

The Critical Role of Community Relationships in Community Identification: Insights for Virtual Community Development

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ABSTRACT

Research objectives: This study aims to explore the realm of virtual community management and enrich the virtual community development literature by investigating the effects of strategic community management and the incorporation of community environmental mechanisms throughout various stages of virtual community evolution.

Methodology: The present study explores the environmental mechanism required within the business strategy to establish a tailored Virtual Brand Community (VBC). The present study first surveys the community literature and then introduces a horizontal developmental framework rooted in the management-relationship-behavior realm. This framework extends the research boundaries of consumer engagement in virtual community management and can aid in establishing vibrant and sustainable virtual communities.

Conclusions: Barger et al. (2016) called for research to identify “comprehensive frameworks related to all of the antecedents and consequences of consumer engagement on social media” (p. 281). Accordingly, the present study introduces four stages of development and expansion for virtual communities (i.e., recruitment, consolidation, elitist period, and partner period) while identifying relevant business strategies for virtual community moderators.

Implications: Interestingly, previous research on group identification has often overlooked the extent to which identification is constructed. An untapped potential is to illustrate customer relationship management in a virtual community, which may help entrepreneurs, especially those seeking to build a vibrant and sustainable virtual community. Additional implications are presented for the virtual community moderators’ consideration.

Limitations: There lacks an empirical component to examine the extent to which variables such as level of education, native language, religion, and culture may help explain the engagement of the virtual community. These limitations present possibilities for future research to explore.

JEL Classification: M2, M3

Keywords: community identification behavior; virtual community expansion; virtual community management; virtual community relationships

I. INTRODUCTION

Innovative technology continues to revolutionize markets. The advent of the Internet, social media, and mobile technology has granted consumers unparalleled sources and avenues for information. Today, interactive communication platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Periscope, Instagram, WeChat, Line, and various other social media channels offer live broadcasting options. To distinguish themselves from competitors, marketers must navigate through the cacophony and leave an enduring impact on customers (Kumar and Reinartz, 2016).

The Virtual Community (VC) has evolved into a platform that facilitates the process of value co-creation. The concept of value co-creation, emphasized by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2003), underscores the significance of partnerships between companies and their consumers to yield value. A community of like-minded users with a solid emotional bond can contribute to the value of a corporate-sponsored community (Chiu et al., 2006). Despite its potential benefits, the Virtual Community (VC) has yet to fully exploit its advantages. One underlying reason is the potential gap between virtual community members' needs and community priorities, which can impact individuals' expression of community identification behavior. This gap underscores the necessity of utilizing emotional bonds to establish shared values while developing community relationships.

Many consumers engage in virtual communities to alleviate loneliness, connect with like-minded peers, and obtain social support (McKenna and Bargh, 1999; Wellman and Gulia, 1999). Businesses can enhance their websites or Facebook pages with relevant content to resonate with their target customers and guide online activities toward their objectives. Nowadays, the Internet has evolved into a popular avenue for social interaction, especially with the emergence of Web 2.0, commonly referred to as the Social Web. Web 2.0 communities strive to achieve economies of scale through participation, interaction, and content sharing.

Developing and maintaining a virtual Consumer-to-Consumer (C2C) community shares similarities with nurturing any virtual community that fosters the individuality of a group and promotes information sharing within a co-creation ecosystem. Nonetheless, limited research has delved into this process. In reality, users constitute the very fabric of the community, making it imperative to explore further how to strike a balance between accumulating relational capital and meeting user needs while progressing group relationships in a virtual context.

The advancements in virtual technology have empowered various industries to adopt e-commerce and mobile commerce within their business models, placing customer orientation at the forefront of the marketing world. Network platform administrators (referred to as "admins" or "moderators") must be capable of keeping pace with the evolving needs and expectations of their users, as the success of an industry hinges on this adaptability. For a virtual community moderator, the challenge lies in constructing a dynamic and thriving community from the ground up. This undertaking involves attracting users and fostering interactions among community members, akin to the notion that "it takes a village to raise a child."

For a virtual community to flourish, it is essential to establish a transparent operational structure and a wholesome social environment. However, community management must align with the stages of community development and the socio-

economic context. Consequently, this study enhances virtual community literature through strategic community management and the implementation of community environmental mechanisms throughout various stages of virtual community evolution.

Barger et al. (2016) conducted a review of consumer engagement literature and proposed that consumer engagement could be effectively delineated as “reacting to, commenting on, sharing, and posting user-generated content” (p. 280). They pinpointed several areas warranting future investigation, such as delving into the underlying significance of commenting and sharing. Additionally, these authors called for research to identify “comprehensive frameworks related to all of the antecedents and consequences of consumer engagement on social media” (p. 281).

The present study not only echoes Barger et al.’s perspectives (2016) outlined above but also introduces a horizontal developmental framework rooted in the management-relationship-behavior realm. This framework extends the research boundaries of consumer engagement. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the significance of adopting a temporal perspective that encompasses the connection between development stages and relationship bonds (see Table 1), which will be illustrated in Section IV. This perspective can aid in establishing vibrant and sustainable virtual communities.

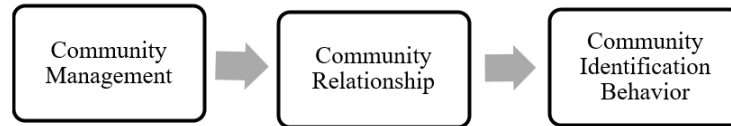
Considering the perspective mentioned above and the research gap concerning relationship bonds and virtual communities, the present study initially delved into the connections between management strategies and the accumulation of resources for online platform administrators and community users. Subsequently, leveraging the context of virtual community relationships, the study explored how group dynamics contribute to fulfilling individual needs and examined the impacts of diverse management strategies. Finally, in pursuit of understanding the ultimate purpose of community identification behavior, the study investigated aspects such as information sharing and value co-creation, while analyzing the causal relationships that arise from community interactions.

Table 1
Four Stages of Virtual Community Development and Expansion

Virtual Community Development		Community Management			Community Relationship		Community Identification Behavior
Stage	Relation Bonds	Management Strategy	Community Environment	Cumulative Capital	Group Relationship	Individual Demand	Activity or Behavior
Recruitment	Financial Bond	Member Reward	Institution	Financial	Dependency Reciprocal	Existence Relatedness	Information Sharing
Consolidation	Social Bond	Virtual Platform	Continuous	Social	Dependency Reciprocal Commitment	Existence Relatedness Growth	
Elitist	Customization Bond	Instant Response	Uniqueness	Knowledge	Commitment Trust	Growth Transcendence	Value Co-Creation
Partner	Structural Bond	Network Embeddedness	Participation	Innovation	Dependency Reciprocal Commitment Trust	Existence Relatedness Growth Transcendence	

Note: The suggested four stages of virtual community development and expansion are grounded in the diverse community relationships discussed within this paper.

Figure 1
Three Dimensions of an Online Community



With this research, our aspiration is for platform administrators and virtual community moderators to adeptly apply well-suited management strategies, nurturing lasting community bonds and yielding favorable results in cultivating virtual communities.

II. COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT/CREATION

A community is comprised of individuals with shared interests (Shafer, 1999). Moreover, a community creates a co-dependent organization. The online/virtual community not only permits interaction and sharing of information amongst their online group but also brings a sense of community citizenship together with an understanding that formed the group (Romm et al., 1997). The term, “identification” is a key element in the development of a community (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Norms, rituals, and goals that are agreed upon by the community form its “identity” (Bhattacharya et al., 1995). Also, the active involvement of the members in the community’s activities brings further benefits to the community as a whole. Knowledge exchange and experience-sharing are vital aspects that strengthen community identification.

New Community Management refers to the expansion of virtual communities, wherein individuals continuously engage in public discussions, which is effective in establishing communication between them and creating social networks in the digital world (Rheingold, 1993). The Internet has instigated an immense change within the world of marketing. The traditional 4P marketing mix (Product, Promotion, Price, and Place) seems to be inadequate for current marketing trends; thus, the consumer-centric 4C marketing mix (Consumer value, Cost to satisfy, Convenience to buy, and Communication) was proposed (Lauterbor, 1990; Smith, 2003). In an online environment, social media can enhance the 4C marketing mix through relevant online content, affective context, relationship development, and community engagement. Focusing on attractive and relevant content is the direct way to keep viewers’ attention without making them feel like they are sitting through a sales pitch. Figallo (1998) suggested that community management should be designed to provide a sense of connectivity and comfort, so that people will return regularly. Exactly because of this, minimal dissimilarities in the management, interactions, and contents, it must be created in order to stand out from the rest and sustain its success.

Establishing a strong connection and beneficial relationship online is essential (Hagel and Armstrong, 1997). The system design of online businesses should emphasize instant interaction between the system and the consumers, while being user-friendly, which can uphold the force that balances the internet community. For instance, when group administrators have trendy topics or have interesting subject matters to share with the virtual community members, and combine that with chat interactions relating to that

topic such as comments, reviews, and advertisements. The topics chosen for engagement must align with the preferences of the group members. Jones (1997) also proposed that community management must emphasize the development of interpersonal relationships and social behaviors, and must encourage users to become actively involved in the community; therefore, strategies for community management should focus on developing strong interpersonal relationships among users and avoid the controversial message that may offend their audience. The Pepsi ad featuring Kendall Jenner in 2017 is a recent example of an ad that was pulled shortly after release due to public concerns that it trivialized social causes such as Black Lives Matter.

A. Management Strategy and Relationship Capital for Relationship Bonds

The foundation for relationship marketing involves the bonds that connect enterprises and customers. These bonds can be economic, psychological, emotional, or physical dependence developed through interactive relationships, closely linking members under relationship exchange (McCall, 1970). Previous studies have shown that building relationships to retain customers can be made through some forms of relationship bonds (Berry, 1995; Perry et al., 2002; Wilson, 1995; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000). Scholars also pointed out that the relationship bond affects customer loyalty or future relationship. This means that the higher the degree of relationship bond within the community, the higher the degree of identification the administrators will obtain; therefore, the development of a strong community is based on the bond between its members. This bond is built on the foundation of relationship capital, which is created and accumulated through interactions between community administrators and users. Capital is considered any tangible or intangible resources (e.g., financial and human resources) invested in the production process. Different types of relationship capital can result from different management strategies. Therefore, before developing a community relationship, it is essential to establish a strong embedded relationship among management strategy, capital characteristics, and related capital patterns.

B. Membership Rewards and Financial Capital for Financial Bonds

Berry (1995) suggested that enterprises can enhance customer relationships by creating financial bonds. This concept is consistent with the notion that enterprises often build relationships with customers via financial incentives (Palmatier et al. 2006). The use of social influencers to promote products or services is another example of financial bonding. Indeed, Instagram pays approximately \$1,000 per post to social influencers with 100,000 followers (Chen, 2017).

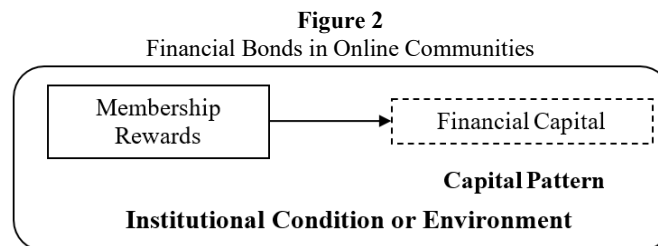
Offering price incentives and attractive pricing deals can motivate customers to increase their spending on an enterprise's products and services, ultimately cultivating repeat business. Further, loyal customers are more likely to identify with the companies' products and services and will have higher levels of trust and commitment toward the enterprise or the brand (Parasuraman et al., 1991). Kotler and Kotler (2000) also pointed out that enterprises can use high-frequency marketing programs and club marketing financial bond methods, such as a rewards program, to enhance corporate interests. High-frequency marketing programs provide financial benefits to visitors who visit frequently. When frequent visitors accumulate a certain number of credits, they are qualified for a

complimentary upgrade or free products or services. This incentive allows businesses to build and maintain a lasting relationship with their customers.

Based on the above discussions, membership rewards can be an effective marketing strategy, especially for communities with high-frequency users, even without financial incentives. The administrators of the virtual communities frequently offer people business proposals, which can encourage their interest in remaining loyal to the community. By utilizing this business tactic, many individuals may be motivated to do more business with the community to enjoy certain privileges. Furthermore, offering rewards or benefits to users can strengthen the relationship between online users and community administrators. In practical application, financial incentives that attract customers can be easily imitated, and maintaining customer loyalty can be challenging since customers can be fickle in abandoning established brands and switching to a competing brand with more favorable incentives (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000). For example, in order to build a loyal customer base, a co-branded credit card by Citi and Costco allows credit card users to earn cash-back rewards on every purchase. Virtual community moderators may establish a loyal customer base with an attractive bonus-earning program too. To prevent increasing transaction cost, the membership reward programs must be financially sustainable (from the virtual community administrator's perspective) and attractive (from the members' perspective). Once users terminate their relationship in the community, all financial capital that has been accumulated will become useless because this unilateral behavior violates the agreement from both sides; therefore, based on financial bonds, this study argues that membership rewards are an important management strategy in virtual communities to enhance financial capital under institutional condition or environment (see Figure 2).

C. Virtual Platform and Social Capital for Social Bonds

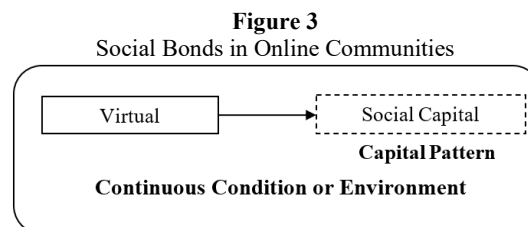
Berry (1995) described social bonds as personal relationship bonds formed through social interaction, where sellers build relationships with their consumers via attractive products/services. Social bonds involve friendship developed between sellers and their consumers through shared preferences and common values (Wilson, 1995). This allows enterprises to understand their customers' needs, develop long-term relationships with them, and promote customer loyalty. Consequently, customers feel a sense of appreciation towards the company, urging them to continue patronizing the company's products and services. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) proposed that social capital helps companies obtain diverse and necessary information and resources through relationship networks; however, the use of social capital can only be enhanced when multi-party interactive relationship networks become the norm within the virtual community.



As employees and loyal customers are a brand's most prominent marketing asset, a significant part of community-building is understanding the central theme and goals of the virtual community. This understanding enables one to assist virtual community moderators/administrators in moving the business forward and achieving their goals. An environment with a member-friendly cooperative atmosphere is a key factor that needs to be identified for social bonds to form within a community. Administrators need to provide an opportunity or create an appropriate environment for consumers to use for daily activities. A virtual platform will not only overcome limitations in geography, time, and social participation but will also allow community members to engage in a two-way interaction to form healthy relationships among other members. Perry et al. (2002) also indicated that for a social bond to develop, it needs both time and effort; thus, continuity is necessary when social bonds are used as a managerial strategy. The present study proposes that virtual communities may have a useful and simple platform for providing the user in gaining knowledge and information in the form of imageries and articles all over the world. This study will also allow people to continuously monitor the information they share online. Through the media platform, users could be both recipients of information and contributors as they may express what they feel concerning a particular brand (Woisetschläger et al., 2008). In addition, people can choose the type of network platform (e.g., with or without live streaming services) that will suit their needs to receive and send messages in a persistent environment or condition. Nowadays, the public is tired of paid and owned advertising, and consumers are more interested in user-generated genuine content. As earned media is poised to have an increasingly important impact, the social capital element cannot be ignored if a virtual community moderator would like to grow the community. The diagram for social bonds is shown in Figure 3.

D. Instant Response and Knowledge Capital for Customization Bonds

Zeithaml and Bitner (2000) stated that enterprises could use customization bonds to form a deeper relationship with their consumers after social bonds are established. Customization bonds can be established when companies provide products or services that are individualized or customized to the needs and demands of their customers (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000). The interactive social relationship for knowledge sharing is formed through knowledge acquisition and sharing (Hansen, 2002); therefore, customization bonds are formed when companies can understand customers' needs and provide customized products and services in accordance with their needs. Customization bonds, including mass customization and accurate prediction of emerging needs/trends, could help build customer loyalty and establish customer intimacy. For businesses, the customization bond must be flexible and organized in providing individualized products to create an intimate relationship with their customers.



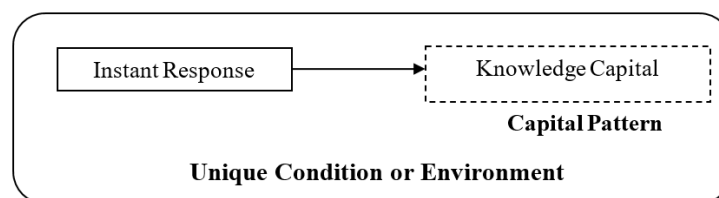
To effectively manage a virtual community, administrators should build strong connections with its users through customization. Being customer-oriented is essential because any issues that arise in the virtual community need to be resolved promptly and effectively. “Instant response” refers to a type of communication technology that permits users to send and receive messages and see who is currently online to receive notifications (Cameron and Webster, 2005). If instant responses are not acquired, users tend to leave the community and switch to a more responsive channel. This situation will affect knowledge acquisition and diffusion, which becomes unfavorable to knowledge sharing and accumulation. The innovation of knowledge should arise from a person’s interpersonal interaction (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Organizational participants can create innovative knowledge through good communication, which further stimulates new knowledge; therefore, this study proposes that customization bonds develop when administrators can provide instant responses to gain knowledge capital under unique conditions or environment (see Figure 4).

E. Network Embeddedness and Innovation Capital for Structural Bonds

A structural bond is an enterprise-level bond (Venetis and Ghauri, 2004), developed through similarities in structure, management, or institutionalized rules. Common structural bonds involve products and services embedded in the company’s information technology architecture. This study explores the structural bonds between website moderators and fans as a socially constructed and socially embedded process. This allows companies to provide individualized and diversified services through information technology management, establishing a link with customers through the information equipment. The process and equipment sharing can further promote the development of relationships through the mutual sharing of process, experience, and equipment; therefore, systems and technology (such as electronic data exchange) can enhance the interactive relationship of organizations among each other.

Further, a close relationship can be formed when organizations can provide and share psychological, legal, and material support. This can be a strong foundation for organizations to improve their relationships with customers and reduce the likelihood of customers shifting to other competitors. To form and maintain structural bonds, administrators must keep the resources favorable to both the business and the virtual community members, which helps prevent customers from switching to other competitors.

Figure 4
Customization Bonds

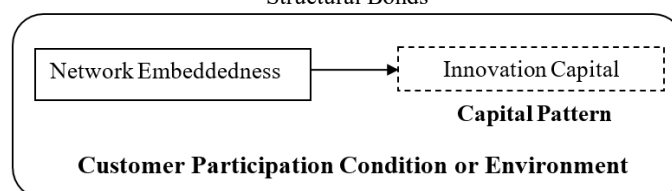


Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2003) suggested that the co-creation of shared values can be achieved by allowing users to join administrators in constructing their individual user experience, transforming passive participation into active participation, thereby accumulating innovation capital. Utilizing technology transfer aids businesses in acquiring knowledge and effectively integrating internal and external knowledge as sources of innovation (Leonard-Barton, 1995). When knowledge is utilized as innovation capital, embeddedness is used to keep the capital within the network community. Based on the social network theory, “embeddedness” is the tendency of users to still include themselves in a specific link to produce and restore increased relations in a period (Baker and Faulkner, 2002; Granovetter, 1992). When comparing “embedded” ties with “arm’s length” ties, the former can foster trust, facilitate extensive information exchange, and possess superior problem-solving capabilities (Uzzi, 1996). Communicating through groups creates knowledge that results in the innovation of knowledge within the organization, called the multiplier effect (Kogut and Zander, 1992; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). When there is a more significant investment in the relationship, a closer relationship is likely to be established, which concentrates on both parties for them to remain the connection (Venetis and Ghauri, 2004; Pinnington and Scanlon, 2009). The aspect of the embeddedness of the network is constructed through models of customer participation, innovation capital, and structural bonds (see Figure 5). Structural bonds matter in a virtual environment, too, as online social networks are a novel extension of the human group in which people “relate, think and exchange experiences” (Litterio et al., 2017).

F. Community Relationship and Joining Motivations

A virtual community allows people to interact and connect with the virtual world using the Internet, creating social aggregates and forming relationships (Rheingold, 1993). Many people have their own reasons and motivations for joining online groups (McKenna and Green, 2002). Users seek social support in order to maintain their relationship with the community (Wellman, 2005). Social support involves available assistance from other people, including affective support, positive interactions, and practical support when the need arises. A community relationship is the model of social interaction (Mayall, 1994). A community relationship is formed when many individuals aim to have a mutual and certain purpose. Based on the above viewpoints, community relationship includes the means or strategies administrators can utilize to develop relationships among individuals and the group as a whole, satisfying individual needs.

Figure 5
Structural Bonds

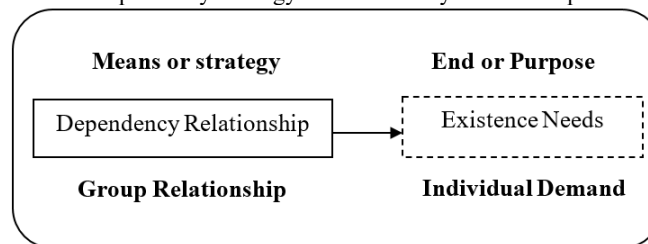


G. Dependency Relationship for Existence Needs

A dependency relationship exists when members of the organization are contingent on each other in achieving a particular objective, thus increasing profit. Members also experience a greater sense of identification with the group due to their pursuit of shared objectives (Gundlach and Cadotte, 1994). Because of this, neither party can be easily replaced due to long-term dependence. Furthermore, both parties collaborate as partners through benefit-sharing, which is mutually beneficial and interdependent (Moody, 1992). Users can gain friends and expand social interaction through social networks, which link all participants together (Ellison et al., 2007); therefore, users can easily focus on the information they receive, increasing dependence on network platforms. Also, people may develop behavioral dependence and psychological dependence on the programs on the Internet (Rasmussen, 2000). All material and physiological desires result from the existence of needs, including welfare, remuneration, and the demand in operating situations. YouTube is an important search engine and only growing in popularity. What people used to do on the blog platform is now done via vlogs on YouTube, namely content marketing that builds trust, liking, and popularity. For instance, if a group hugely relies on a specific association, they will tend to highly absorb the plans and strategies of that association (Yilmaza et al., 2005). When users are dependent on a community, leaving it would mean the loss of resources such as material benefits and mental information, which result in the deprivation of basic existence needs.

In summary, when users understand and identify better provided with the knowledge of a particular program, users will still be focused on that program, having an increased curiosity. Moreover, the information helps in developing a reliance connection. Internal drives are what generate our needs. In a dependency relationship, the existence of needs implies that an individual is concerned with salary, physical working supplies, and fringe profits. Because these are long-term concerns, when users perceive that they can gain resources from the platform, they will feel interested and will be reluctant to leave the platform. This results in users becoming dependent on the platform to meet their needs. This study argues that administrators can utilize dependency relationships to satisfy the existence needs of users and keep up with the ever-changing customer needs (see Figure 6).

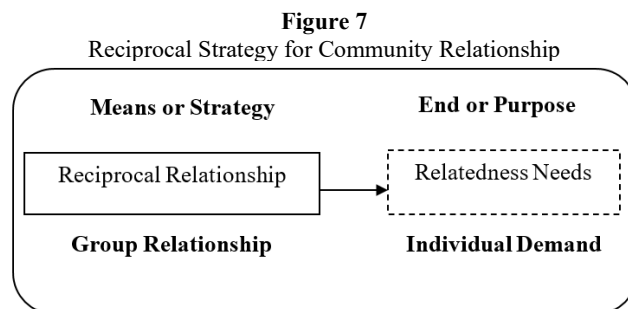
Figure 6
Dependency Strategy for Community Relationship



H. Reciprocal Relationship for Relatedness Needs

The reciprocal relationship usually implies that both parties can attain a good consensus and value during negotiation. Based on Alderfer's (1969) viewpoint, a relationship need is constituted through reciprocal sharing of thoughts and feelings or exchanging information with others. When users participate in community activities by expressing their personal feelings, they expect other users or administrators to respond. This becomes a two-way interaction between the users and the administrators or other users instead of only getting resources from the community. When a society has good communication and interaction between its members, its followers can have a common objective and cooperatively strive for the highest profit (Gundlach and Cadotte, 1994). Members will also feel a greater sense of identification with the community when common goals are attained. Administrators employ reciprocation to satisfy relatedness needs to attract users to use their products; therefore, greater interaction is reached. Furthermore, since the basis of the reciprocal relationship is an optimistic interaction, exchanging feelings, as well as opinions with each other for their needs to be satisfied, is a successful way to develop mutual connections.

Relatedness needs involve gaining inspiration by receiving respect and adoration from a loved one. Most often satisfied through shared feelings and reciprocated understanding. When both parties view their relationship with the community as critical, administrators tend to be more helpful in providing their users with improved and more beneficial information on a product or generous compensation. When users are satisfied with the rewards and the services provided, it will result in the willingness to share knowledge received from managers with the users that are significant; thus, they can also have equal returns. This study argues that administrators can utilize reciprocal relationships as a strategy to develop a community relationship to satisfy relatedness needs and to encourage participation in community activities (see Figure 7).

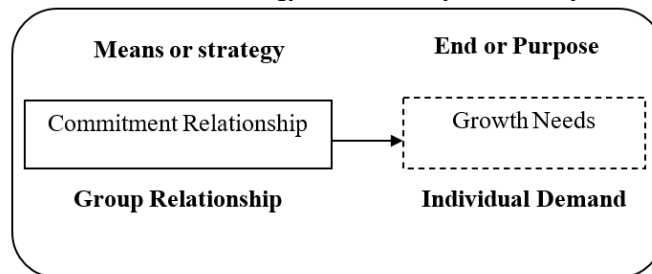


I. Commitment Relationship for Growth Needs

A relationship that is committed and preserved between two parties is called a committed relationship. Joining the virtual community is an unpremeditated action (Meyer and Allen, 1991). A commitment relationship enhances the volunteerism of its people, concentrating their efforts by improving performance and maintaining a strong commitment to the community. Moreover, the commitment itself will lead one to interact with other members. Based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-actualization represents the ultimate stage in an individual's progression toward fulfilling their highest level of needs, such as their distinct objectives and individuality, the realization of their highest potentiality, and helping other people. As the community agrees to maintain communal relationships, the community develops its growth needs. Individual growth needs are perceived as limitless; thus, a commitment can be used as a way to help achieve specific goals.

A person's desire to develop his/her career is associated with the growth needs in Maslow's model. The "growth needs" motivate an individual to pursue proficient achievement by acquiring knowledge, overpowering trials, and making changes. A committed association built on trust is when both are willing to have unchanging support with each other continuously. Having that support, people will stipulate their personal supplies, become fully aware of their potential, constantly advance in every period of development, learn from each other, and continue to have a good connection with other people. Those who engage with social media brand communities are more likely to show higher levels of trust, commitment, satisfaction, emotional bonding, and loyalty to the brand (Brodie et al., 2013). Investigating consumer sentiment and customer behavior via social media can help the website administrator be in the community members' shoes and turn those research insights into action that can improve everything from marketing campaigns to new service development. This study argues that administrators should nurture a strong commitment as a strategy for community relationships to satisfy the needs of individuals for growth (see Figure 8).

Figure 8
Commitment Strategy for Community Relationship

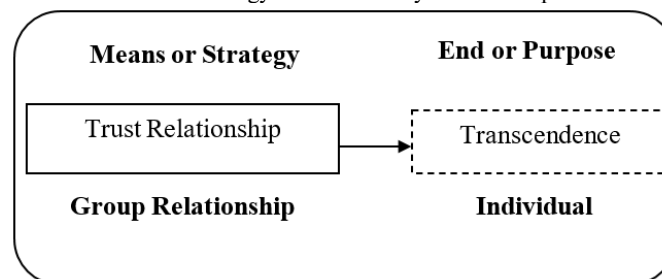


J. Trust Relationship for Transcendence Needs

Trust can be described as the assurance of the people in having an excellent consistency of services (Garbarino and Johnson, 1999). It also reflects the level of confidence and sincerity that both parties have toward their relationship with each other (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Users' trust is affected by the source and the contents of the information (Frewer et al., 1996). Virtual platforms with numerous advertisements or poor layouts can greatly reduce users' trust (Sillence et al., 2004); on the other hand, those materials containing an emphasis of one's personal experiences are trusted easily (Bordia and Rosnow, 1998). Moreover, social trust affects the actions of the theory of embeddedness. As the person trusts someone, it fosters a sense of identification (Granovetter, 1992). A trusted connection with each other develops transcendence needs. Transcendence involves an individual's search for meaning; it shifts the attention away from the "self" and towards the association, emphasizing an individual's existence and connecting with other people as well as the environment (James, 1985). Self-transcendent persons are at their happiest as they dedicate themselves to other people, with self-sacrifice being their highest achievement (Karasu, 1999; DeHoff, 1998).

In summary, when a close association is established between community administrators and their followers, a trust relationship ensues. That is, administrators and followers can feel a sense of belongingness, similar to being a member of an extended family or a community. As the bond of having resources is produced, it fulfills the transcendence needs. To achieve transcendence, followers must think, act, and behave like an administrator and must devote themselves to their community. Through shared assets, they can work with each other in creating an innovation to achieve transcendence. This study argues that administrators can build a trust relationship as a strategy for virtual community relationships to satisfy the transcendence needs of individuals by providing complementary resources to achieve the community's goals (see Figure 9).

Figure 9
Trust Strategy for Community Relationship



K. Community Identification Behavior

Identification is individuals see themselves as part of a community. However, the notion of community identification originated after identifying an organization (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). As people recognize that they belong to a group, community identification emerges. Ahearne et al. (2005) suggested that as individuals classify themselves as members of a community, they will participate in community activities, make commendations grounded by proficient experience in helping explain uncertainties of their associates, as well as endorse the community to other individuals for them to have own profits and of the group. People participate in community activities by sharing information using social means like electronic mail and discussion groups, for which they have a sturdy bond with the community's objectives (Rheingold, 1993). Moreover, group communications further promote their place in society because it makes them feel that they have a responsibility concerning their obligation to achieve the goal of the community (Coleman, 1994). Based on the above viewpoints, an individual who has a strong sense of identification in a specific community will have two types of interactions within the community, namely: information sharing and co-creation. Information sharing involves an individual providing personal recommendations or information obtained from others to solve the queries of community members. Consequently, co-creation involves an individual directly participating in community activities, such as endorsing the community to non-members, which enhances their responsibility toward their obligation to the group.

L. Information-Sharing

Information sharing involves individuals acquiring and sharing information with other people. The Internet provides opportunities for conveying knowledge to the virtual community (Erdelez and Rioux, 2000; Talja, 2002). For that reason, information sharing has developed a significant behavior in a group. Because sharing of information is all over the Internet (Rioux, 2005), this has progressively evolved into an addiction that causes reliance. The sharing of information is valuable in forming relations (Bao and Bouthillier, 2007). Furthermore, the whole organization of having an information behavior norm that is cooperative helps to create and maintain relationships amongst individuals (Talja and Hansen, 2006); allowing Internet users to have extreme interactivity as well as establishing good social relations.

Through sharing, good relationships within the network can be created and preserved. It can foster trust and friendliness among members. According to Sonnenwald (2006), everyday communications create trust in which individuals get used to sharing information with people they are familiar. Nevertheless, through experiences and sharing, both parties benefit from each other (Talja, 2002). Therefore, if a virtual community administrator's purpose is to improve an individual's willingness to share information, it's crucial to have a deep understanding of the provocations and communications in social relations to encourage people to share, be contingent, and trust the platforms which will influence to have a more effective way in sharing information.

M. Value Co-Creation

The participation of users who implant some of the value they extract from a product is referred to as co-creation (Auh et al., 2007). Co-creation has to be expressive and beneficial, but the managers of the virtual community need a more extended period to motivate the group followers to be a part of their purpose. According to Etgar and Rachman-Moore (2008), co-creation entirely covers the cooperation of partners as well as its users. Consequently, it has been commonly applied in many kinds of business settings like finance, cosmetics, medication, and tactical partnerships in transferring technology (Auh et al., 2007).

There are three main reasons users may be willing to engage in co-creation and knowledge sharing: mutual benefits, reputation, and altruism (Davenport and Prusak, 1998). Nevertheless, knowledge-sharing must be voluntary. For users to willingly participate in co-creation, virtual community administrators should focus on four key behaviors: inspiring communication between users, organizing user groups, being in control of the variety of users, and promoting individual user experiences in co-creation (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000). In sum, virtual community administrators should organize activities on their online platforms to develop a sense of dependency and reciprocity among community members, promoting users' understanding of commitment through these activities. These community-building activities foster a typical trust among parties, which results in successful co-creation. When members of a virtual community feel connected and invested in the success of the community as a whole, they are more likely to engage in co-creation and work together to achieve shared goals.

III. THE EFFECTS OF COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT ON COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

This study investigated four dimensions of community management which are: (1) membership rewards, (2) virtual community, (3) instant response, and (4) network embeddedness. As close interactions among clients and managers of the virtual community are present, those four dimensions are applied to further improve relationships, the status of the group's programs, and the participation of their users.

A. The Effects of Membership Rewards on Community Relationships

Parasuraman et al. (1991) noted that people will continue interacting with Internet community administrators or will be more willing to re-patronize if they receive high value-added rewards or returns. When users can regularly participate in virtual groups, the platform of the community can be stable. Though administrators use the membership structure to recognize their users' necessities and thoughts, they can reward them for their consumption. This strategy enhances the constructive response of their clients regarding the managers and helps them achieve improved outcomes and status. Virtual community administrators can utilize membership rewards to promote a mutual connection with their clients. Furthermore, as the rewards that are provided are sufficient to meet the needs of the users, they will have an increased willingness to continue interacting with the managers, which will foster to have relationship interdependency.

B. The Effects of Virtual Community on Community Relationships

This study considers that users can share various types of information in the form of information and group discussions within the online world. They can likewise share their experiences or share ideas concerning particular products. Nowadays, most information can be obtained from the Internet; and Internet users impart this information. The sharing of information is simplified within the virtual community. Therefore, the virtual community introduces an appropriate and substance-filled place to interact and exchange information, rendering many people acquiring and sharing information through virtual groups. This means that dependency relationships and simple reciprocal norms exist amongst people as well as the continued existence of the communities is ensured due to interactive and mutually beneficial relationships.

C. The Effects of Instant Response on Community Relationships

Instant response software enables an interactively synchronized virtual structure among of a group of persons that acknowledges the individuality of every people (Cameron and Webster, 2005). It gives the clients helpful advice regarding the difficulties they encounter. As administrators of the virtual community apply the most straightforward method in grouping their users and keep individualized responses based on their needs, problem-solving and delivery of solutions will become efficient and effective. Furthermore, the instant response can help users rapidly receive adequate replies or solutions, unlike other standardized methods of responses. In addition, it creates a positive experience in the community and cultivates trust toward the community's administrators, which would result in loyal membership and continued consumption. It can be inferred that an instant response has an affirmative outcome which is contingent, mutual, and trust.

D. The Effects of Network Embeddedness on Community Relationships

This study considers that network embeddedness is a significant foundation for determining the value of the online world. It's easy to make a small purchase without ever talking to another person, but making a big-ticket purchase requires advice and recommendations from experienced users. Consequently, a virtual community with active discussions is more likely to attract a healthy number of participants and grow, as big-ticket purchases often require advice and recommendations from experienced users.

Network platform administrators must promote communication among participants in enhancing the embeddedness of the network. This action creates a greater user fondness regarding the online world as well as increases sharing of knowledge and user updates (Yli-Renko et al., 2001). Moreover, the embeddedness of the network will help clients in benefitting from each other through information exchanges, which in turn will generate a sense of dependence among them.

E. The Effects of Community Relationships on Community Identification

We categorize virtual community development along a Four Stage Model of Virtual Community Relationships: (1) dependency relationship, (2) reciprocal relationship, (3)

commitment relationship, and (4) trust relationship. Interpersonal interactions and communication form relationships; however, there are several stages and different levels of intimacy in developing relationships.

F. The Effects of Dependency Relationships on Community Identification

Network platforms permit clients more accessible access to sending or receiving messages and keep their members' attentiveness regarding information. Regular Internet use can lead to a behavioral and psychological dependence on the programs (Rasmussen, 2000). This dependence can foster a sense of value within the community, encouraging cooperation between administrators and users in the sharing of technology and resources. Both the community administrators and the users distinguish the cooperative correlation that it cannot be changed (Smith and Barclay, 1999); thus, if the administrators of the community aim to encourage their clients in co-creation, community activities must be organized on network platforms to develop a sense of dependency. Dependence is an antecedent factor that facilitates the formation of a long-lasting supportive relationship between both parties (Heide, 1994).

G. The Effects of Reciprocal Relationships on Community Identification

This study acknowledges that sharing feelings, thoughts, and messages with the targeted members of the virtual community almost always yields appropriate feedback. Reciprocity and cooperation, instead of individualized behavior, are the basis of the sharing of information; thus, members frequently share similar purposes and involve themselves in such events. Also, the strengthened connection will further influence their behavior in sharing information (Bao and Bouthillier, 2007). As the group members have reached a consensus regarding expected benefits, it leads to affirmative communication with interactions.

H. The Effects of Commitment Relationships on Community Identification

This study posits that the familiarity among community members and their comprehension of the group will result in increasingly greater and more extended interactions. Li et al. (2006) mentioned that commitment comes from previous communications and information sharing with virtual groups, arising from their willingness to participate. Sustained attention to the given information of the society helps its followers sustain a secure bond with the administrators through good collaboration. Generally, both parties must be prepared to sustain this valuable relationship.

I. The Effects of Trust Relationships on Community Identification

This study considers that trust is produced through constant information sharing between two parties. Through trust, common understanding and goals are reached, which further enhances this valuable relationship through shared behaviors. Furthermore, cooperative information sharing supports interpersonal connection within the entire community. It also enables community members to interact more and establish good interpersonal

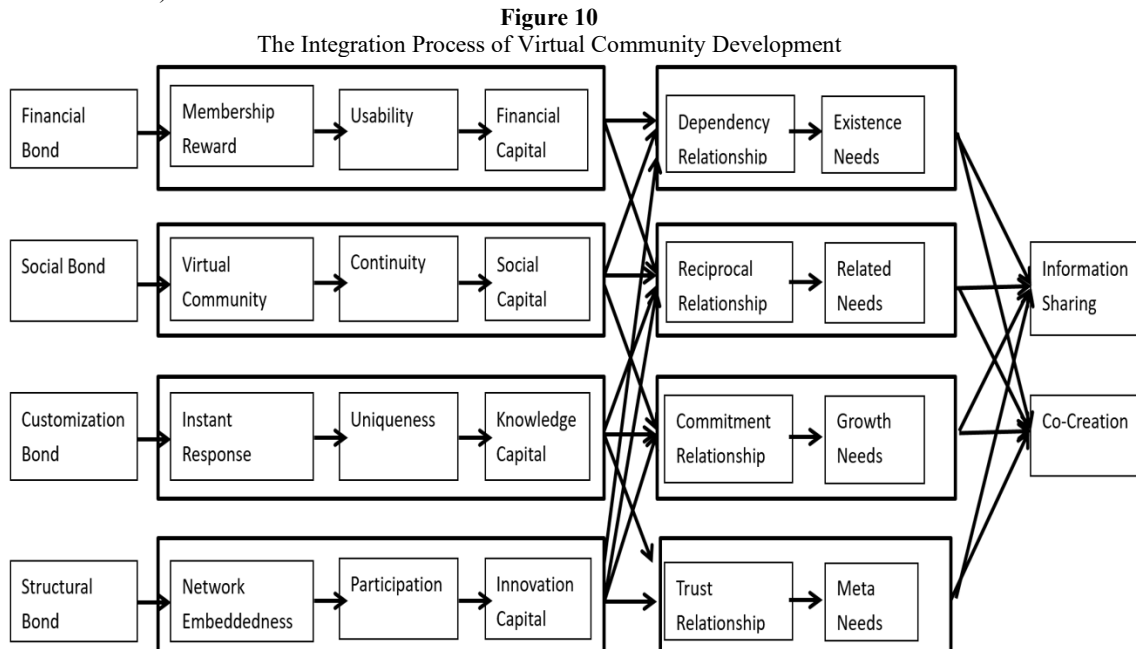
relationships. Regardless of the content and the outcomes of information use, good community network relationships, such as trust, can be established and maintained through sharing (Talja and Hansen, 2006).

J. The Integration Process of Virtual Community Development

The research framework with all the proposed relationships is summarized in Figure 10. This study attempts to illustrate how communities are developed through community management, community relationships, and community identification. Community development is divided into three successive stages, sequenced from left to right, and from top to down. Once community management is developed through membership rewards programs, the establishment of a virtual community, the provision of instant response, network embeddedness, and community relationship follow. Community relationships can be strengthened through dependent, reciprocal, commitment, and trust relationships. The final stage is community identification which occurs when online users get involved and attached to the virtual community, promoting knowledge sharing and co-creation with the administrators.

IV. THE STAGE OF COMMUNITY EXPANSION

This study introduces four stages of development and expansion for virtual communities while identifying relevant business strategies for virtual community moderators (see Table 1).



A. Recruitment Period

Based on financial links, the moderators can prevent members from leaving the community, thus preventing future losses, by establishing a system of membership feedback. As the number of community members increases, financial capital accumulates; this can motivate members to remain within the community and encourage non-members to join. The increase in financial capital will help the establishment of a community dependency relationship. Furthermore, moderators need to ensure that the needs and demands of the users are met to develop a dependence on the community. This will promote community identity behavior which will build reciprocal relationships among users and moderators of the community.

B. Consolidation Period

Based on social links, the moderators can utilize virtual platforms as a continuous “holding” environment for maintaining interactions between members and moderators of the community. Active and stable members will help accumulate and increase social capital, which can further motivate members to remain participative and attract non-members to join the community. Moreover, community relationships built on user dependency can generate social identity behavior, promoting the development of a reciprocal relationship. Moderators must also be able to satisfy the users’ growth needs for users to develop commitment towards the community, promoting social identity.

C. Elitist Period

Based on customer-oriented links, the moderators can create an exclusive environment that facilitates immediate responses, offering members highly specialized information tailored to address specific needs. This will help increase and accumulate knowledge capital through members with expertise in specific knowledge areas. Knowledge capital can help retain members, encourage others to become community members and develop community dependency relationships. Furthermore, moderators can employ the appeals strategy to address users’ relationship needs, foster a reciprocal relationship, encourage social identity behavior, fulfill users’ growth needs, and cultivate users’ commitment to the community.

D. Partnership Period

Based on structural links, moderators can provide an environment that fosters cooperation among members and moderators to create and innovate together. In this stage, knowledge capital can be used to produce innovative products and services, which can generate and accumulate cumulative innovation capital. Incremental innovation capital can help improve community dependency relationship and user dependency, reciprocal relationship and community identity behavior, committed relationship and user growth, and trust relationship and social identity behavior.

E. Implications

To the best knowledge of the authors, no theoretical paper has been constructed on virtual community development, which is both concerning and indicative of the need for such an endeavor. The present study aims to delve into the domain of virtual community management. The established relationships among users of the network programs, facilitated by virtual community management and the establishment of social connections, influence information sharing and value co-creation within the virtual community. This occurs through a sequential and step-by-step process of relationship development. The succeeding paragraphs discuss the implications of this study.

F. Theoretical Implications

Extant research has identified consumer brand engagement as a critical variable in the context of online social exchange (Hollebeek et al., 2013; Harrigan et al., 2018). Interestingly, previous research on group identification has often overlooked the extent to which identification is constructed. An untapped potential is to illustrate customer relationship management in a virtual community, which may help entrepreneurs, especially those seeking to build a vibrant and sustainable virtual community.

G. Practical Implications

The present study explores the environmental mechanism required within the business strategy to establish a tailored Virtual Brand Community (VBC). Various types of VBCs, rooted in different forms of capital, need suitable environmental mechanisms to facilitate the integration of users into community relationships. The fusion of community identification with specific environmental mechanisms may effectively guide the assimilation of new members into the group, thereby fostering corporate growth and capital accumulation. For example, it makes sense to establish a membership reward program to encourage the active participation of virtual community members while attracting new blood. In addition, a virtual community with a friendly atmosphere can encourage interactions among members and, consequently, enhance community retention and cultivate a sense of cohesiveness. Furthermore, a virtual community that enables instant response technology can facilitate a smooth communication flow.

Community managers should regularly seek feedback and ideas from members and be responsive to their needs and concerns. What are the critical elements in virtual relationship development? This study proposes four stages of virtual community development and expansion, namely: (1) recruitment, (2) consolidation, (3) elitist, and (4) partner period. Through these stages, community moderators/managers can gradually develop a community relationship based on the social situation of their target members. Each stage involves a specific management strategy and a certain type of environment that must be established to ensure the success of community development and expansion. In addition, it promotes spontaneous user social identity behavior by satisfying the various users' needs across each stage.

A preliminary connection is created through rewards for participating, which will develop a dependency connection between administrators of the platform and its clients. Through this relationship, together with the accessibility of having a community online,

viewers in a virtual community will be constantly informed of the program updates and be more likely to stay connected with other individuals in the same virtual community. At present, the platform administrators could implement a system that facilitates prompt responses and offers individualized services, along with suitable solutions, to foster a close connection with its members. In an increasingly cluttered marketplace, distracting forces are continuously competing for viewers' attention and interest, which in turn leads to viewer attrition. The moderators need to support members and maintain at least the same level of engagement through a responsive two-way communication infrastructure between members and the moderators. A great way to break through the clutter is to personalize the content and engage viewers with more interactive activities. Accordingly, interactive activities will cultivate trust and mutual consideration in cooperation which is grounded on the embeddedness of the network. The gathered relationship levels will become consolidated, which will improve the relations between the administrators of the platform and its members.

The mentioned relationship structure is applicable when assessing both the moderators/administrators of the network program and its users, to progressively and properly administer the groups. An accessible platform for virtual community members to collaborate and nurture enduring relationships is facilitated by today's innovative internet technology. Through this, the members will achieve a reciprocated understanding, encounter individuals having common interests, inspire each other to develop and aspire for excellence as well as completely produce common importance. Accordingly, the health of virtual communities could be assessed via several Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). A short list of KPIs may include the number of subscribers, unique visitors, viewer turnover, conversion rate, and number of retweets, to name a few. The social media celebrities' popularity was based on progress on each performance metric. However, there are at least two challenges: First, there is no consensus regarding a basket of KPIs to focus on; Second, it is a challenge for virtual community moderators/administrators or advertising sponsors to adequately measure all the KPIs over time. Going forward, an effective social promotion strategy must solicit new fans and cultivate the types of users who want to engage with the virtual community.

V. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES & LIMITATIONS

Given that the creation of a sustainable virtual community is still in its infancy stage, social science and business scholars could make a notable contribution to digital marketing and social media communication by studying virtual community organisms. Future research can address the impact of business strategies on community relations and social identity behavior by examining the impact of various strategies on social relationship patterns. Future research may guide online community moderators/administrators to effectively balance the various communication styles and social norms across different age groups, with a goal of sustaining active engagement of audiences/members remains.

Next, the examination of society governance and social capital formation represents another area warranting investigation. It is essential to understand how virtual community members' engagement in value-creation activities influences community members' psychological well-being and facilitates the accumulation of social capital. A virtual community can meet the needs of its members through various types of value-

added activities, and members can show their identification with the virtual community through activities such as electronic word-of-mouth and information-sharing. Future studies may examine the applicability of the model presented in this study and investigate how engaged communications may help virtual communities increase brand awareness, build trust among members, and strengthen relationship bonds.

Finally, cyberbullying is a phenomenon that exists within virtual communities and it is worth future studies' attention. The occurrence of such events is not necessarily limited to slander or threatening remarks and images constituting personal attacks. Currently, the determination of whether information circulating online amounts to cyberbullying lacks a definite and absolute criterion. On the other hand, perceptions and levels of acceptance of others' speech can vary from person to person. Nevertheless, regardless of the circumstances, interactions or occurrences of hostile dynamics within a virtual community will inevitably have an unfavorable impact on the development of the virtual community. Individuals who do not exercise caution in their active engagement within a virtual community could potentially fall victim to identity theft, with their credit being jeopardized in the event of compromised accounts. Future studies may consider empirically investigating the potential downsides of virtual community development across diverse cultural contexts (e.g., in an individualistic culture context vs. a collectivistic culture context).

This research presents some limitations that should be acknowledged. For instance, this study surveys the virtual community literature and identifies four stages of virtual community development. However, there lacks an empirical component to examine the extent to which variables such as level of education, native language, religion, and culture may help explain the engagement of the virtual community. These limitations present possibilities for future research to explore.

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