanding of the factors behind consumers’ contribution act to a VSHC. From our previous discussion, we noted that system factors (ease of use and usefulness) as well as self-motivation factors would have an effect on consumers’ intention towards contributing to a VSHC. It has both significant theoretical and managerial contributions. By integrating the theory of TAM from IS and the helping theory from psychology, we have built a conceptual framework in explaining the reason why people are willing to contribute their knowledge to a VSHC. We believed it is a useful starting work to understand the contribution behavior of consumer in a VSHC and considering the interesting issues raised by this study,
future research might extend the model. Also, this model can be act as theoretical foundation to examine why people are voluntarily shares their best information as well as knowledge in different types of virtual communities. Besides, this research has some important contributions to the practitioners. By understanding the contribution motives, it could help practitioners to design a better community for facilitating people’s sharing behavior. For instance, a unique identity or symbol can be provided to each participant so that they would be motivated to contribute for building their own reputations. A practical example can be demonstrated by the virtual consumer community of Amazon.com. It implemented an active feedback mechanism where members can give rating to other people’s contributions. In such a way, community members could feel an immediate reward from their contributions and hence increase their sharing motivations (Tiwans et al. 2001).

Virtual community of consumers is an important research area but is not well studied. To the best of my knowledge, it is the first such work focusing consumers’ sharing behavior in VSHC context. VSHC is not only a place for consumer sharing, but also could be a valuable asset to organizations. In order to cope with the competitive environment, organization should pay more attention to manage the knowledge from customers. Having the right understanding of contributors’ motives is the first step towards success of virtual consumer community. We look forward of future research studies on this area.

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