



Why do newcomers participate in virtual communities? An integration of self-determination and relationship management theories



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ABSTRACT

This study proposes and tests a model that outlines the antecedents of newcomers' participation behavior in virtual communities and incorporates both mediating and moderating effects. According to self-reported data from two periods and objective behavioral data, the combined fulfillment of needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence determines newcomers' cognitive social identity, which then influences participation behavior through affective commitment and collective self-esteem. Of the three needs, autonomy exerts the strongest effect on cognitive social identity. Moreover, relationship satisfaction moderates the relationship between awareness of group membership and affective commitment, which helps explain why newcomers with high awareness of their group membership might not cohere with a particular social group. Overall, by combining self-determination theory with relationship management theories, this study establishes an explanatory platform for newcomers' participation behavior. The authors conclude with a discussion of the managerial and research implications of these findings.

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1. Introduction

The emergence of new information and communication technologies has initiated radical transformations in social interactions, which in turn have important implications for the formation of virtual communities [58,59]. To many commentators, virtual communities hold great promise as management tools, because they can offer valuable insights into product innovation [45], facilitate deep and enduring bonds with consumers [11], and reduce customer service costs by enabling peer-to-peer problem solving [49,59]. Moreover, virtual communities reflect the increasingly popular “consumer empowerment” movement, which encourages companies to view their customers as proactive cocreators rather than as passive audiences, and co-opt customer competencies for value creation [12,49].

Recent studies of virtual communities provide some support for this promise (e.g., [34,45,59]), but extant theoretical or empirical research does not offer a detailed understanding of why newcomers to a virtual community might contribute time and information for the benefit of other members. This issue is important, because the long-term viability of virtual communities requires not only discretionary efforts by existing members to enact positive community development but also newcomers' voluntary contributions [50,59]. Indeed, according to virtual community research, newcomers' participation can introduce new

knowledge, perspectives, and energy, and thereby cultivate a more vibrant, self-sustaining virtual community [50].

Among the theories usually employed to explain member participation behavior in virtual groups, the social capital framework [20,44,58,59] offers unique variables and processes that are relevant to certain aspects of social behavior. Yet social capital-based factors cannot fully explain member participation behavior. For example, as a core construct of social capital theory, reciprocity offers only limited explanations for why members proactively participate in virtual communities [58,59]; this is especially true in the case of newcomers' participation, as these recent members have had only limited interactions with other members. Most social capital-based mechanisms similarly require extended periods of time, or at least repeated interactions, to exert an effect. In addition, existing virtual community studies focus primarily on identifying factors associated with member participation (e.g., [20,58]); little research investigates mediating processes or moderating influences on newcomers' participation decisions. As such, the present study seeks to advance our understanding of newcomer behavior in virtual communities by proposing and testing a model that outlines the antecedents of newcomers' participation behavior and incorporates mediating and moderating mechanisms. Specifically, we attempt to contribute to virtual community literature in three ways.

First, drawing on self-determination theory [25,52] and social identity theory [15,55], we offer viable explanations for some variance in newcomer participation behavior. Self-determination theory explicates the nature of member–group relationships on the basis of three psychological needs: *autonomy*, *relatedness*, and *competence*. To the extent that newcomers experience fulfillment of these needs through participation

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processes, they become more likely to adopt the values of the social group [26,52]. This *internalization* process creates a closer psychological attachment to the community and motivates newcomers to help achieve the community's goals. Their decision to participate proactively in the virtual community in turn reflects a manifestation of their voluntary effort to achieve these goals [1,55]. Second, we add to the virtual community literature by investigating mediating mechanisms that underlie the relationship between newcomers' psychological needs and participation behavior. This explicit focus on mediating mechanisms better specifies the theoretical relationships among the independent and dependent variables and helps clarify how the fulfillment of essential psychological needs influences newcomers' participation behavior [10]. Third, we investigate the moderating effects of relationship satisfaction on participation decisions and, which helps to explain prior research findings indicating that not all members who are aware of their group membership cohere with the social group [30,50].

We structure the remainder of this paper as follows: In the next section, we present our conceptual framework and research hypotheses. We then describe our research methodology and present the empirical evidence, after which we discuss the findings and managerial implications. We conclude by indicating some limitations of our research and future research avenues.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

We present our research framework in Fig. 1. Specifically, we begin with the antecedents of awareness of group membership: needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Awareness of group membership should produce two forms of social identity, affective and evaluative, that prompt newcomers' participation intentions. We also consider how relationship satisfaction moderates the links from cognitive social identity to affective commitment and collective self-esteem.

2.1. Social identity

Social identity is “that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or

groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” [54, p. 63]. Several studies from different fields suggest that social identity consists of three related but distinct components: awareness of group membership, affective commitment to the group, and evaluative significance of group membership [9,15,29]. Awareness of group membership is a cognitive sense of the self as a representative of a particular social entity, such as the virtual community in our study. This perception develops through cognitive categorization processes, in which the person forms self-categories of community membership and similarities to other members, as well as dissimilarities to nonmembers [1,9]. These classifications reflect the notion of consciousness-of-kind for social groups [4]. That is, self-awareness or self-knowledge of belonging to a virtual community is one way that a member can achieve a social identity.

Affective social identity can be characterized as affective commitment to the focal group (e.g., [15,29]). In organizational settings, affective social identity represents “a partisan, affective attachment to the goals and values of an organization, to one's role in relation to the goals and values, and to the organization for its own sake, apart from its purely instrumental worth” [18, p. 533]. In brand communities, researchers have characterized this idea as “kinship between members” which also encourages relationships between consumers and brands [4].

The evaluative component of social identity refers to the positive or negative value connotation that a member attaches to group membership; it arises from evaluations of self-worth that might be derived from membership [29,48]. Other terms that refer to the same aspect of social identity include collective self-esteem [40] and group-based self-esteem [15]. These forms differ from global self-esteem, in that they are situation specific and thus responsive to proximal factors [15,48]. Group-based self-esteem reflects a person's perception of personal value because of his or her role as an active member of a virtual community. Members with higher group-based self-esteem thus should perceive themselves as more important, meaningful, and worthwhile within their respective communities [47]. Because the three components of social identity differ in nature and have unique antecedents and consequences [15,29], we treat them as three distinct constructs rather than components of a higher-order latent variable.

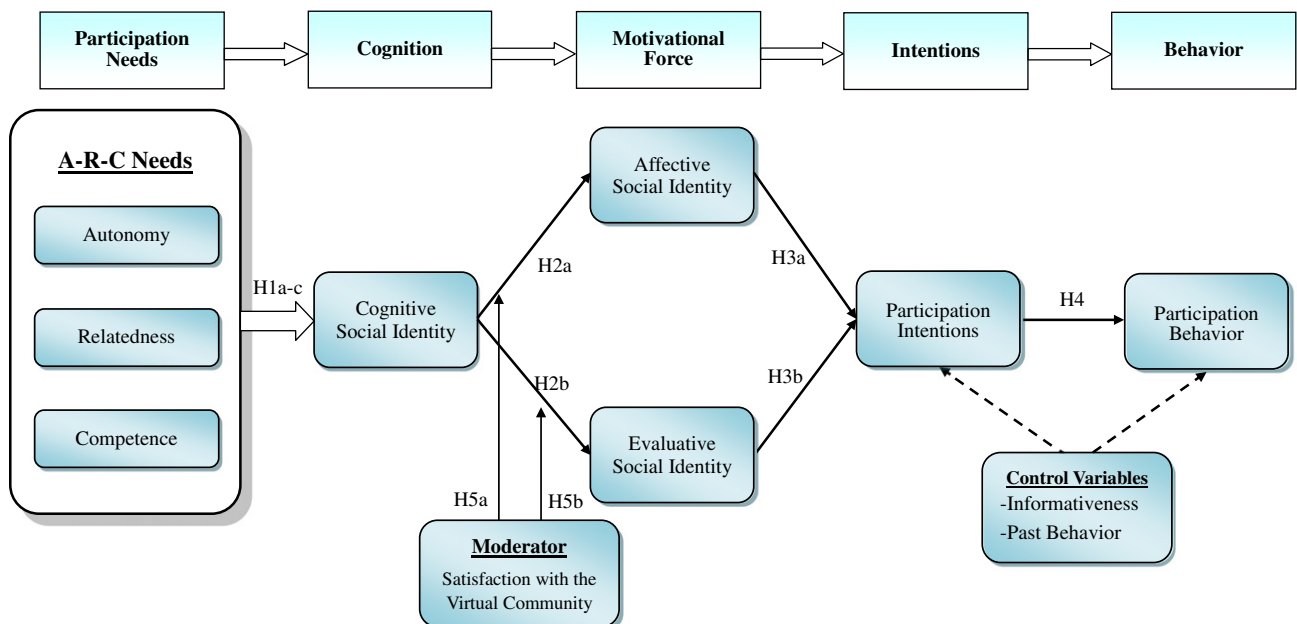


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

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