Understanding Attitude and Predicting Behavior in Virtual Social Communities

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Abstract

The paper is aimed to explore the youngster's attitude towards online social communities which is now emerging as an ideal platform for getting meaningful consumer insight worldwide. The survey was administered over 120 post-graduate students of Delhi University. Factor analysis and multiple regression analysis were used to test the stated hypothesis. Factor analysis explained 45 percent variance among the variables. The ß coefficients for Social trustworthiness (ß=.012) and Privacy concern (ß=.082) were statistically found significant in determining overall rating of virtual social communities. The overall internal consistency of the data was checked by applying Cronbach's alpha which demonstrated the value (0.69) within the acceptable limit. For researchers and practitioner, the paper provides a conceptual and theoretical framework to understand the key factors in acceptance of virtual communities which is pivotal in making strategic decisions to improve e-commerce in India.

***Key Words:** Virtual Communities, Factor Analysis, Perceived Hedonic Benefits, Social Motivation*

Introduction

It is invariably proved in many studies that traditional marketing practices which focus more on consumer segmentation elements like gender, age, income, culture and psychographic elements are no longer truly represent modern consumer buying behavior per see. In modern times, it is digital communication which acts as a revolutionary and powerful media in enhancing consumer socialization through systems of blogs, message- boards, sharing of individual sentiments and opinion on various issues.

Several other researchers opined that information shared through online discussion forums, electronic bulletin boards, blogs, news-group, product-service review sites including virtual communities put more interactive, trustworthy and credible impact on consumer buying behavior (Goldsmith et al 2006, Liao et al, 2006, Bickart, 2001,).These studies offers a great deal of potential impact that SNSs and other interactive media may have on various stages of consumer decision making process. Many adolescents have integrated a part of their daily existence and to a much higher intensity than many adults (Lee et al, 2005).It is interactive abilities and high degree of customization provided by virtual communities which has made them as a powerful tool of consumer motivation and socialization in particular (Hoffman et al, 1996, Shib, 1998,Stoor, 1992).

Unlike traditional media like television and radio, the virtual social communities are considered as a high interactive media where people can transmit content, pictures, music in their social communities without any cost (Deborah, 1999).Ability to develop social capital

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and interactive nature of these communities act as a magnet to attract and retain their visitors. Undoubtedly, the these communities are unable to develop a distinct and solid business model, but the impact that they create in spreading information in a democratic manner, offering creative learning engagement is deep-rooted which no one can deny. It is substantiated with growing profile creation, time-spending patterns and nature of information exchange in a more interactive and personal way. Some of these virtual community sites have, however, gone for the category extension by adding shopping and other promotional avenues in anticipation to make them an alternative business model in the future. But this move doesn't compromises with the basic nature and character of a virtual community site.

Young consumers have imbibed online communities as an important ingredient of their life style and behavior. The intervention of technology creates a kind of instinct which is acting as a key determinant and agent of changing values, lifestyle, perception, learning, belief and patterns of information exchange on a variety of products/service.

Indian Scenario

The virtual networks are emerging as a powerful tool to transform a communication campaign into a religion. It is especially true in a developing country like India which has high computer literacy and proven capability in software development worldwide. It is projected that by 2013, India will emerge as the third largest internet market in the world immediately after China and USA (IMRB survey).In this way, approximately 10 per cent of the Indians have internet access. India is adding internet users at the rate of almost 5-7 million a month and at the current pace it will surpass the US, which has about 245 million users.

The profile of the users is growing rapidly, showing that the medium has made deep penetration into small towns and even among the less affluent

India is projected as seventh largest market for social networking, after USA, China, Germany, Russian Federation, Brazil and The UK (Comscore Media Metrix, 2010).The Facebook has captured the number one slot in this category with more than 20 million visitors in 2010. It

Table 1: Projections about Internet Users in India

Year	No. of Internet Users (in m)
2008	53.5
2009	67.5
2010	95
2011	121
2012	162
2013	220*

Source: Times of India

was closely followed by Orkut with little less than 20 million users observed during the same period.

Given the fact that India will emerge as the third largest internet user base in two years down the line, growing popularity of social media on internet, high perceived credibility, deep inroads even into small towns, marketers in India are harnessing the opportunities and devising strategies to ensure that they learn from virtual community dialogue about their offerings. As a result, social networks like Face book, Orkut, Twitter are being used by more and more marketers to promote their brand and interact with customers. A growing number of marketers are creating linkages on various communities where fans can post contact information, give recent updates and most importantly provide freedom of expression in a fair, open and democratic manner. It provides an ability to engage consumers in exchanging vital information on what they buy, how they buy, from where they buy and specific experience with the brand that they get during these stages.

Objectives of the Research

- To analyze youngster's attitude towards online social communities

- To understand the role of social communities as a determinant of consumer behavior

Research Methodology

The survey was administered over 120 students selected from various affiliated college and Post-Graduate department of Delhi University. Since no sampling frame is available for members of various virtual communities, the sample selected, would probably have selection error which is difficult to avoid in such process. Data was collected using non-probability convenience sampling. The research instrument was divided into two parts. The first part dealt with respondent's motivation to join social communitiesv, opinion towards information content, brand presence, advertising and influence on purchase behavior w.r.t social communities. Second part of the questionnaire was designed to capture information on demographic and economic dimensions. A five point Likert scale as response scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree was employed against each variable.

Analysis of Demographic Profile

The demographic profile of the respondents found that 62 percent of them were male. Almost 85 percent were below 25 years of age.

Table 2: Selected Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Category	N (120)	Percent
Gender	Male	74	62
	Female	46	38
Age	Below 20	39	32.5
	21-25	62	52.5
	26-30	12	10
	Above 30	7	5
Marital Status	Married	5	4
	Unmarried	115	96

Membership Status on Social Networks

The data analysis reveals that Facebook is one of the most preferred networking sites among the youngsters. It is followed by Twitter and Orkut .A significant percent of the respondents, however, maintained account in more than one social networking site.
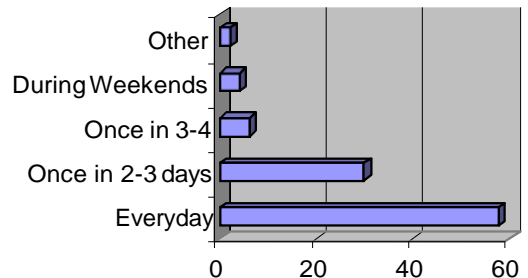
Membership Status Analysis (%)
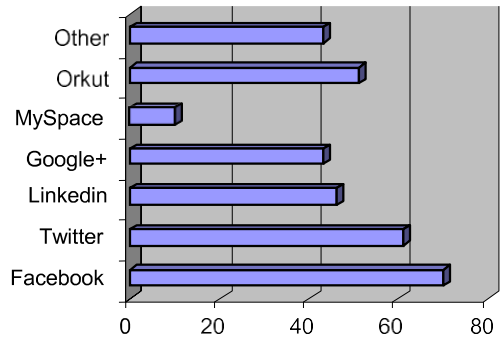
Frequency of Visit to Social Networks

It is clear from the diagram below that almost 58 percent of the respondents log on to social networks everyday. It was followed by 30 percent respondents who prefer to visit social networks in a gap of 2-3 days.

Frequency of Visit to Social Networks (%)

Respondents Association with Brands/ Marketers on Social Networks

More and more brands and marketers are making presence on social networks by creating their web pages on it. This fact is supported by the data analysis which observed almost 43 percent respondents who are associated with some brands on social networks. However, more than half of the respondents still don't have any association or liking with any brands on social networks in this regard.

Respondents Association with Brand
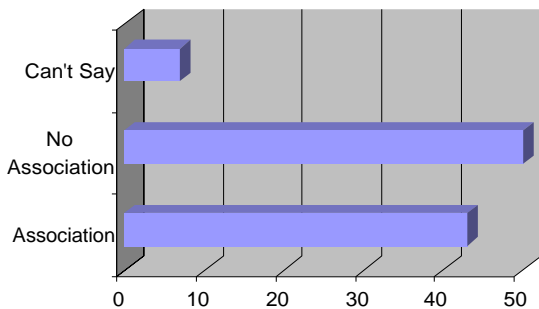
Perceived Impact of Advt. on Social Networks on Consumer Behavior

A large number of marketers are increasingly using social networks for making communication with their customer. It is being emerging as a non traditional method of making interactive communication by engaging them in such promotion. This fact is supported by our data analysis where almost 40 percent respondents got influenced by various communication made by brand in the form of advertisement on various social networks.

Respondents Perceived Impact of Advt.on Purchase Behavior (%)
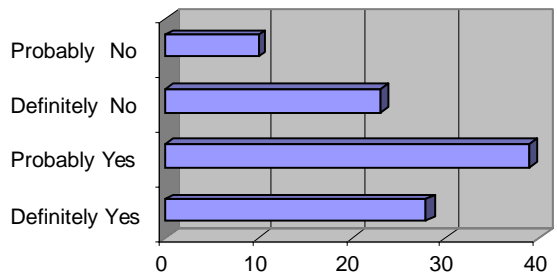
Factor Analysis

A factor analysis was conducted to analyze the motivation and attitude of the students regarding online communities. The identified constructs have been developed on the basis of a content analysis study which was conducted during the stage of questionnaire development. Some of these constructs have been selected from prior research conducted in this regard. However, due modifications have been made in these constructs according to the characteristics of Indian consumers.

The factor analysis was conducted using principal axis factoring with varimax rotation as an extraction method. The reliability of the data was measured using Cronbach's alpha and the values were found within the acceptable limit commonly used in such research works. The results confirmed the suitability and validity of the data because the alpha value ranges between the acceptable limits and thus indicate the goodness of the data under study.

S.No.	Factors and Constructs	Rotated Factor Loading	Percent of Variance Explained	Croanbach's alpha Value
1.	**Information Motivation (IM)**	13	.72	
	• SNSs are the best way to collect product related information.	.641		
	• I prefer to serach SNSs for whatever brand I require.	.696		
	• SNSs provide upto date and latest information about various brands.	.781		
	• SNSs share valuable and useful information on products.	.701		
	• SNSs are a convenient source to get brand related information.	.603		
	• Different brand communities may share latest information on SNSs.	.540		
2.	**Perceived Hedonic Benefits (PHB)**	11	.78	
	• SNSs provide one of the best ways to entertain myself.	.592		
	• Visiting to SNS keep me fresh.	.658		
	• I never get boredom while visiting SNS.	.849		
	• I feel pleasure to see, hear and read information shared on SNS.	.711		
	• Visiting my SNS is the best way to pass time and get enjoyment.	.844		
	• Information shared on SNSs make me laugh and has high amusement value	.692		
3.	**Social Trustworthiness (ST)**	9	.84	
	• I strongly believe that members of a virtual community share their genuine experience, opinion, views and reviews.	.521		

	• Organizations provide authentic and genuine information on their pages in virtual communities.	.634		
	• SNSs act as a deterrent for naïve practices.	.876		
	• Communicating through SNS is highly interactive and transparent method of communication.	.796		
4.	**Social Motivators (SM)**	7	.75	
	• Participating in discussion and forums in virtual communities makes me an active and valued customer.	.699		
	• Participation with other members through SNSs improves my acceptance in my friend circle.	.704		
	• My friend circle expects me to be in touch with them through various SNSs.	.829		
	• SNSs have helped me to extend my friend circle.	.618		
5.	**Privacy Concern (PC)**	5	.59	
	• SNS have enough measures to prevent any threat to my privacy on internet.	.57		
	• I strongly believe that information exchanged on my SNS is not subject to plagiarism.	.62		
	• Often, I don't get any anonymous data in my SNS account.	.66		
	• I recommend others to use SNS.	.51		
	• I have positive perception about security and privacy aspect of SNS.	.67		

Table 3
Factor Analysis Result

The variables within factor are correlated was confirmed by the Bartlett's test of spherecity.The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy indicated a practical level of common variance of 0.742, which implies that the result obtained from factor analysis are appropriate. Collectively all the constructs explained 45 percent variance of the data designed to analyze the respondent's attitude towards online social communities.

Result of Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was also conducted to test the stated hypothesis of the study. The respondents were asked to rate virtual social communities on a scale of 1-10.It was treated as dependent variables and 5 different factor which have been explored in the factor analysis were treated as predictors over respondent's rating of virtual social communities.

Model	R	R-Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1.	.051	.003	-.006	.420
a. Predictors; (constant), Information motivation, perceived hedonic benefits, Social trust worthiness, Social motivators, privacy concern.				

Since the value of standard error of estimate is less than the standard deviation (i.e 0.721) of the dependent variable, thus the proposed model for multiple regressions is found appropriate to run.

Variable	Â	T	Sig.	Hypothesis
Information Motivation	.165	2.974	.003	Supported
Perceived Hedonic Benefits	.276	6.251	.000	Supported
Social Trustworthiness	.012	.145	.881	Not Supported
Social Motivators	.566	8.549	.000	Supported
Privacy Concern	.082	1.403	.161	Not Supported

The multiple regression model observed significant t-statistics in three out of five independent variables in predicting the rating of online social communities. These are IM (ß =.165), PHB (ß = .276) and SM (ß =.566).Hence the study accept respective hypothesis and reject ST and PC hypothesis which is found to have strong influence on the dependent variable.

Managerial Implications & Conclusion

Social networking sites provide fabulous opportunities to reach to young consumers today. The media is different from the other methods of communication as it has abilities of interactivity and mass circulation. Young consumers have more credibility in kind of communication made between various types of people in these virtual communities. In developing positive attitude and behavioral intentions towards virtual communities, marketers, policy makers and researchers and others are required to focus on trust and privacy aspects of virtual communities. Once these issues are properly addressed, the technology has the ability to make significant contribution in spreading the wings of e-commerce in India.

Marketers are required to use these platforms to share authentic and credible information to their likes/visitors on virtual communities in the communication world where interactive communication is the lifeline and necessity to keep abreast of the competition.

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