



Does affinity matter? Slow effects of e-quality on information seeking in virtual communities



Xianjin Zha^{a,*}, Jinchao Zhang^b, Yalan Yan^{c,*}, Zhiliang Xiao^b

^a Center for Studies of Information Resources, Wuhan University, Wuhan 430072, China

^b School of Information Management, Wuhan University, Wuhan 430072, China

^c School of Management, Wuhan University of Science and Technology, Wuhan 430081, China

ARTICLE INFO

Available online 28 January 2015

Keywords:

Affinity
Information quality
System quality
Service quality
Information seeking
Virtual communities

ABSTRACT

Virtual communities function not only as social settings, but also as information neighborhoods. In this study, the term e-quality was used to refer to information quality, system quality, and service quality. Following the updated information systems (IS) success model, a research model was developed to explore the effects of e-quality on information seeking as well as the direct and mediating effects of affinity with virtual communities (the degree of importance that users place on virtual communities) on information seeking. Data collected from users of virtual communities were used to test the model. Affinity with virtual communities not only had a large and direct impact on information seeking in virtual communities but also fully mediated the effects of information quality and service quality on information seeking and partially mediated the effect of system quality on information seeking. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Virtual communities refer to “online social networks in which people with common interests, goals, or practices interact to share information and knowledge, and engage in social interactions” (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006, p. 1873). Virtual communities have an increasing impact on how a great number of people seek information they need (Fallis, 2008). They enable people to easily create and exchange information through online social spaces (Cheung & Lee, 2009), resulting in the creation and accumulation of ongoing information resources. Consequently, virtual communities function for their members not only as social settings, but also as “information neighborhoods” (Burnett, 2000), offering the promise of becoming an integrated part of the information seeking landscape (Ostrander, 2008). Indeed, seeking information is an important aspect of being a member of a virtual technological community (Bouty, 2000). Many users participate in virtual communities for seeking information to resolve problems at work (Chiu et al., 2006). Social networking sites such as Facebook play an important role in international students’ everyday life information seeking (Sin & Kim, 2013). In this study, the focus is on the context of China, where there are many popular virtual communities, such as Baidu Know, Baidu Document, ScienceNet Blog, Chinese Wikipedia, and Sina Microblog, each of which attracts millions of users.

2. Problem statement

As information sources, virtual communities face challenges arising from the fact that the open sources in virtual communities lack quality assurance mechanisms, thus offering information in unfiltered forms with varying levels of quality (Kim & Sin, 2011). When their information needs are high, information seekers tend to prioritize source quality. Consequently, the more credible and authoritative sources in the workplace are sought (Lu & Yuan, 2011). In this situation, then, the quality of virtual communities appears to be critical for their success. An information systems (IS) success model proposed by DeLone and McLean (2003) is an update of the original IS success model proposed by the same authors 10 years prior in a separate paper (DeLone & McLean, 1992). In this model, information quality (*semantic success*), system quality (*technical success*), and service quality are important components of IS success. This updated IS success model treated use, user satisfaction, and net benefits as *effectiveness success*. Subsequent studies have re-specified and tested portions of the IS success model (Carlson & O’Cass, 2010; Kim, Jin, & Swinney, 2009; Kim & Niehm, 2009; Lin, 2008; Pearson, Tadisina, & Griffin, 2012; Wixom & Todd, 2005; Wu & Wang, 2006).

Affinity with virtual communities is defined as the degree of importance that users place on virtual communities (Perse, 1986; Ruiz-Mafe & Sanz-Blas, 2006). The present research suggests that affinity with virtual communities can potentially represent the nature of users’ cognitive and affective connections to virtual communities, essentially reflecting one important aspect of the effectiveness success of virtual communities. In addition to the components of IS effectiveness success as

* Corresponding authors.

E-mail addresses: xianjinzha@163.com (X. Zha), yalanyan@163.com (Y. Yan).

suggested by DeLone and McLean (2003), which is oriented to IS in general, affinity with virtual communities should be examined and can potentially become one of the most accurate descriptors of the effectiveness success variables in the context of virtual communities.

Information seeking has long been the focus of research. However, prior research has not investigated information seeking in virtual communities through the lens of the updated IS success model with affinity as its extended component. Building on the updated IS success model, a research model is developed to explore the effects of e-quality on information seeking in virtual communities as well as the direct and mediating effects of affinity with virtual communities on information seeking. This provides a new view for information seeking research and practice alike. Given that the information quality of virtual communities has long been a concern (Arazy & Kopak, 2011), this study is critical for helping the development of effective virtual communities in the specific context of China and beyond. Effective virtual communities can bring collective wisdom to bear and help to guarantee diversified information sources for information seekers, with the result that virtual communities and authoritative information sources can possibly inform each other, thus hopefully facilitating the formation of an effective overall information environment.

3. Literature review

3.1. Virtual communities and information seeking

Given the provision and availability of information, the primary significance of virtual communities is the fact that they function for their members not only as social settings but also as “information neighborhoods” (Burnett, 2000). There are various types of virtual communities on the Web: learning communities, health communities, communities supporting political activities, and other types (Zorn, 2004). As pools of information and sources of mutual support and help in various aspects (Zorn, 2004), virtual communities provide users with online spaces where there is an integration of content and communication, with the emphasis on user generated content (Lee, Vogel, & Limayem, 2003), allowing people to make contacts, engage in the exchange of information, and learn from and about each other (Rothaermel & Sugiyama, 2001). The rapid growth of online virtual communities “has made mass production and mass dissemination of information faster and easier than ever before” (Lu & Yuan, 2011, p. 133), and it is important to pay attention to the information behavior and collective wisdom in virtual communities (Ross & Sennye, 2008).

Wilson (2000) defined information behavior as “the totality of human behavior in relation to sources and channels of information” (p. 49). The basic premise of online virtual communities is that people are encouraged to participate in the shared creation of content, with members' collaborative work being accumulated to become the assets of the communities (Liao & Chou, 2012). Consequently, “large-scale, continuously evolving, open collaborative content creation systems such as Wikipedia have become increasingly popular” (Stvilia, Twidale, Smith, & Gasser, 2008, p. 983). In the context of online virtual communities, information behavior predominantly concerns information seeking, information use, information production, information dissemination, and information sharing. This study focuses specifically on information-seeking behavior.

Information-seeking behavior has been defined as “the purposive seeking for information as a consequence of a need to satisfy some goal” (Wilson, 2000, p. 49). Bates (2002) proposed four modes of information seeking, namely, searching, browsing, being aware, and monitoring. Searching and browsing involve active information seeking while being aware and monitoring are passive. The being aware mode has also been called information encountering (Williamson, 1998). The sense-making model suggests that individuals who have information needs experience a cognitive gap which prevents them from making sense of a particular life situation. In order to fill the gap, they will make an effort to seek information to change their state of knowledge

and satisfy their information needs (Marchionini, 1995). Characterized by anonymity and their voluntary nature, virtual communities support the creation and maintenance of weak ties among strangers with the result that information-seeking behavior is more likely to occur (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Yan & Davison, 2013). Virtual communities can conveniently aggregate information to allow users to access different perspectives of specific issues (Tremayne, Zheng, Lee, & Jeong, 2006). Individuals thus tend to choose virtual communities as the ideal sources for seeking information on a specific topic so as to fill out their cognitive gaps, and information seeking is suggested as one of the main reasons why individuals participate in virtual communities (Johnson, Kaye, Richard, & Wong, 2007).

Information seeking in the context of virtual communities has been a focus of research for more than a decade. The social and cultural factors that influence the preference for using information sources in everyday settings can determine the choice of information seeking in online virtual communities (Savolainen, 1995). The information-seeking behavior in the virtual world of the Second Life was found to be full of rich and complex interactions with multiple facets, influenced by five key themes: sociability, characteristics of the 3D environment, serendipitous discovery, search utility, and play and humor (Ostrander, 2008). Information-seeking behavior by college students has been studied to explore how Wikipedia's readers think about and use information they obtain from the site (Menchen-Trevino & Hargittai, 2011). Individual characteristics and information efficiency expectancy were found to be associated with information-seeking behavior (Cho & Lee, 2008). Collaborative norms were found to be able to operate in conjunction with other antecedents such as future obligation, perceived usefulness, knowledge growth, resources facilitating conditions, and self-efficacy to affect knowledge-seeking behavior in the context of electronic knowledge repositories (Bock, Kankanhalli, & Sharma, 2006). Many other studies have also examined online information seeking, taking as their focus online information resources seeking and use in virtual learning communities (Markland, 2003), motivations for online opinion seeking (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006), health information seeking and health website credibility (Rains & Karmikel, 2009), factors driving users to continue using the information in Internet-based bulletin board systems (Jin, Cheung, Lee, & Chen, 2009), adoption and use of information in online communities (Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008), and cultural influences on seeking quality health information in a local Korean online community (Yi, Stvilia, & Mon, 2012).

3.2. Affinity with virtual communities

Based on the uses and gratifications theory, which assumes that individuals select particular media and their contents to gratify their needs and fulfill their interests (Rubin & Perse, 1987), affinity has been used to assess general attitudes of individuals towards a medium and/or its content (Ferguson & Perse, 2000). Affinity is conceptualized as the perceived importance of the medium in an individual's life (Perse, 1986). Many studies have reported on affinity and its impact on the selection and use of various media and contents, taking as their focus television viewing (Perse, 1986), online auctions (Stern, Royne, Stafford, & Bienstock, 2008), virtual worlds (Barnes & Pressey, 2011), music (Kinnally, Lacayo, McClung, & Sapolsky, 2008), Internet (Mafé & Blas, 2006), and YouTube (Haridakis & Hanson, 2009). However, the direct and mediating effects of affinity on information seeking in virtual communities have been largely overlooked in the literature. In the present research, affinity with virtual communities is defined as the degree of importance that users place on virtual communities (Perse, 1986; Ruiz-Mafé & Sanz-Blas, 2006). It represents an attitude developed from past experience with virtual communities (Barnes & Pressey, 2011; Perse, 1986). It reflects how an individual looks forward to being involved with virtual communities (Geissler & Edison, 2005) and the closeness of one's connection to and relationship with virtual communities (Li, 2011).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1099194>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1099194>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)