# Emotional Support, Perceived Corporate Ownership and Skepticism toward Out-groups in Virtual Communities

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## Abstract

Consumers often look to virtual communities for knowledge and support in overcoming the challenges they face. This article examines the role of emotional support in virtual communities that help participants to cope with personal challenges such as healthcare, financial or legal matters. It examines the potential for peer to peer emotional support experienced in virtual communities to generate skepticism toward related out-groups such as doctors and drug companies. It also examines the degree to which corporate ownership of the virtual community reduces the level of skepticism emotional support generates toward out-groups. Guided by predictions of social identity theory, we use data from 270 regular participants in healthcare virtual communities to show that emotional support does generate skepticism toward out-groups. However, we find that this effect is reversed when the virtual community is reported by participants to be corporate owned. We offer guidance to public policy makers on the potential negative consequences of skepticism and we provide advice to managers on how to counter skepticism and improve community stickiness.
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Keywords: Participation; Virtual community; Emotional support; Skepticism; Overall satisfaction

## Introduction

Peer to peer virtual communities (VC) are among the most visited destinations online and have become an important source of influence in consumer purchase decisions. For example, a PR Newswire press release (February 21, 2013) reports that WebMD's traffic averaged 117.4 million unique visitors per month during the fourth quarter of 2012 representing a 28% increase over the same period a year earlier (PR Newswire 2013). On their own volition, consumers visit these web sites regularly perusing articles and discussion threads within topic related communities. Some consumers become active participants posting questions and responding to the requests of fellow consumers. Despite continuing concerns about the quality and credibility of VC user generated content, public interest has remained robust.

Studies of consumption communities have tended to focus on brand enthusiasm (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001), hobbyists and social chatter (Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann 2005;

Bagozzi, Dholakia, and Mookerjee 2006) and professional activity, including work related helping behaviors (Andersen 2005). VC researchers make the distinction between brand communities, in which interest in a specific brand is a precondition for involvement in the community, and communities in which participants engage in peer to peer (P3) problem solving to overcome a common problem or create a public resource (Mathwick, Wiertz, and de Ruyter 2008). The present study extends research on virtual communities by shedding light on a specific sub-category of P3 VCs concerned with personal challenges, which we term "communities of personal challenge". Personal challenge VCs are communities in which people engage in self-help to cope with personal challenges such as health, financial or legal problems with the potential to substantially undermine their quality of life. For example, at Mentalhealth.com participants exchange coping strategies in a mental health support community on topics such as bipolar disorder, eating disorder, abuse, bullying, attention deficit disorder and addiction and impulse problems. Foreclosure Fight Club is a VC in which people share their experiences about resisting their homes being foreclosed and exposing fraud and misinformation by people seeking to exploit the unfortunate circumstance of others. Other examples include

DailyStrength.org, a family issues support forum in which participants discuss family relationships and parenting, and ILW.com, an immigration discussion forum in which participants pursuing extensions of their US H1B visas exchange experiences and provide advice to each other as well as receive professional advice. We make a basic assumption in this study that consumers who are faced with a personal challenge such as a health or legal challenge are likely in a VC context to have kinship and consider themselves as members of an in-group confronting a challenge. We expect the degree to which these group members consider the professionals that serve them as in-group or out-group to be a function of supportive interactions within the VC.

Individuals engage in personal challenge communities out of necessity and participation often provides valuable insight in sustaining their motivation and mental toughness to cope with or overcome their challenge. Using qualitative research techniques, Anderson and McCabe (2012) highlighted the potential of inter-net interactions to create co-constructed environments that self-socialize participants in ways that differ from traditional social and societal approaches. These co-constructed and self-socializing characteristics of online interactions provide the broader context within which advice and social support are provided within VCs. These communities are also a forum for interaction between networking professionals such as attorneys, physicians, financial advisers and other counseling services. Pharmaceutical products and medical, financial and legal services are often mentioned in discussions within communities of challenge in both a positive and negative light. Although the potential of VCs to influence consumer purchase decisions has long been recognized (Hagel 1999), research on VCs that coalesce around a personal challenge is noticeably absent from the literature. Hence, there is a need to understand how consumer perceptions may be impacted by communities of personal challenge. The conceptual model guiding this study is shown in Fig. 1.

Research on VCs has emphasized their identity defining role and socially supportive benefits (e.g., Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann 2005; Dholakia et al. 2009; Nambisan and Baron 2007, 2009). Given the severity of the health, legal or financial challenges faced by many participants in VCs of challenge, it is likely that ongoing socially supportive experiences could have influential effects on perception and behavior. VC participants in search of easier alternatives may be receptive to opinions found within VCs that contradict the realistic but unpleasant advice of a professional. VCs provide a ready opportunity to seek comfort in the pleasant experiences of others facing a similar challenge. It is possible that the emotionally supportive experiences within VCs may prompt participants to engage in identity defining and group cohesive behaviors such as expressing skepticism toward related out-groups (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Hence, we examine the likelihood that experiencing emotional support within VCs of personal challenge leads participants to become skeptical of related out-groups such as doctors and drug companies in the case of healthcare VCs. As a counter to the narrow focus of emotional support, we also examine the effects of participant overall satisfaction on participant skepticism toward related out-groups. We anticipate that overall satisfaction will reduce participant skepticism toward related out-groups. Given the popularity of VCs, it is important that managers and consumers become aware of their potential for not only achieving positive socially supportive ends, but also for increasing conflict between consumers and other groups within the value network.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. We review the literature on peer to peer virtual communities, followed by a brief discussion of social identity theory. Following this we develop our hypotheses, outline the study methodology and discuss our research findings.
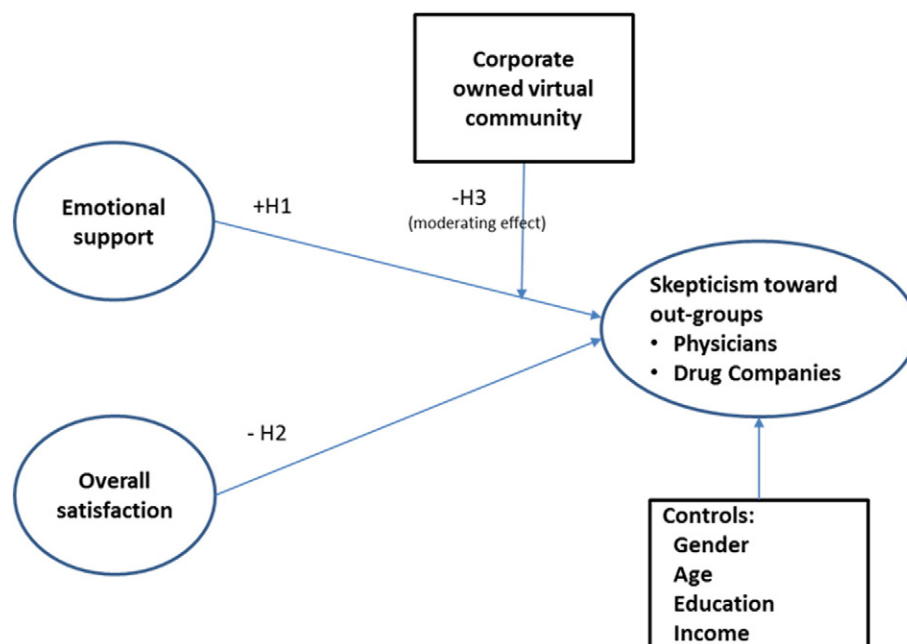


Fig. 1. Emotional support and skepticism toward out-groups in virtual communities.