



# Virtual Group Dynamics and Social Networks

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**Dr. Andrea Guazzini**

*Department of Education and Psychology  
and Centre for the Study of Complex Dynamics (CSDC)  
University of Florence*

*Contacts*

e-mail: [andrea.guazzini@unifi.it](mailto:andrea.guazzini@unifi.it) - [andrea.guazzini@gmail.com](mailto:andrea.guazzini@gmail.com)  
website: <http://virthulab.complexworld.net/>

## *Virtual Community Participation and Motivation*

### *Mixing Methaphors: Sociological and Psychological Perspectives on Virtual Communities*



With the rapid diffusion of the internet, new media technologies are transforming the ways we organize daily lives, conduct businesses, and participate in political and social activities. As a result, many traditional social and political constructs are increasingly being meshed with technological innovations to create new terms such as: **Cyber Culture, Hyper-Text or Electronic Democracy**

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### **Virtual Community**

In the popular domain, Virtual Community, is a term that can be used loosely to describe a variety of social group interacting on the internet, ranging fro massively multiplayer online game (MMOG). online discussion forums, blogs, to a wide variety of social media sites or social networking sites.

**Despite its growinf popularity in theory and in practice, there is no consensus regarding the appropriate definition or types of virtual communities (Porter, 2004)**

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### Virtual Community



**Heeding Rheingold's call for further exploration**

**Premise:** Community should be seen through the sociological, psychological and psychosocial lens.

**Question:** How have conceptions of community shifted with the emergence of the internet?

### Internet

“The electronic network” of networks that links people and information through computers and other digital devices allowing person-to-person communication and information retrieval (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman & Robinson, 2001)

In order to fully understand the social implication of the internet, it is necessary to explore the philosophical assumptions underlying two contrasting views: **technological determinism** and **social constructivism**

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### **Technological Determinism**

**Technological innovations are the fundamental sources of change in human society.**

New technology **Transform human behaviour and organization at every level:** from day to day personal interactions to family lives and from social organizations to the formation of culture (Howard, Jones, 2004)

### **Social Constructivism**

**SC empasizes the role of human agency and social context in the development and impact of technology.**

Within this framework, technologies “ do not suddenly leap into existence as the result of a momentous act by a heroic inventor” and do not determine human beviour or social organization. Rather, new technological artifacts are “gradually constructed or deconstructed in the social interactions of relevan social groups” (Bijker, 1993)

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### Internet as a Culture

While the internet can be treated as a network of networks, **the sum total of all the computer networks out there and more, it has also become a fixture of our households today**, and can no longer be understood in purely a mechanical and technological sense.

The view of the Internet as a “culture” is closely aligned with the *ritual* view of communication proposed by Carey (1988), in which rituals and cultural symbols are created and maintained through a process of communication.

Beyond the technology represented by the hardware infrastructure of the Internet, there is that “something more” represented by Web Sites, Discussion Forums, Online Games, and Blogs, that represent a “*place*” that people can “*log on*” and “*log off*” as part of their daily lives. In this sense **the internet represents a conceptual place**, often referred to as **Cyberspace**, where cultures are formed and reformed (Hine, 2000)

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### Internet as a Culture

The question is, then, whether the kind of **cyberculture** that transcends physical boundaries of time and space bears any meaning to the real world.

*Early studies of CMC found that:*

- Individual interaction with others in cyberspace, produces a form of **virtual co-presence**, which becomes the basis for the formation of interpersonal relationship (Porter, 1996)
- Internet appear as a **symbolic space** where new and existing values, identities, and desire converge to create real social implications offline (Oldenburg, 1999).
- As human interactions have become the common norm in cyberspace, scholars have argued, **the online social world has become something that is socially constructed, or symbolic.**

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### **Virtual Communities: a sociological perspective**

### *From pastoral village to Metropolis: the Rise of Information Society*

The technical, functional and symbolic characteristics of the Internet may have changed the ways that communities are formed and experienced through a decentralized global communication network that transcend time and space

### **Information Society**

**According to Bell (1973) the information society is represented by a “shift from manufacturing to services, the domination of science and technology-based industries, and the advent of new social stratification through the rise of new technical elite (Day & Schuler, 2004)**

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### Virtual Communities: a sociological perspective

#### From pastoral village to Metropolis: the Rise of Information Society

Webster (1995) attempted to tease out five distinct analytical paradigms:

**Technological:** As technology progresses, innovations in information processing, storage and transmission reduce cost and increase the availability of information across all segments of society.

**Economical:** economic interpretation of the information society places an emphasis on “economics of information”, where the production and distribution of “knowledge” becomes another form of goods and services to be bought and sold, as well as a new kind of labor force required.

**Occupational:** This perspective stresses the possibility of occupational changes; that is, an information society is achieved when information work is predominant in occupations, and this is often combined with economic measures.

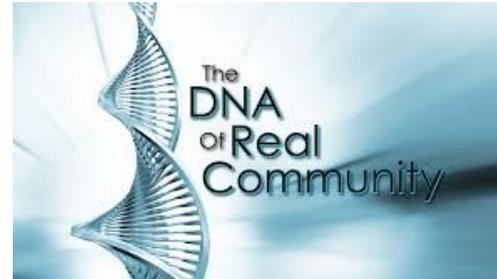
**Spatial:** The spatial conception emphasizes the information networks, which connect locations and consequently have substantial effects on the organization of time and space

**Cultural:** Such a conception focuses on the pattern of everyday lives, which now includes a sharp increase in the information in social circulation.

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## **Virtual Communities: a psychological perspective** *Values, Rituals, and Symbols: The Imagined Community*

**Gusfield (1975) identified two dimensions of community as *territorial* and *relational*.**

While communities may obviously be defined by their physical boundaries, such as cities and neighborhoods, proximity to or occupation of certain territory does not necessarily constitute a community.

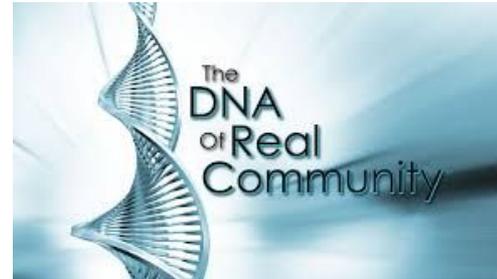
From a psychological perspective, ***community exists in human emotion or perception and, consequently, influences the nature and the quality of relationships among members, as well as cognitions and behaviours.***

Dewey (1972) observed, ***“to learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community”***, in other words, we can only realize and appreciate our sense of humanity by communicating with others through language and participating in shared experiences.

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### **Virtual Communities: a psychological perspective** **Values, Rituals, and Symbols: The Imagined Community**

**Barney (2004) pointed out the idea of communication and shared interests, as two defining elements of the fondation of a community.**

The types of shared interests that community members embrace can be broadly understood in cultural terms: **values, symbols, languages, traditions, and rituals** that make each community unique.

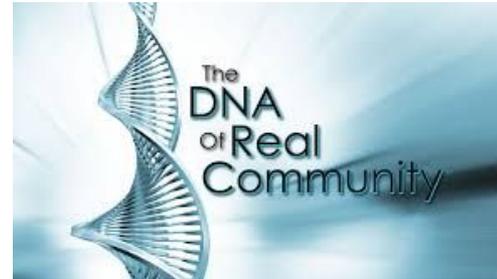
On the other hand, the function of communication is not only to facilitate the sharing of experience, cut, echoing Carey's ritualistic view, to **maintain shared meaning across time and space.**

This characterization is similar to Benedict Anderson's (1991) notion of an imagined community. "*In the minds of each member lives the image of their communion*"; **community is given meaning by its participants.**

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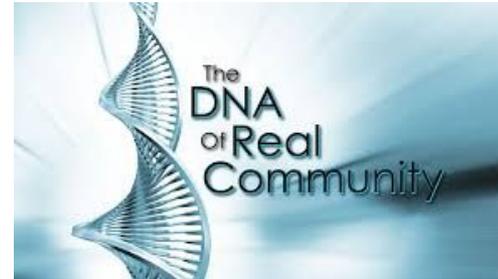
### **Virtual Communities: a psychological perspective** *Psychological Sense of Community*

The **Sense of Community** was originally proposed by Sarason (1974), who defined it as “**the perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them and the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure**”

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### *Virtual Communities: a psychological perspective* *Psychological Sense of Community*

McMillan and Chavis (1986) proposed a framework to study sense of community that includes four fundamental elements:

**Membership:** the sense of belonging and emotional safety resulting from being part of a group community

**Influence:** community cohesiveness and attractiveness depends on the community's influence on its members and the members' feelings of control and influence on the community

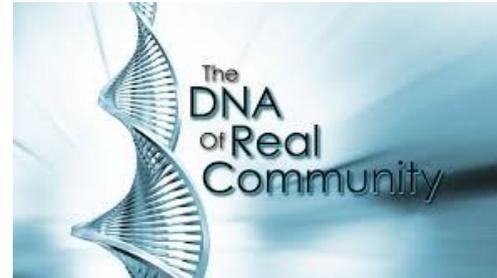
**Integration and fulfillment of needs:** common needs, goals, beliefs, and values as the cohesive force that fulfills individual desires and binds the community together

**Shared emotional connection:** the bonds developed over time through positive interaction and shared history with other community members.

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### **Virtual Communities: a psychological perspective**

***As Kurt Lewin (1946) noted more than hal a century ago, behaviour is a complex function of the person and his or her environment.***

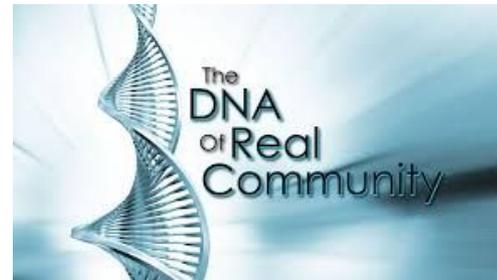
**An individual's existing values, beliefs, or personalities may interact with today's network environment to result in different perceptions and meanings about community.**

- In term of ***Personality*** prior research has indicated that, when using the internet, the ***Extroverted*** are **more likely to seek out online interactions** with others, become ***more involved*** in online communities, and derive ***more emotional benefits*** from participating in online social groups than introverted individuals (Kraut, Kesler, Boneva, Cummings, Helgeson, & Crwaford, 2002)
- In general several studies confirmed that people's ***personality difference can be used to predict how they might behave in a group or community setting offline*** (Lounsbury, Loveland, & Ginson, 2003)

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### **Virtual Communities: a psychological perspective**

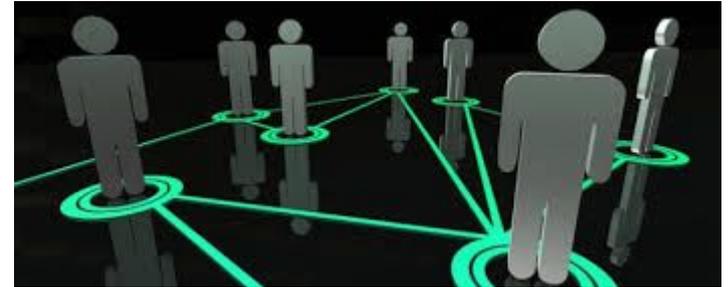
**Nevertheless, the unique characteristics associated with the Internet may prompt people to behave differently and therefore create different experiences for themselves and for people whom they interact with.**

- Schwier and Balbar (2002) observed that although asynchronous platforms, such as discussion forums, offer similar levels of convenience and enrichment as Internet chat sessions, **real-time Internet chat gives users a sense of urgency and immediacy** that ultimately **creates a more dynamic environment** and the added **experience of togetherness**.
- While **Social Identity** and **Group Identification** can be attributed to one's fixed demographic attributes, such as race and gender (Yzerbyt, Rocher, & Schadron, 1997), the more **fluid, subjective interpretation of values and beliefs** (Hamilton, Sherman & Lickel, 1998), may become **salient in the decentralized and mobile network environment, and virtual community**.
- In particular, Teenagers already use online social groups **as a means to develop their own sense of "self"**, and in many instances, are **"trying out" new and different identities in cyberspace** (Talamo & Ligorio, 2001; Turkle, 1995)

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### Asynchronous Text-Based Community



### Virtual Communities

**Are social aggregations finding their place in specific Internet locations.**

- On line social aggregations are mostly characterised by the specificity of their environments where, despite the absence of a physical space, the **sense of place** is perceived quite strongly and is very present. **Electronic media have altered the significance of time and space for social interaction** (Meyrowits, 1986).
- The social aggregation participating in the setting up of Internet networks represent not only a form of socialisation, but also a **venue for the exchanging of value-laden forms (news, spoilers, the latest gossip, new developments)**, they can therefore be considered **indicators** of the setting up of knowledge bases through the complex system of symbolic elements they establish and the intertextual reference system they create .

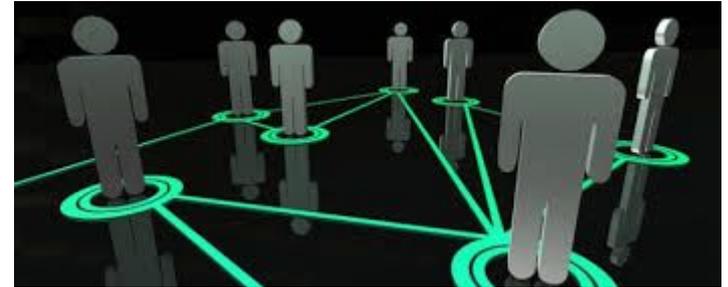
### The Communities

**May be studied as laboratories where dynamics relating to the exchange of meanings, the construction of meaning, and the establishing of a culture may take shape and find their place.**

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### Virtual Community (The first definition)

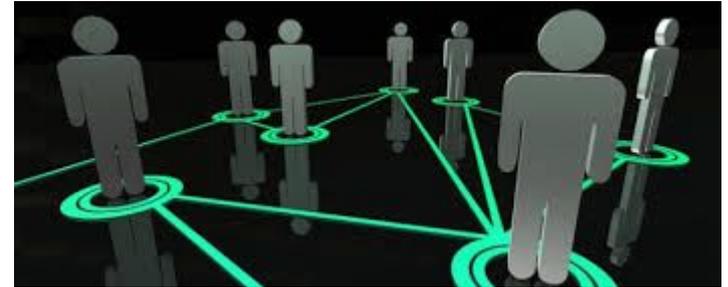
The first definition of virtual community found in literature was proposed by Rheingold in 1994, and it has remained a valid starting point for many: ***Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussion long enough, which sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.***

Soo et al (2000) suggest two possible community structure:

- ***Communities based on Formal Collaboration:*** Structures involving relationships ruled by formal agreements and structured protocols.
- ***Communities based on Informal Interaction:*** Structures not limited to formal agreements and structured protocols (e.g., Web based virtual communities)

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**Armstrong & Hagel III (1996) develop a very important taxonomy for a participative working environment on the web:**

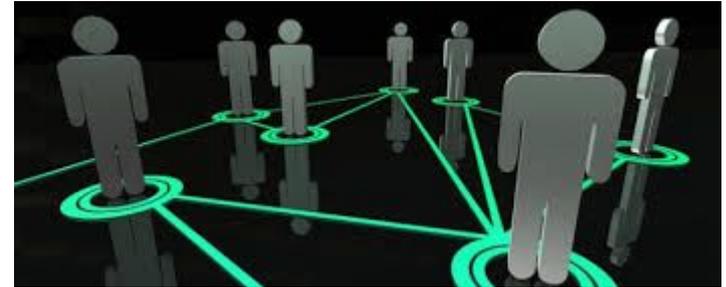
1. **Communities of Transaction:** developed to facilitate the buying and selling process of products and services and to give information about these transactions (Ozuem, et al., 2008)
2. **Communities of Interest:** developed to connect persons with common interests in one or more subjects. It is not a social community per se (Cortes, et al. 2002)
3. **Communities of Fantasy:** developed to enable the participants to create, in a collective way, their own fantasies, environments, characters and/or stories (Brent, 2004)
4. **Communities of Relationship:** developed to enable the participants to exchange personal experiences usually of great impact in their personal lives, leading to strong personal ties (Hsu et al., 2007)

Nevertheless, real virtual communities rarely have the features of only one type, as they are normally a combination of the types presented above.

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### Virtual Communities: Motivations for

One of the main reasons for success (and survival) of a virtual community lies in its members' motivation to actively participate in it (Ardichvili, 2008)

Some motivations are related to the uses and applications of a virtual community, others lie on inherent social characteristics of the human kind.

- Significant influence over the decision to participate in a virtual community can be classified as **social ties, trust, considerations of reciprocity and identification with the community and its goals** (Chiu et al. 2006)
- Trust relates to how an individual expects members in a virtual community to follow an **intrinsic set of rules, norms and principles** (Chiu, 2006)

Ardchvili (2008) defines a framework dedicated to this:

- **Emotional benefits:** sense of usefulness and by being able to contribute
- **Intellectual benefits:** developing expertise and expanding perspective
- **Establishing ties with others:** building the sense of community

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### **Virtual Communities: Motivations for**

**Rheingold believes that the technology that underlies the computer mediated communication enables and stimulates new activities between people**

**Looking for a group's collective goods is a way of looking for the elements that bind isolated individuals into a community (Rheingold, 2000). The three types of goods are:**

- 1. Social network capital**
- 2. Knowledge capital**
- 3. Communion**

*A good example of knowledge capital is Wikipedia, a worldwide virtual community of contributed and interactive knowledge.*

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