

PDF - ENABLING E-COMMERCE GROWTH THROUGH THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY'S CULTURE - researchcub.info

This research paper investigates the elements that encouraged people to visit and actively participate in a virtual community, and eventually leading its guests to purchase from its E-Commerce store. In essence, the E-Commerce store acted as a critical symbiont to the economic survival of the virtual community. In order to establish its uniqueness, the virtual community under study introduced several innovations to its web interface in order to improve human-computer interaction. It also created its own process of interaction and incentive to attract more members. The resulting effects not only made the virtual community unique from other communities, but that it actually created its own emergent culture. Consequentially, the social construction of the community led to the creation of a large and dynamic knowledge repository, supporting the evolution of its emergent culture. Evidences seem to show that the socially-constructed forces driving the virtual community's success are shaping social awareness to support its symbiont, the E-commerce store, for its own long-term economic survival.

1. Background Culture, as defined in the dictionary (Merriam Webster 2002), is "the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group. Culture is also the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon man's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations". In connection with this definition of culture, a virtual community, which forms a social group with certain beliefs, social forms (language, lifestyle, norms) and traits, creates an emergent culture amongst its members. The underlying technology and systems infrastructure, an interactive bulletin board system supporting such virtual community, plays a pivotal role in facilitating the process of creating and supporting such culture. Based on the seminal works of Vygotsky (Vygotsky, Vygotsky, and John-Steiner 1978, Vygotsky, Vygotskii, and Kozulin 1986, Lefrancois 1992), the factors that separate humans from other animals in our development are our use of tools, speech, and symbols, and as a result of these, we create culture. The virtual community's system interface, language, symbols of communication, and its utilization of rich media are tools, symbols, and forms of speech that facilitate the emergence of a unique culture. Sumi and Mase (2002) demonstrated how systems and their visual interface could be used to "create shared community awareness" and improve human communication. The virtual community under study is a fitness community, and the cultural aspect of this study rests on a multiracial social group with a common denominator – similar beliefs, interest, and lifestyle. This is called "community of mind" by Rothaermel & Sugiyama (2001) and Tonnies (1912) due to the members' common intellectual interest. Members of this particular community under study strongly believe in adopting a lifestyle of health and fitness and adhering to the rigid disciplines of bodybuilding. According to Health and Nutrition Systems International Inc. (2002), "In an industry study by the Nutrition Business Journal (NBJ), sales of nutrition supplements was \$13.9 billion in 1998 and ... are projected to be \$49 billion by the year 2010." Considering the geometric growth of the multi-billion dollar nutrition supplement industry and the health and fitness industry in the United States, there has been a fast growing interest in the exchange of knowledge among the users of

nutritional supplements. In addition, the innovations in machine equipment and physical training techniques evolving in the health and fitness industry are of great interests to the same group using these nutritional supplements.

2. A Profile of the Virtual Community

The Elite Fitness virtual community was established in early 1999 using an interactive bulletin board as its backbone system infrastructure. It existed with an E-commerce storefront called Mass Quantities that was selling health and sports supplements, such as protein drinks, diet supplements, and vitamins. The vision of this virtual community was for health and fitness enthusiasts around the world to be able to find useful knowledge and advice, and to interactively discuss issues of health, fitness and bodybuilding. The community has attracted people from different geographic locations – United States, Canada, Europe and Asia. Through member contribution and interaction, the virtual community gradually built a unique “knowledgebase” combining the knowledge domains of nutrition science, biochemistry, human anatomy, kinesiology, scientific training methods for athletes, and the proper use of athletic tools and gym equipment. In brief, it is a social group that characteristically forms a “fitness culture”, and has an extensive array of member-generated knowledge to support the existence and perpetuation of such culture. In addition to its group uniqueness, members also expect other members in this social group to have more distinct physical or bodily traits, generally characterized by a low amount of body fat, above-average physical strength, more muscle mass, body aesthetics and symmetry than an average individual. Members experience peer pressure to post their pictures so that other members can assess their level of fitness or shape. To communicate their unique interest, they have also created their own language and graphic forms of expression. In this manner, it is a social group with its own set of forms, traits, and beliefs. Hagel and Armstrong (1997) classified virtual communities into several categories. Elite Fitness site matches the definition of the Topical community as defined by Hagel and Armstrong. Under their definition, “topical communities center on topics of interest (excluding geography, gender, or life stage) and include communities focused on hobbies and pastimes such as painting, music, or gardening ...” The unique cultural dimensions that glued this virtual community together rest on the spirit of dedicated fitness lifestyle and strict bodybuilding discipline. The reason why fitness and bodybuilding enthusiasts from all over the world joined this community was because they could not easily find the same level of knowledge and peer support in their own local communities or ethnic groups. The driving force behind this community dwells on the notion that people with the same interest or hobby may not necessarily find their peers in the same geographic community or ethnic group but in virtual communities existing on the Internet.

3. Theoretical Background and Research Contribution

Hagel and Armstrong illustrated the dynamics of virtual communities and identified certain elements or factors that can lead to the community’s success and continued evolution (see Figures 1 and 2). In their model, “content attractiveness” and “member loyalty” are the key factors shaping the success of the virtual community.

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