



Fairness and devotion go far: Integrating online justice and value co-creation in virtual communities



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ABSTRACT

Although building long-term, successful virtual communities is important, rare studies have examined both in- and extra-role value co-creation behaviors from the perspective of social exchange theory and equity theory. Specially, we incorporate five different online justice perceptions into our model and examine the mediating role of “sense of virtual community” between these perceived online justice antecedents and both in- and extra-role online value co-creation behavior (reflected by knowledge contribution and online community citizenship behaviors, respectively). We empirically examine the model using data from 278 members of virtual communities. The results reveal that perceived online justice leads to value co-creation behavior through sense of virtual community. The findings elicit several implications for theory and practice.

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1. Introduction

The Internet has had a significant and progressive impact on people's daily lives for the past few decades. With the Internet and the development of other technologies generating an unprecedented proliferation of virtual communities around the world (Andersen, 2005), increasingly more users are relying on the Internet to obtain useful information instead of offline sources (Yen, Hsu, & Huang, 2011). In addition, an increasing number of users now connect with one another through online channels to share interests and form virtual communities (Blanchard, 2008; Koh & Kim, 2003; Tonteri, Kosonen, Ellonen, & Tarkiainen, 2011). Prior research has explored different aspects of online user behavior, such as peer-to-peer information sharing and problem solving (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh, & Gremler, 2004; Mathwick, Wiertz, & De Ruyter, 2008; Wasko & Faraj, 2000, 2005), intentional information seeking and social interactions involving communities (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Yi & Gong, 2013), and time spent chatting online (Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004; Yen et al., 2011). Yet, although virtual communities are rapidly growing, many still fail because of a lack of sufficient active contributors and continuous supply of knowledge content (Chen & Hung, 2010). The success of virtual communities greatly depends on the contributions of members (Bagozzi &

Dholakia, 2002; Dholakia et al., 2004; McWilliam, 2000). Despite the many advantages derived from user participation behavior, previous studies on such behavior have ignored the phenomenon that users often act as value co-creators of virtual communities (Bendapudi & Leone, 2003; Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Yen et al., 2011). Indeed, within virtual contexts, value can be co-created with and determined by the users in the consumption process and through value-in-use (Lusch & Vargo, 2006; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). Therefore, scholars and practitioners should work to understand and value users' co-creation behavior in virtual communities.

Extant literature has focused on managing customers as human resources (Groth, 2005; Groth, Mertens, & Murphy, 2004) and found that users exhibit value co-creation behaviors in virtual communities. Most previous studies have addressed either knowledge contribution or knowledge-sharing behaviors (Bock, Zmud, Kim, & Lee, 2005; Chen & Hung, 2010; Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006; Chen, Yang, & Tang, 2013; Hashim & Tan, 2015; Hsu, Ju, Yen, & Chang, 2007; Wasko & Faraj, 2005) or citizenship behaviors, including voluntary behavior (Kang, Lee, Lee, & Choi, 2007), helping behavior (Fang & Chiu, 2010; Wasko & Faraj, 2005; Yen et al., 2011), and the spread of positive word of mouth (Mathwick et al., 2008). Previous organizational behavior research has identified two types of value co-creation: in-role behavior (e.g., task performance), which refers to behavior necessary for successful value co-creation, and extra-role behavior (e.g., organizational citizenship behavior), which is voluntary behavior that provides extraordinary value to the firm and is required for value co-creation (Bove, Pervan, Beatty, & Shiu, 2009; Groth, 2005; Yen et al., 2011; Yi & Gong, 2008, 2013; Yi,

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Natarajan, & Gong, 2011). Indeed, as partial employees of virtual communities, community users contribute by performing both in- and extra-role co-creation behaviors (Groth, 2005).

Within the context of online communities, knowledge contribution behavior serves as the basis for smooth operations, while online community citizenship behavior represents a crucial means of promoting the effectiveness of online communities (Dholakia et al., 2004; Williams & Cothrel, 2000). Similar to in-role behavior, knowledge contribution behavior refers to behavior that is expected and required of members to share and co-create knowledge. Conversely, online community citizenship behavior, analogous to extra-role conduct, refers to discretionary efforts directed toward helping, feedback, advocacy, and tolerance in virtual communities (Groth et al., 2004; Lengnick-Hall, Claycomb, & Inks, 2000). Both knowledge contribution behavior and online community citizenship behavior are vital and have been most often applied to characterize customers' online community participation (Yen et al., 2011). To gain deeper insights into such a value co-creation phenomenon, this study shows that users' online value co-creation behavior comprises knowledge contribution behavior (in-role) and online community citizenship behavior (extra-role). Although prior studies have stressed the importance of online value co-creation behavior, rare research on virtual community has integrated both types of online value co-creation behaviors into a model. Therefore, to adopt a more comprehensive perspective, this study proposes a co-creation-based integrated framework by incorporating both in- and extra-role value co-creation into the model.

Given that distinctive contributions may come from each type of value co-creation behavior, identifying the antecedents underlying such behavior in virtual communities should help both academics and practitioners gain insights into how to stimulate members' value co-creation in virtual communities (Grewal, Levy, & Kumar, 2009; Verhoef et al., 2009). Online interactions represent a multi-sided process between one user and other community members, and by participating in virtual communities, users can form justice perceptions. Justice, regarded as the fundamental basis for relationship maintainability and sustainability in a social exchange (Fang & Chiu, 2010; Lind, Kulik, Ambrose, & de Vera Park, 1993), is an effective and readily available mechanism for dealing with diverse, uncertain circumstances (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002), such as the virtual context. Specifically, Chiu et al. (2006) call for research to examine whether online justice perceptions influence individuals' behaviors in virtual communities. In this regard, we extend the notion of users as partial employees (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004) and adopt social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Homans, 1961) and equity theory (Adams, 1965; Leventhal, 1980) to identify various perceived online justice dimensions, including distributive justice, procedural justice, interpersonal justice, and informational justice. In addition, drawing on the complementary perspective (Kay & Jost, 2003), we add a complementary justice factor that has not yet been examined in extant literature.

Previous work suggests that sense of virtual community is a psychological outcome in virtual communities (Oh, Ozkaya, & LaRose, 2014) and reflects the extent to which individual users feel that they belong to virtual communities. Because sense of virtual community can lead to appropriate behavior (Zhao, Lu, Wang, Chau, & Zhang, 2012), we further use this variable as a critical mediator between users' justice perceptions and online value co-creation behavior in virtual communities. Using survey responses from 278 active virtual community members, we develop, validate, and test a model that investigates the impacts of the justice dimensions on participants' in- and extra-role value co-creation behavior in online communities. The results corroborate our propositions that members' justice perceptions (i.e., distributive, procedural, interpersonal, informational, and complementary justice) can facilitate the psychological mechanism of sense of virtual community, which

in turn leads to positive in- and extra-role value co-creation behavior (i.e., knowledge contribution behavior and online community citizenship behavior). These results provide important implications for both research and business practice.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. In Section 2, we review the literature on online value co-creation behavior and different justice perceptions in virtual communities. A synthesis of previous research leads to hypotheses and helps formulate a research framework for the study. In Section 3, we describe the methods and measurements and, in Section 4, provide the results. Section 5 discusses the managerial and research implications and presents limitations and future research directions.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1. Value co-creation

Prior research has considered value co-creation and its groundwork from different perspectives, such as "value-in-experience" (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) and "value-in-use" (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000) first emphasized the changing role of customers from passive audiences to active co-creators of experience. Companies can thus achieve a competitive advantage by co-opting customer competence (Bendapudi & Leone, 2003). Co-creation involves an effort between multiple parties to create value of experience collaboratively. Such co-creation experience depends highly on individuals (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Indeed, each individual's uniqueness or specialness may affect the co-creation process.

Value-in-use means that value for the user is created or emerges during participation (Bendapudi & Leone, 2003), indicating that a user is engaged in the value-creating process (Grönroos, 2011). Because value is created as value-in-use by the user for the user, the user as an integrator of resources in the value-creating process can be viewed as a value co-creator (Edvardsson, Tronvoll, & Gruber, 2011; Grönroos & Voima, 2013; Grönroos, 2011). Ramaswamy (2011) emphasized that co-creation is the process by which mutual value is expanded together. Therefore, encouraging users to be co-creators of value has presented a fundamental tenet of involvement in the value co-creation process and could be the next frontier for competitive effectiveness (Bendapudi & Leone, 2003; Grönroos, 2011; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). Because co-creation implies participation in networking structures (Etgar, 2008), this study accepts Vargo and Lusch's (2004) standpoint, viewing users as co-creators of value in virtual communities, and value co-creation behaviors may occur within the participation process, which takes place after interactions with other members.

2.2. Online value co-creation behavior

2.2.1. In- and extra-role online value co-creation behavior

A virtual community is the gathering of people for whom electronic communication is a primary form of interaction (Ridings & Gefen, 2004); who share common interests, goals, or practices and engage in social interactions through the Internet (Chiu et al., 2006; De Valck, Van Bruggen, & Wierenga, 2009); and who connect, communicate, and get to know one another better over time (Williams & Cothrel, 2000). Two types of online value co-creation behavior—namely, knowledge contribution behavior and online community citizenship behavior—are of vital importance because they enable the community to accumulate resources and grow over time.

Knowledge is critical to sustain a virtual community (Wasko & Faraj, 2005), and many community members are no longer passive audiences but rather have become active co-creators of knowl-

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