Social Networks Sites as a virtual community – Can SNSs replace the organic communities?

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Abstract

The theory of interactive media argues that people are more likely to attend to a new interactive medium when the persons they know have also adopted it (Hiltz, 1993). Parks suggests the idea that "new users will become active, committed users of SNSs only when they find that a sizable number of their existing contracts are already using it" (Parks, 2011).

Arguing about the Facebook users, they become more active and involved to list more people as friends, if their existing friends are using Facebook. For example, this SNS provides numberless of pages that enable sharing the user-generated content by the participants. Like many other SNSs, it brings easy access to diverse people, offers a rich set of options for users to express and address their personal interest and it structures so as to facilitate communication and relational formation among members. Parks claims that "moreover, those who design and market SNSs have emphasized the relational and communal potential of these sites" (Parks, 2011).

Keywords: virtual communities, theory of interactive media, model of online community, communication

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I. INTRODUCTION

Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on...public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationship in cyberspace (Rheingold, 1993).

In 1993, Howard Rheingold highlighted the community metaphor that banished alternative metaphors of the day like "information superhighway" (Parks, 2011). In his book Virtual Communities: Homesteading on Electronic Frontier, he presents his personal perspective of how life develops in the world of cyberspace. Considering Rheingold's point of view (that virtual communities might encourage the development of the collective life), Parks debates the idea of SNSs which "are not communities in any singular sense, but rather function as social venues in which many different communities may form" (Parks, 2011). Like many of their Internet predecessors, the key attribute of SNSs is the social element itself. Every community category is based upon "meaningful connection to others, conviviality, perhaps empathy and support" (Parks, 2011).

Mentioning "the internal rhetoric" of SNSs, Parks argues that they often valorize communal language and imaginary as well. Twitter's log in page proclaims, "Follow your interests. Instant updates from your friends, industry experts, favorite celebrities, and what's happening around the world". The Facebook Mobile Application connects you "with friends faster, wherever you are".

Referring to the connection and belonging of the past, Rheingold explains that the popularity of online communities is a "response to the hunger for community that has followed the disintegration of traditional communities" (Rheingold, 1993).

Over time conceptualizations of community were described by tensions between what might be called "strong" and "weak" requirements (Parks, 2011). In order to describe the "strong" conceptualization, Parks refer to the community sociologists' perspective, such as Bell, Newby (1972, 2012), Kinton and Weinreich. According to Parks, they consider that "strong" conceptualization involves groups of people who share physical space, are relatively self-sufficient within the space and who are linked by ties that include kinship. Parks suggests that, theorists have replaced the conceptualization of community from a geographic entity to a quality of sociality. The "weak" requirement designates community as a culture, a set of ideas and interpersonal feelings rather than a physical space (Parks, 2011).

Within this framework, Willson defines virtual communities as social groups that display the psychological and cultural qualities of strong community without physical proximity (Willson, 2006).

Van Dijk provides a working definition of virtual communities similar to Willson's formulation noting that they "are communities which are not tied to a particular place or time, but which still serve common interests in social, cultural and mental reality ranging from general to special interests or activities" (van Dijk, 1998). Van Dijk speaks about four characteristics that he claims to be common to all communities: having members, a social organization, language and patterns of interaction, and a culture and common identity. All these characteristics are used to compare the virtual communities with the "organic" communities that are real-life communities (Gauntlett, 2000).

Jones considers that the ability to engage in collective action represents an essential test of the authenticity of any community, also the virtual one. This perspective meets other two requirements for community, that the group thinks of itself as a community and that the members identify with it (Bell, & Newby, 2012). Jones argues that the ritualized sharing of information also sustains the community (Jones, 1998). This idea leads to the patterns of interaction that grow out of regularized information exchange. "Social communities thrive when the members participate, discuss, share and interact with others.

The more active the participation by a critical mass of members, the more healthy the community is" (Tuten, 2008). Tuten suggests that virtual communities are based on creation and sharing the user-generated content by the participants, which at some point are recruiting new members to the community. Examples may include from sharing, promoting and commenting to saving, categorizing and sharing bookmarks. Chat systems, instant messaging and texting systems are synchronous, which means that the members of the same virtual community must be co-present online. In this case, conversations are rapid and each individual comment is short (Sundén, 2003). As Boyd argues "friending" enables a variety of relationships on SNSs like Facebook, with some exceptions, the number of individual friends one has can be seen as an indicator of social connectivity (Boyd, & Ellison, 2010). For all that, the results of a research made in 2009 indicate that people who use SNSs to learn more about people they have met or observed in offline space may feel tied and more connected to their offline communities (Ellison, 2007; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2009).

The theory of interactive media argues that people are more likely to attend to a new interactive medium when the persons they know have also adopted it (Hiltz, & Turoff, 1993). Parks suggests the idea that "new users will become active, committed users of SNSs only when they find that a sizable number of their existing contracts are already using it" (Parks, 2011).

Arguing about the Facebook users, they become more active and involved to list more people as friends, if their existing friends are using Facebook. For example, this SNS provides numberless of pages that enable sharing the user-generated content by the participants. Like many other SNSs, it brings easy access to diverse people, offers a rich set of options for users to

express and address their personal interest and it structures so as to facilitate communication and relational formation among members. Parks claims that "moreover, those who design and market SNSs have emphasized the relational and communal potential of these sites" (Parks, 2011).

Referring to van Dijk's exercise, Jankovski suggests that it "leads to a typology of ideal types where in virtual communities are described as those with relatively loose relations, which are unconcerned with considerations of time and place, which contain a well developed paralanguage, and which are pluralistic and heterogeneous in composition" (Jankovski, 2006) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Ideal type of organic and virtual communities

Characteristic	Organic	Virtual
Composition and activity	Tight group (age)	Loose affiliation
Social organization	Tight to place and time	Not tied to place and time
Language and interaction	Verbal and non-verbal	Verbal and paralanguage
Culture and identity	Total singular	Partial plural
	Homogeneous	Heterogeneous

Source: van Dijk, 1998/2012

Van Dijk explores the idea that many virtual communities can be characterized by the strong ties among their members. Arguing the central question of his study, whether virtual communities can replace the organic communities, van Dijk's overall conclusion is that virtual communities cannot be considered 'lost' community in society, especially because the cultures and identities created are 'too partial, heterogeneous and fluid to create a strong sense of membership and belonging' (van Dijk, 1998, 2012). In the same time, he claims that even if virtual communities may supplement organic communities, they are unable to replace them.

II. A THEORETICAL MODEL OF ONLINE COMMUNITY

Baym develops a theoretical model of online community through which she tries to understand how such communities develop and manifest themselves, and what is the sense of the process of being online that leads participants to experience these virtual phenomena as communities.

In her work called "The emergence of on-line community", Baym argues about what she calls an "emergent model of online community" (Baym, 1998). Her perspective refers to the

features that influence the character of an online community: external context, temporal structure, system infrastructure, group purposes and the characteristics of participants. These attributes contribute to the development of an online community dealing with "group-specific, forms of expression, identities, relationships and normative conventions" (Baym, 1998). Providing a framework for understanding how online communities develop, she takes a close look at the television soap opera newsgroup "r.a.t.s". Baym's comparative analysis argues that every community may be unique.

III. CONCLUSIONS

As a conclusion of this study arguably virtual communities are not so *virtual* after all (Parks, 2011). According to the findings, virtual communities are social groups that preserve the cultural qualities specific to a community without being limited by the geographical boundaries (Livingstone, Wober, & Lunt, 1994; Jenkins, 2012). Virtual communities are authentic as long as they involve the user in the collective action and the cultures and identities created imply a strong sense of membership and belonging (Jones, 1995, van Dijk, 1998). In this sense, the group thinks of itself as a community and the members identify with it. As van Dijk claims virtual communities supplement organic communities, but they cannot replace them. But still virtual communities serve common interests in social, cultural and mental reality, and the member reaches from a general to special interests. SNS's the "social venues for virtual communities" facilitate communication and rational formation among members.

Applying the theory of interactive media one can arguably conclude that virtual communities are in most of the cases the online extension of geographically situated offline communities (Lievrouw, & Livingstone, 2002).

People can create and develop relations with the other members of community based on similar affinities and interests, even if they are not sharing the same physical space. As argued in this chapter members will "travel" from a community to another but the need to identify with it is the one that encourages them to be a part of this social and virtual experience.

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