

A Construct on Fostering Unity Through Virtual Community Cohesion

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a research outcome that examines the construct that explains the cohesiveness of members of the social media in fostering unity. As the proliferation of the new media becomes rampant with the prevalence of the Internet, society tends to become individualistic and spends more time with their digital devices rather than interacting with family members, neighbors and colleagues. This phenomenon if left unchecked may contribute to disunity within the society. Hence, the objective of the study presented in this paper was to come up with a construct that can explain virtual community cohesion in fostering unity. The research approach includes consulting relevant materials on social cohesion and identifying dimensions that make up the social cohesion construct. These were then subjected to reviews by experts in the field of community cohesion. Meanwhile operational definitions of virtual community were examined and mapped against the traditional social cohesion. This results in a construct comprising of 8 components with 46 items for measuring unity through virtual community cohesion.

Keywords: Social Media, New Media, Social Cohesion.

I INTRODUCTION

The new media can be a tool for social cohesion, but it can also be a weapon for disunity and social destruction. Schivinski et al. (2014) refers new media as on-demand access to content anytime, anywhere, on any digital device, as well as interactive user feedback, and creative participation. However, the authors also remarked that another aspect of new media is the real-time generation of new and unregulated content. According to Forsyth (2010), cohesion can be broken down into four main components: social relations, task relations, perceived unity, and emotions. The Collins Dictionary defines cohesion as “tendency to unite”. Simply, group or community cohesiveness can be viewed as tendency for the group or community to have a sense of unity, interacting in a harmonious and agreeable manner. Building community cohesion is about building better relationships between people from different backgrounds including those from new settled communities to achieve unity in the community.

According to the Community and Local Government of the United Kingdom, community cohesion can be viewed as different groups of people getting on well together (Community and Local Government, 2009). It reveals the integration for cohesive community to be based on three

principles: (i) People from different backgrounds having similar life opportunities; (ii) People knowing their rights and responsibilities; and (iii) People trusting one another and trusting local institutions to act fairly.

Similarly, Malaysia's Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak launched the concept of 1Malaysia that will “foster unity in Malaysians of all races based on several important values which should become the practice of every Malaysian” (Bernama.com, 2009). In line with the Federal Constitution, the concept of 1Malaysia is based on the premise to serve its citizen irrespective of ethnic, religious and cultural diversity with the slogan “People First, Performance Now”. With this slogan, valuing and respecting the ethnic identities of every community in Malaysia, the government aspires to further strengthen unity to ensure stability towards achieving greater progress and development for the people and country, and hence contribute to the success in realizing the Vision for Malaysia to become a fully developed country by 2020.

With the advancement in information technology, the Internet has become an important media for social interaction particularly it allows citizens to share aspects of their lives, and keeping in touch with family members and friends through e-mails, chat rooms, instant messaging, newsgroups, and hence forming relationships with those whom they meet on the Internet (McKenna et al., 2002). Gupta and Kim (2004) define Virtual Communities as places in the web where people can find and then electronically “talk” to others with similar interests. Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace (Rheingold, 1998). Virtual communities and online communities are sometimes being used interchangeably. Chewar et al. (2003) regards online communities or virtual communities as a general gathering of interest, without the condition and organizational basis of residential proximity or the goal of affecting real-world events or interactions, in addition to human feelings as stated by Rheingold (1998). However, when geographical locations matters, and when technology is used to complement real-world interaction, Chewar et al. (2003) use the term community network. The PCMag.com (2014) regards the “social networking site” as a group of people who use the Internet to communicate with each other about anything and everything, and has become the 21st century “virtual community”.

The rapid growth of social networking sites that has been observed over the years is indicative of its entry into mainstream culture and its integration into the daily lives of many people. In parallel with this, there has also been considerable media coverage of the growth of social networking, its potential positive outcomes and concerns about the way that some people are engaging with it. Social networking sites offer people new and varied ways to

communicate via the internet, whether through their PC or their mobile phones. They allow people to easily and simply create their own online page or profile and to construct and display an online network of contacts, often called 'friends'. Users of these sites can communicate via their profile both with their 'friends' and with people outside their list of contacts. This can be on a one-to-one basis (much like an email), or in a more public way such as a comment posted for a specific group or all to see.

Problem statement

It is often mentioned that virtual community (or social network site) brings about social problems particularly in the ethical use of the media. Despite that, the capacity of such media in enabling and enhancing social connections is also apparent. The anonymity inherent in certain types of ICT promotes connectedness on the part of individuals who, for whatever reason, might otherwise have problems with starting face-to-face relationships, and also provides a platform to reconnect with previously unknown others (Ellison et al., 2009). It benefits their members through offerings of physical, economic, cognitive, and emotional resources (Spruill & Faraj, 1997) and serves as an important resource for people with various purposes, goals, and needs (Kim et al., 2008). The Internet (and SMS) permits people to communicate and express themselves in the real world in ways they might be incapable of (Katz & Aakhus, 2002), thus enhancing their level of social connection and their feelings of confidence.

Of late, individualism is seen as a phenomenon in which social cohesiveness appears to be diminishing and if not attempted to, may be disappearing. This problem is also prevailing in Malaysia. This is apparent as the government keeps encouraging its citizen to be united through the recently announced concept of 1Malaysia. With the Internet as the medium for social networking, it is believed that the virtual community could be a medium of social cohesiveness. Hence, this study aims to determine the characteristics that are indicative of social cohesiveness among the members of virtual community, and thus facilitate the government in addressing the issue of unity (social cohesion) in Malaysia.

II METHODS

Despite the prevalent use of the social network reaching the daily lives of most people, studies on virtual community are limited to benefits and ethical use of the social media. Developing a construct to measure virtual community cohesiveness would be an answer to many questions about the impact of social media to the society.

A. Constructing the Measurement Framework

The research started off with reviews of relevant literature, particularly on the measurement of traditional community cohesion due to the absence of a measurement for virtual community cohesion. Based on these reviews, indicators and characteristics of social cohesion were identified. These were mainly based on the works by Chan et al. (2006) who came up with a social cohesion measurement framework. The framework provides a comprehensive definition of social cohesion as "a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and horizontal interactions among members of society as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that

includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioral manifestations". This can be visualized in the form of a 2-dimensional matrix that relates the horizontal and vertical interactions to the sets of attitudes (representing the subjective component) and norms (representing the objective component). Table 1 shows the Cohesion Measurement Framework.

Table 1. Social Cohesion Measurement Framework (Chan et al., 2006)

	Subjective component (attitude)	Objective component (norms)
Horizontal interaction (cohesion within civil society)	General trust with fellow citizens	Social participation and vibrancy of civil society
	Willingness to cooperate and help fellow citizen	Voluntarism and donations
	Sense of belonging	Presence or absence of major inter-group alliances
Vertical interaction (government – society relationship)	Trust in public figures	Political participation
	Confidence in political and other major social institutions	

Horizontal dimension refers to the relationship among different individuals and groups within society. This is reflected both in their attitudes and norms (subjective component) and their actual behavior (objective component). On the other hand, the vertical dimension looks into the relationship between the state and its citizens (or civil society), and how they (the citizen) manifest such relationship in actual situation.

The framework comprised of 9 interactions or constructs that form the basis for the social cohesion measurement. The mapping of Horizontal Interaction and Subjective component produces the first 3 constructs, namely 1) General trust, 2) Willingness to cooperate, and 3) Sense of belonging. The mapping of Horizontal Interaction and Objective component produces the next 3 constructs, namely 4) Social Participation and Vibrancy of Civil Society, 5) Voluntarism and Donations, and 6) Presence or Absence of major inter-group Alliances. The mapping of Vertical Interaction and Subjective component produces the next 2 constructs, namely 7) Trust in Public Figures and 8) Confidence in Political and other major social institutions. Lastly, the mapping of Vertical Interaction and Objective component produces 1 construct, namely 9) Political Participation. Using this framework as a guide, individual items were identified to operationalize each of the 9 constructs. These items were taken from various sources as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Items in the Social Cohesion Construct

	Subjective component (attitude)	Objective component (norms)
Horizontal	General trust with fellow citizens	Social participation and vibrancy of civil society

interaction (cohesion within civil society)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognition (Jenson, 1998) Community diversity (Community Cohesion Unit, 2003) Sense of trust (Jeannotte, 2000; Chan et al., 2006) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participation (Schmeets & Riele, 2010; Chan et al., 2006) Interpersonal Interaction (Friedkin, 2004; Chen et al., 2008) 	<p>Confidence in political and other major social institutions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Legitimacy (Jenson, 1998; Chan et al., 2006)
	Willingness to co-operate and help fellow citizen	Voluntarism and donations	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive interactions (Turok et al., 2006) Recognition (Jenson, 1998) Social order (Turok et al., 2006) Active participation (Jeannotte, 2000) Connection and relations (MacCracken, 1998; Chan et al., 2006) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Voluntary work (Jeannotte, 2000; Chan et al., 2006) Donation (Chan et al., 2006) 	
	Sense of belonging	Presence or absence of major inter-group alliances	
Vertical interaction (government – society relationship)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social inclusion (Jenson, 1998; Turok et al., 2006) Acceptance (Ottone et al., 2007) Sense of Belonging (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Community Cohesion Unit, 2003; Chan et al., 2006) Shared values (Community Cohesion Unit, 2003; Maxwell, 1996) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social Fabrics (Turok et al., 2006) Willingness to cooperate (Chan et al., 2006) Integration (Schmeets & Riele, 2010) Social Equality (Community Cohesion Unit, 2003; Jeannotte, 2000; Jenson, 1998; Turok et al., 2006) Demography (Easterly et al., 2006; Mukherjee & Saraswati, nd)

B. Reviews by Experts

Two experts in the field of unity and social cohesion were consulted to review the social cohesion framework for face and content validity. The first expert is a Professor of Sociology Development from Universiti Utara Malaysia who has 27 years of experience in the field of sociology. The second expert is a Professor in Sociology from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia specializing in ethnic relations and development studies. The experts were presented with the social cohesion framework in the form of a “Review Kit” consisting of constructs and items as identified earlier. The experts were asked to comment on the suitability and appropriateness of each item on the construct. Upon receiving the feedback, the Review Kit was updated and given back to the expert for further reviews and confirmation. This process was repeated until the expert was satisfied with the Review Kit in which it was then sent to the second expert for comments and feedbacks. Following the snowball approach, the second expert was recommended by the first expert, and the Review Kit process was again repeated for the second expert. The process ended when there was no more feedback to be extrapolated and the social cohesion framework was considered valid and reliable.

III FINDINGS

The reviewed social cohesion framework was analyzed item by item and mapped against characteristics of virtual community (VC). These characteristics were obtained based on operational definitions of VC that include works by Bruckman and Jensen (2002), Hill et al. (1996), Kannan et al., (2000), Kim et al., (2008), Lee et al. (2002), Porter (2004), Ridings and Gefen (2004), Dube et al., (2006), and many others.

Table 3 summarized the measurement for virtual community cohesion.

Table 3. Virtual Community Cohesion Measurement

Constructs	No. of Items	Items
1) General Trust	6	Recognition, Appreciation, Ethnic Diversity, Multi-Ethnicity, Single Community Membership, Mutual Respect.
2) Willingness to Cooperate	4	Positive Interaction, Active Social Relationships, Active Formal Participation, Active Informal Participation.
3) Sense of Belonging	5	Shared Experiences, Identities, Common Vision, Shared Challenges, Shared Values.
4) Social Participation	8	Involvement in Needs Assessment, Community Leader, Community Member

		Involvement, Responsibility, Accountability, Community Contribution, External Support, Commitment.
5) Voluntarism and Donations	15	Voluntary Engagement, NGOs, Philanthropy, Charity, Purpose, Cooperative, Individualistic, Competitiveness, Aggressiveness, Own Protection, Please Oneself, Career Responsibility, Benefit to Community, Understand Oneself, Enhance Oneself
6) Inter-Group Alliances	4	Establish Cooperation, Voluntary Collaboration, Equality, Alliances
7) Trust in Public Figures	3	Trust in Administrator, Involvement in Decision-Making, Accountability
8) Political Participation	1	Active Involvement

Mapping for the General Trust construct identified all 6 items from the traditional community to be pertinent for the VC. These were: 1) Recognition of the VC on the existence of ethnic diversity; 2) Appreciation of members of VC on the existence of ethnic diversity; 3) Members value the existence of ethnic diversity within their VC; 4) Members accept the existence of multi-ethnic memberships in their VC; 5) Members accept single community memberships in their VC; and 6) Members have mutual respect in multi-ethnic VC.

Willingness to Cooperate construct identified 5 items from the traditional community. Four items were found to be pertinent to VC. These were: 1) Positive interactions among members of VC; 2) Active social relationships among members of VC; 3) Active participation in formal social virtual networks; and 4) Active participation in informal social virtual networks. The fifth item, Relation among community members was changed to Interaction among community members as the latter was more applicable to VC environment.

Mapping for Sense of Belonging construct identified all 5 items from the traditional community to be relevant in the VC. These were: 1) Strength of shared experiences among VC members in terms of language/ childhood experience/ education/ culture/ food; 2) Identities between those of different background experiences in terms of language/ childhood experience/ education/ culture/ food; 3) Common vision in terms of language/ childhood experience/ education/ culture/ food; 4) Shared challenges in terms of language/ childhood experience/education/ culture/ food; and 5) Shared values in terms of language/ childhood experience/ education/ culture/ food.

The construct for Social Participation identified 14 items, out of which 8 items were pertinent to VC. These were: 1) Involvement in needs assessment in founding of specific VC group; 2) Community leader represent the VC; 3) Community member involvement in decision-making; 4) Responsibility in decision-making; 5) Accountability in decision-making; 6) Community contribution in supporting programs for the VC; 7) External supports in programs for VC; and 8) Commitment of the VC members. The remaining 6 items were either changed to suit the VC characteristics or discarded due to their inapplicability to the VC environment. The 3 items changed were 1) Participation of people to the VC, instead of Attraction to the community;

2) Members' participation in the VC, instead of Attractive to members; and 3) Members' involvement in VC activities, instead of Loyalty to the community. The other 3 remaining items were deemed not applicable to VC since there is no formal structure to represent organizations in VC, behavior/conduct does not represent member's degree of participation in VC, and similarly function does not represent member's degree of participation in VC.

Mapping for Voluntarism and Donations construct identified 16 items, in which all but 1 item were deemed pertinent. These were: 1) Engagement in voluntary partnerships; 2) Engagement in NGOs; 3) Engagement in philanthropic activities; 4) Contribute to charity; 5) Purpose of charity; 6) Cooperative in maximizing joint outcomes; 7) Individualistic in maximizing own welfare with no concern of that of the others; 8) Competitive in maximizing own welfare relative to that of the others; 9) Aggressive in minimizing the welfare of others; 10) Undertake a task to protect oneself; 11) Undertake a task to please oneself; 12) Undertake a task as a career/responsibility; 13) Undertake a task for the benefit of a community; 14) Undertake a task to understand oneself; and 15) Undertake a task to enhance oneself. The 1 remaining item discarded was Administration of charities since this is concerned with management of the charity with specific formal structure not present in VC.

The mapping of the construct for Presence or Absence of Major Inter-group Alliances or Cleavage identified all 4 items to be pertinent. These were: 1) Establish cooperation among political parties/ non-governmental organizations (NGOs) /Associations (including religious association); 2) Voluntary collaboration among political parties/NGOs/Associations (including religious association); 3) Equality in access to opportunities; and 4) Existence of alliance/cleavage due to religious conduct (piety).

The next construct is Trust in Public Figures. Since this relates to government-society and state-citizen cohesion in the traditional community, to the knowledge of the researchers, there is no formal structure of governance defined for VC. The closest resemblance to authorized personnel in the context of VC is the administrator of the VC. Hence, this research proposed that the vertical dimension of this framework be translated into the measure of the relationships between the administrator and members of a VC. Therefore out of 6 items identified in the traditional construct, 5 were deemed not applicable. The one that was pertinent was Trust in Political Leadership. However a new item was added to reflect Trust in Administrator of the VC. The remaining 5 items considered not pertinent were: 1) Trust in Public services (since there is no real public service involved in VC); 2) Trust in Law Enforcement (maybe relevant to cyber law but discarded in relation to enforcement within VC – members are free to join or opt out without ramification); 3) Trust in Judiciary (since no such body exists in VC); 4) Trust in sovereignty of the ruler (not applicable in VC); and 5) Trust in federal-state government relationship (such structure does not apply in VC). Additionally, 2 new items were included in this construct: Involvement in Decision-Making and Accountability of the Administrator to reflect trust in the administration of the VC.

The construct for Confidence in Political and other major social institutions was not mapped. There was no political structure that can be associated with virtual community since there are no political parties that exist in a virtual environment. Similarly, social institutions do not exist in a virtual community. However, there are services being rendered by real institutions through virtual community (social media). Hence this construct was discarded.

The last construct, Political Participation identified 7 items, out of which 1 item was deemed relevant to VC. This was Active Involvement in Political Activities. The other 6 items were discarded as they were not relevant to VC. These items relate to involvement with the government (no formality in VC), political opinion (already covered by item 1) and public rally (no such activity in VC).

IV CONCLUSION

This study found that constructs for the traditional community cohesion resembled that of the virtual community cohesion. Out of the 9 constructs identified for the traditional community cohesion, 8 constructs were applicable for virtual community cohesion. The one that was considered not relevant was Political and Other Major Social Institutions. This can be attributed to the fact that virtual community is very much informal whereby groups of people can communicate with each other just about anything and everything as opined by PcMag.com (2014). Therefore this study concludes that the relevant constructs for virtual community cohesion comprised of General Trust, Willingness to Cooperate, Sense of Belonging, Social Participation, Voluntarism and Donations, Presence or Absence of Major Inter-group Alliances, Trust in Public Figures, and Political Participation.

This study also found that majority of the items in the constructs was pertinent except those items that relate to formal structure and management of the community, including formal governance structure. Items that relate to physical entities such as infrastructure, buildings and people, country, state and formal institutions and organizations were also found not applicable to virtual community. In addition, items that relate to sense of permanency, commitment, investment and economic returns were also discarded as these items affect real world event and are contrary to virtual community characterized by unconditional gathering of interest and structural foundation of domiciliary juxtaposition as posited by Chewar et al. (2003). In conclusion, out of a total of 83 items found in the traditional community cohesion, 46 items (55%) were found to be applicable to virtual community cohesion.

Future studies can make use of the virtual community cohesion construct developed here to determine antecedents and influencing factors that affect cohesion in a virtual community environment. The construct can also be used by practitioners and researchers to evaluate and measure the cohesiveness of a social network group by identifying weaknesses in certain constructs so that actions can be taken to remedy potential social problems before they get out of control.

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