Virtual Communities and Lifestyles

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CHAPTER ONE

VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES AND LIFESTYLE

Introduction

Nowadays, the internet, which has become a new social field with the rapid development of technology and communication technologies, shows its influence in all aspects of individuals' lives, as well as in building relationships and communicating. With the internet's spread, individuals' tendency to use the digital world for communication has also increased (Bagozzi and Dholokia, 2002; Burnett, 2000; Cummins et al., 2014). These new communication technologies have changed the perception of time and space and created a new communication environment. Individuals have started to gather in digital networks for support, organization, or communication, to protect and maintain their shared interests (Bagozzi and Dholokia, 2002; Rheingold, 2000). The large communities that individuals initially formed by coming together to increase their communication have attracted the attention of businesses over time, and caused many to become virtual communities. In the modern understanding of marketing, businesses put their customers at the center of their planning. In the planning of enterprises, it is necessary to establish a connection with customers and provide customer satisfaction, and then create customer loyalty using this satisfaction. The fact that consumers are starting to use the internet, and, accordingly, digital environments, creates an excellent opportunity for businesses to connect with their consumers in digital (virtual) environments.

For this reason, virtual communities, especially businesses, are open to sharing, detailing, and discussing information about consumers' personal needs online (Hagel, 1999; Johnson and Lowe, 2015; Zwass, 2010). On the other hand, three main issues with regard to virtual communities are essential from the perspective of enterprises. Firstly, business managers reveal what motivates individuals to join virtual communities and produce content in these communities. Another issue is that consumers plan how to

produce content in these virtual communities. The last issue is the insight into what can be extracted from consumers' content.

Information exchange between businesses and consumers on the internet occurs through multiple channels. The most preferred of these channels are social media channels. Consumers interact through social networking sites such as MySpace, YouTube, Facebook, LinkedIn, Tumblr, Reddit, Telegram, and Wikipedia. Businesses follow this development, and meet consumers through these platforms to an increasing extent, day by day. The main task of enterprises is to find answers to the questions in consumers' minds by exchanging information on these platforms (Dholakia et al., 2004: 21; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Wiertz and De Ruyter, 2007).

According to 2020 data, social media usage rate covers 3.08 billion people. This data shows that 3.08 billion people use at least one social media channel, such as WhatsApp or Instagram (Statista 2020). The world's population stands at 7.91 billion in January 2022, with the annual growth rate of 1.0 percent suggesting that this figure will reach 8 billion sometime in mid-2023. Well over half (57.0 percent) of the world's population now lives in urban areas. There are 4.62 billion social media users around the world in January 2022. This figure is equal to 58.4 percent of the world's total population, although it's worth noting that social media "users" may not represent unique individuals (learn why). Global social media users have grown by more than 10 percent over the past 12 months, with 424 million new users starting their social media journey during 2021. Meanwhile, social media users have seen even faster growth than internet users over the past decade. Today's total of 4.62 billion social media users is 3.1 times higher than the 1.48 billion figure we published in 2012, and means that social media users have grown at a CAGR of 12 percent over the past decade (We Are Social, 2022). The development and dissemination of social media have also encouraged consumers to create many virtual communities to share information. Frequent interactions have gradually transformed consumers into virtual communities on social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.). This, in turn, has created a relationship between consumers and brands or businesses (Luo et al., 2021: 1).

Social media allows individuals to talk to each other, get emotional support, share, gossip, play, flirt, or just rebuild their identities, and the fact that they like spending time by using technology in communication fills a wide range of purposes. This interaction is carried out in areas that

are usually called 'virtual', 'digital', 'electronic', or 'online' (Balcı and Ayhan, 2007; Rheingold, 1991; Ridings and Gefen, 2004). On the other hand, the emergence and widespread prevalence of such communities has led to the questioning of the quality of social interactions between people, bringing about hot debates and opposing views on the effect on traditional community life (Castells 2008; Flew 2005; Robins 1996; Slevin, 2000).

The emergence of new information and communication technologies has initiated radical transformations that have significant implications for the formation of virtual communities in social interactions. For centuries, customers have come together in physical environments to find, buy, discuss and enjoy, products and services with like-minded peers (Tauber, 1972). These physical areas constitute the main streets, commercial or cultural activities, and usually the focal shopping areas of cities (Niemeier et al., 2013). Since the 2000s, these physical environments have gradually developed into independent digital spaces (Hänninen et al., 2019). People have begun to communicate with each other beyond the limitations of space and time, to establish 'societies'; in other words, 'virtual reality', where there is frequent contact, mutual assistance, and emotional and even material exchange.

According to a global study by the world-renowned research company Forrester Research, there are 400,000 virtual communities on the internet. At the same time, 27% of computer users are community users. Today, these rates are increasing with the introduction of technology into every home. It is expected that the internet usage rate will exceed 80% shortly and that almost all of these users will become members of a virtual community. A joint research conducted by Pew Internet and American Life concerning all internet users found that 84% of consumers are in a relationship with any virtual community. He also determined that 79% of internet users, that is, 23 million people, connect with a certain community in the virtual environment. In terms of virtual communities, the research reveals that virtual communities communicate with their members several times a week via e-mail (Yeygel, 2006: 38). Also, 76% of internet users participate in an online community: one industry study found that almost everybody is a part of at least one group, event, page or forum. Facebook products have 3.5 billion audience at 2021. More than 10 million Facebook groups are in existence. Every 1/3 internet user has mistrust in social media content: fake news made their job and people stopped believing every content they see according to the study. 45% of social media users were frustrated with the problem of bullying and offensive language pervading many social media platforms: the style of communication

is the biggest blocker for many people to start the communication and engage more actively. Only 14% of internet users were found to have mistrust in content generated and shared on community sites: people trust real reviews and credible comments as before (PeerBoard, 2022).

This study has researched virtual communities, an essential concept for consumers and businesses. The number of active monthly users is 2.4 billion (Webtekno.com). Descriptive studies and lifestyle analyses were carried out on a virtual community on Facebook, the world's most widely used social media platform, with a total of 90,000 members. The name of the virtual community is specified as 'X Community' or 'X Virtual Community' during the study, for confidentiality reasons. The internet, social platforms, and virtual communities that emerge from the birth of social friendships, which are a large part of our lives, have a tiny place in the literature. For this reason, this study aims to contribute to the literature.

Literature Review

There is extensive literature on virtual communities. Researchers have conducted various studies to evaluate virtual communities, types of virtual community, and their role in facilitating information exchanges. We can outline these researches as follows:

Koh and Kim (2004), determined that the behavior of virtual community members is affected by the enthusiasm of community leaders and the satisfaction they experience when interacting with other members. They determined that the social ties between community members are strong, and that these relationships, if made in the virtual community without face-to-face contact, will be weak.

De Valck et al., (2009) revealed that virtual communities behave differently from traditional reference groups. They determined that members in the same virtual community have different views and behaviors, and those members are actively involved in discussions within the community.

Akar (2010), revealed how social networks affect purchasing decisions, and how social networking sites function as marketing channels. In this context, a conceptual model was created to develop a social networking site as a marketing communication channel. As a result of the research, communications on social networking sites were accepted as marketing communication, with personal consumer areas and profiles, reference groups, influencers, links, and conversations.

Zhou et al., (2013) studied how consumers participate in a virtual brand community. Using observational learning theory, this study represents the first attempt to investigate transformation mechanisms in the Chinese context. The study shows that visitors' perceived informational and social values transform them into virtual brand community members.

Tsai and Pai (2014), focused on a clearer understanding of the participation behavior of members who have just joined a virtual community. They found that meeting their needs related to autonomy, relatedness, and competence, helped trigger their cognitive social identities, which then revealed their emotional and evaluative social identities.

Sungwook et al., (2014) determined that new members who join a virtual community perform a benefit and cost analysis on every decision-making step within the community. It has been determined that members prefer to seek other virtual communities if the communities they enter do not benefit them. The study helps to determine how new members can position their behavior.

Leal et al., (2014) studied virtual communities and their effects on consumers' purchasing decisions. They concluded that interactions between members may change purchasing intentions and decisions.

Johnson and Lowe (2015), investigated the perception of emotional support in virtual communities, perceived corporate ownership, and skepticism towards other groups. The study found that emotional support does not increase skepticism towards the outside groups concerned, but rather reduces it, when virtual communities (as opposed to those owned by charities, non-profit organizations, and individuals) are owned by the business,

Mpinganjira (2018), examined the antecedents of trust in virtual health communities in her study. The study shows that the usefulness of information, community sensitivity, and shared vision significantly impact consumers' overall confidence in health-related virtual communities.

Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., (2018) examined the effect of sports sponsorship on consumers' participation in virtual brand communities. They noted that virtual communities create brand loyalty, especially from the point of view of consumers, and with this loyalty, the competitiveness of enterprises increases. In the study, the most significant variables on brand loyalty were attitude towards the sponsor, suitability, and relationship quality of virtual brand communities.

Wei et al., (2018) stated that in their studies, members focus on a contract from a psychological point of view when participating in information cooperation within a virtual community. In the study, the psychological contract examined the cooperation of members in two dimensions, and revealed seven different psychological factors.

Bahis et al., (2020) studied the importance of virtual communities in the local area. They revealed the reasons customers join local virtual communities and their behavioral intentions to visit local stores due to the information received about these virtual communities.

Kao et al., (2020) used social change theory to investigate the relationship dynamics of the member-community duo in virtual communities. It has been shown that the effects of social and task communication styles on the speed of commitment to the community are positively managed by both attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance.

Elia et al., (2020) studied the relationship between virtual communities and open innovation. Research has been carried out on how businesses will implement open innovation through virtual brand communities, and how they will implement applications for their purposes.

El-Manstrly et al., (2020) aimed to simultaneously investigate the influence of relational and personal factors on the behavior of members of the virtual travel community. The study contributes to limited research on the drivers of behavior and boundary conditions of virtual travel community members, which is crucial for building thriving communities.

Rodriguez-Lopez and Diz-Comesana (2016), found that virtual communities of different types play a complementary role in creating value together. Communities with informative goals led by their members have revealed a greater availability and mutual relationship of standard value creation practices that promote value creation together. This study stated that virtual communities unite to create a more robust world of communication and information exchange.

Chen et al., (2021), in their work to decipher the causal network of the user participation mechanism within the virtual community, found that there is a conditional dependence between the factors. They determined that user experience and functional value have the most critical effect on user satisfaction, and that social identity plays an essential intermediary role in the participation mechanism. This work enriches the research

methods of user participation mechanisms and provides a reference for the virtual tourism community's theoretical research and management practices.

Xu et al., (2021) examined virtual communities through the concept of social welfare. In this study, it was determined that virtual communities contribute to brand loyalty in tourism marketing. They stated that businesses involved in the field of tourism should use virtual travel communities in order to achieve success.

Luo et al., (2021) researched the intentions of participants who share information in virtual communities in China. By integrating the commitment model and social change theory with the study, they found that the social change benefits of user loyalty mediate the effect of users' information exchange behaviors in virtual communities.

Çavuşoğlu et al., (2021) investigated how badges (titles) given to members in virtual communities affect participation within the community. The study revealed that badges earned and followed at different levels with the study increased the amount of subsequent answering activity. In addition, it was concluded that the gold badges earned in virtual communities have the most impact on users' motivation, while the bronze badges earned have the most negligible impact.

As a result of their studies, Hoffman and Novak (1996) have put internet and computer-based applications at the heart of their marketing practices. Their studies stated that the rise of the internet would significantly change how businesses communicate with their customers over time. They emphasized that the internet is an environment where they can provide and access online content for other businesses and customers with their unique communication model. They stated that consumers and businesses can interact, thanks to the internet, because of the possibilities for producing and accessing this content. Based on Hoffman and Novak's studies (1996), we can say that the internet is a world with active participation, where there are multiple feedback loops and high-speed communication, especially for consumers.

Chiu et al., (2006) are among the most cited in studies on virtual communities. They have created a model to investigate the motivations behind people's information sharing in virtual communities. The study claims that aspects of social capital/social interaction, bonds, trust, reciprocity norms, identification, shared vision, and shared language- will affect individuals' knowledge sharing in virtual communities.

When the literature is examined, it is seen that studies are generally conducted on a single community, and most of these studies are qualitative. In this study, available research has been done on virtual communities, and the lifestyle of a virtual community has been examined. We think this study will be a guide, especially for researchers working on virtual communities. Before proceeding to the concept of a virtual community, it is necessary to touch on the concept of community and the internet, which forms the basis of virtual communities. Also, it has been determined that most studies were carried out since 2010. This shows that this topic is entirely new and needs to be studied. For this reason, we would like to examine in detail the virtual communities we have discussed.

The Concept of Community

A community is an association where people who share certain feelings and thoughts come together and share their experiences. Its members meet with a common denominator, and share comprehensive solidarity in an area with unclear boundaries (Çiftçi et al., 2017: 335). The concept of community, which has an important place in our daily lives, is shifting from physical environments to virtual (online) environments with the development of technology. However, before moving on to virtual communities, it is helpful to examine the concept of community in detail.

Cohen (1985) defined the concept of community as associations that exist in the minds of their members and are symbolically constructed through shared experiences, norms, and culture.

On the other hand, Blanchard and Markus (2002) defined the community as associations where there are emotional shares. By its most general definition, a community is a group formed by people who show decency to coexist with a certain unity of purpose among their members (as cited in Baltacı 2008: 1).

In the literature, the concept of community meets a constructed set of social relations based on the common shares of the community members, in particular, a common sense of belonging.

Communities have become the building blocks that form the basis of social thought. When we look at the past centuries, societies with a relatively deep intellectual history in the 18th and 19th centuries have revealed that they were among the most important study subjects of the great social theorists, scientists and philosophers at the beginning of the

20th century. This data shows that virtual communities were met with increasing interest by consumers, especially at the beginning of the 20th century. In the social sciences, the community emphasizes the importance of experiences in associations, customs, and traditions and the role of structures. As a natural unity, the community is a group where the unifying, communalizing elements between individuals are solid and essential (Robins 1999: 162-163).

McMillan and Chavis (1986: 9) have explained four essential elements in defining the concept of community. These elements are as follows:

- **Membership** is the most critical element that distinguishes whether individuals are part of the community or not. Community members see themselves as part of the community, and identify with the others. For this reason, they feel emotionally safe and start producing within the community. This can be seen as a personal investment, in a sense.

- **Effect** indicates that individuals make a difference and make sense in the community. Members can impact the community in which they are located, and other community members can be affected by this action.

- **Integration and Satisfaction of Needs:** The community members' needs can be met through other members. An important aspect here is the members' creation of a shared resource. Common values within the community are indicated by sharing resources and satisfying needs (material or spiritual).

- **Standard Emotional Connection** is a commitment and belief that members share, and will share, a common history, a common space, spending time together, and similar experiences. Shared emotional connection can ensure positive contact between members, opportunities to share their experiences, methods of honoring members, and members' participation in the community.

Communities, together with the four essential elements listed above, ensure that some important needs of their participants (individuals) are met. These needs are as follows:

1-) Sharing Resources: Communities are associations that exist around topics, experiences, problems that individuals may be interested in, and ways to solve them (Flavian and Guinaliu 2005). A significant degree of information sharing occurs along with individuals' social interaction. For this reason, the participants meet each other's needs by sharing resources.

2-) Building Relationships: Community members with similar problems or experiences can get acquainted. Communities allow individuals to communicate with others. Individuals want to maintain their connections within the community and share them with other members. In other words, thanks to communities, individuals are prone to developing social relationships with others.

3-) Living Dreams: Communities allow members to share their dreams. Members can often take on an imaginary character within the community (Flavian and Guinaliu 2005). In addition, community members can interact by communicating their dreams with other members.

4-) Trade: Community members carry out sales and purchases themselves. The most important feature of these transactions is that the trade takes place more quickly due to individuals' trust in other community members. The sense of trust that arises within the community ensures that the trading steps occur more healthily.

Rickman (1976) proposes four essential psychological elements for developing quality information exchange within the community. These items are:

✓ For people to interact comfortably, they need to be on a site. People need a reason to log in to this site.

✓ People need to feel that the input and output of their shares where they are located are unlimited.

✓ People chat more easily when they have more time on their hands.

✓ People communicate more quickly if they perceive that strangers around them are neighbors. Therefore, communities give people a comfortable perception of neighborliness.

The above definitions of communities are prevalent today because they meet their members' elements and many needs. The fact that communities are so popular has allowed different classes of communities to reach and differentiate.

 Today most individuals assemble due to the research committed to brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001: 412). In addition to the brand communities where individuals share their stories about the brands they use or want to use, they also participate in communities appropriate for

their hobbies or social conversations (Algesheimer et al., 2005, Bagozzi et al., 2006). In addition, individuals are also involved in professional communities to get help with their jobs or to produce content (Andersen 2005). In addition to this classification, with the development of the internet and communication today, communities are now coming together in a digital environment. These associations have also led to the emergence of a new concept, called 'virtual community'.

In the past, the concept of community was defined only as physical association. However, with the development of technology, communities are now defined as individuals who come together in a virtual environment. For this reason, virtual communities, especially for businesses, need to be well understood and researched. One of the main reasons for this is that communities are now turning towards virtual communities. Before proceeding to the concept of a virtual community, information will be given about the concept of the internet, which is the basis of a virtual community.

The Concept of the Internet

The internet is a vast computer network consisting of a connection between computer networks spread all over the world. It is widespread and constantly growing, connecting many computer systems via the TCP/IP protocol. The internet is the correct way to access and share information easily, cheaply, quickly, and securely today.

An essential part of the virtual community concept is the internet, because virtual communities gather in an area created on the internet (this area is called the 'metaverse' today) instead of physical associations. The internet is vital today as a tool used to achieve information, facilitate communication, provode entertainment, and for trade purposes. Before the internet, technology could not provide access to information in a short time. Thanks to the internet, all information resources, written, audio, video, etc., have been collected 'under one roof'. ARPA created the internet in order to be able to fire weapons even if the combat centers are destroyed in the event of a nuclear war. Since the internet was opened up for civilian use, it has allowed communication in various ways. Internet users all over the world of various ages, genders, and educational levels have been provided with the opportunity to play a variety of games ranging from brain teasers to gambling. The most important area of the internet after military use is trade. Thanks to the internet, companies in various fields have been able to trade all over the world (Parlak 2005: 10-11).

As the core of general information technology, the internet has penetrated all aspects, levels, and spheres of society and significantly impacted economic and social development. It is believed that more than 40% of the world's population now has internet access, and the use of mobile devices in this regard, and the use of smartphones in particular, is increasing (Montag et al., 2018).

The internet allows individuals instrumental use, (e.g., it provides access to many resources and services that enable the achievement of multiple goals, and ontological use (for example, achieving well-being through connection with others) (Alvarez-García et al., 2019). The internet has been created through many inventions and innovations in various fields, from computing and communications to regulatory policy, business, and finance.

In the early stages of the internet's development, federal defense-related R&D (Research and Development) funding played a crucial role in building an infrastructure of trained researchers and related institutions, including universities. While scientists and engineers from various countries have made significant contributions to essential research efforts that enable critical communications technologies, the scale of publicly funded US R&D programs and the data networks used by these programs has exceeded simultaneous efforts in the UK and France. In addition, the close relations between academic, defense, and industrial researchers in the US, the large domestic US market, and robust US computer hardware and software industries, helped the internet develop (Mowery and Simcoe 2002: 1369).

The proliferation of the internet with significant monolingual components which provide the US domestic market with rapid industrial growth, and key features of history since 1940, reminds us of the main themes of previous US technological development (Mowery and Rosenberg 1998, Nelson and Wright 1990). Some scholars have argued that the economic importance of this sizeable domestic market declined after 1945, due to the reduction of trade barriers and the revival of international trade and capital flows. (see Nelson and Wright, 1990). The development of the internet includes several examples of foreign inventions and US development, in particular Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) and Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP).

Those engaged in theoretical work on the internet are centred around two schools of thought. The first are researchers, who are called techno-optimists, and consider the internet to be a miracle that can solve all

problems. According to Anthony Corrado, "the internet is a tool that educates the public, mobilizes their democratic participation, keeps the public on the pulse, provides easy access to information about the government, speeds up the voting process, and creates a platform for discussing events of public interest". The internet started the era of democracy without intermediaries and gave power to the people. Thus, instead of the information we receive from biased media bodies, everyone has the opportunity to create their communication network and share what they think with others (as cited in Baltacı 2008: 2). For the techno-sceptics or pessimists group, it is unlikely that the internet will create miracles, strengthen democracy, or increase public participation in the democratic process. This school of thought has widely adopted the idea that the elite will use powers such as the internet to serve their interests, based on the problem of the internet being absorbed by the society, the risk of the disappearance of social bonds between individuals, the increase in inequalities, especially the inequalities between prosperous societies and poor societies, and similar developments in history. It is defended by its authors (Baltacı 2008: 2).

According to a joint study on internet use prepared by We Are Social (2021), and Hootsuite, in 2021, use of the internet and social media channels increased with the Covid-19 pandemic. The remarkable data contained in the report on the internet are as follows:

- The number of internet users worldwide is 59.5% of the world's population. This figure is equivalent to 4.66 billion people.

- People worldwide spend an average of 6 hours and 54 minutes on the internet daily.

- People worldwide spend an average of 3 hours and 24 minutes a day watching television, and 2 hours and 25 minutes on social media.

- People play video games for 54 minutes while reading books for 2 hours and listening to music for 1 hour and 31 minutes.

- 92.6% of internet access is on mobile phones.

- Most internet users (63%) use it to obtain information.

- Google, YouTube, and Facebook are the most visited sites worldwide.

- Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Instagram are the most used social platforms worldwide.

- There are 4.2 billion active social media users in the world.

- Over the past five years, the number of social media users worldwide has increased almost two-fold. Compared to 2019, this number has increased by 13.2%.

- Over the past five years, the time people spend on social media has increased by approximately 150%.

Communication on the internet strengthens consumers by overcoming temporal and geographical limitations. Thus, it ensures the development of groups based on shared interests, most related to purchasing. Decoupling the time and geographical limitations of the internet has enabled communities to come together in this environment. The foundations of online communities were laid with the combination of internet and community concepts. Consumers participate in online communities by using the benefits provided by the internet. Given the information wave on the internet, online platforms have become essential for users to share and exchange information (Chang and Chuang 2011). People come together in digital networks for support, organization, and communication around shared interests (Bagozzi and Dholokia 2002; Rheingold, 2000). They focus on sharing, detailing, and discussing information in an area of interest or personal need online (Hagel 1999; Johnson and Lowe 2015; Zwass, 2010). In particular, the last two decades have witnessed the growing popularity of these online platforms, often called virtual communities (Akrout and Nagy 2018; Islam et al., 2017). Virtual communities created on the internet are computer-mediated spaces in which content and communication are integrated, emphasizing user-generated content (Lee et al., 2003). Comments found in an online community can be read by many members and affect purchasing decisions, since they are considered to come from peers who do not have business interests (Kozinets, 1999).
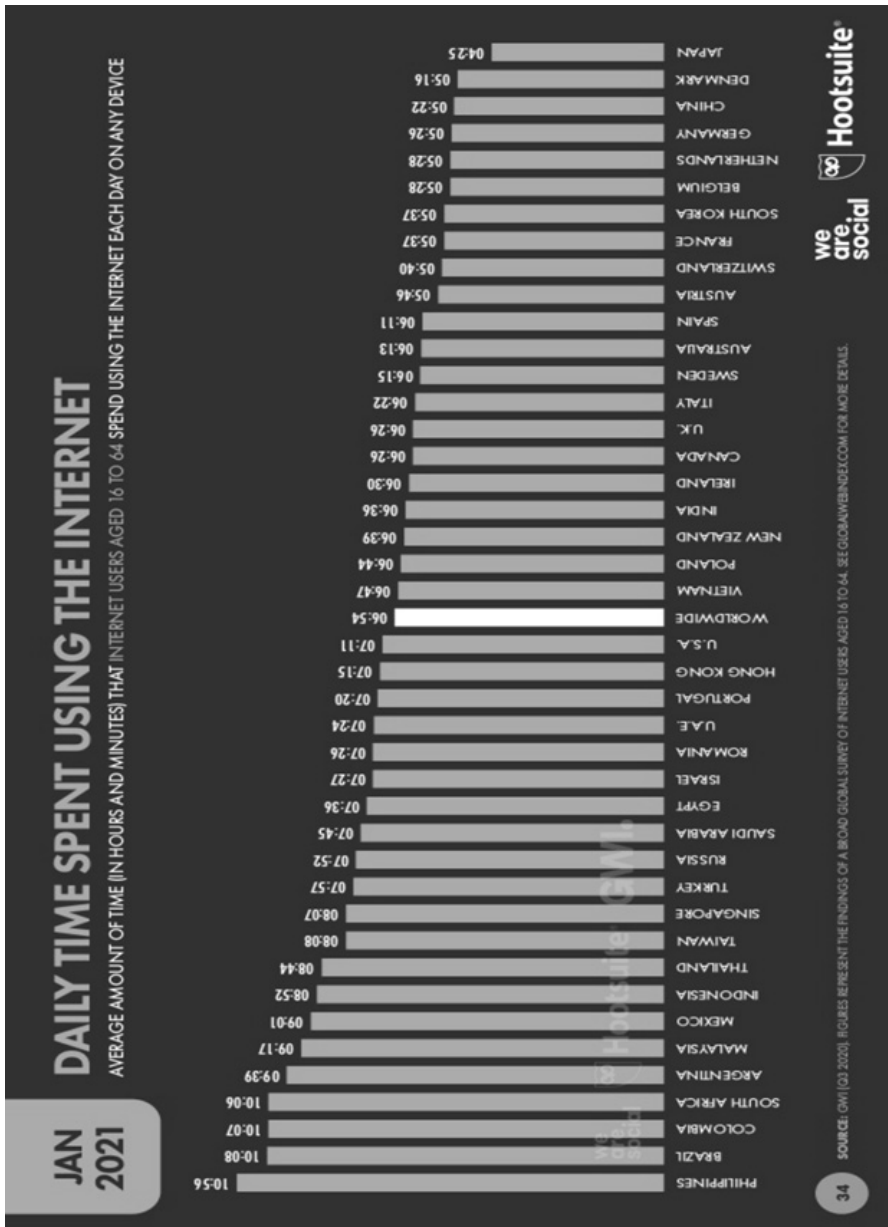
Figure 1.1. Daily Internet Usage Times (We Are Social 2021)

SOCIAL MEDIA USERS vs. TOTAL POPULATION

ACTIVE SOCIAL MEDIA USERS* AS A PERCENTAGE OF THE TOTAL POPULATION

JAN 2021

Country	Percentage
NIGERIA	15.8%
KENYA	20.2%
GHANA	26.1%
INDIA	32.3%
SOUTH AFRICA	41.9%
EGYPT	47.4%
WORLDWIDE	53.6%
MOROCCO	59.3%
INDONESIA	61.8%
ROMANIA	62.6%
CHINA	64.6%
RUSSIA	67.8%
ITALY	67.9%
POLAND	68.5%
BRAZIL	70.3%
TURKEY	70.8%
U.S.A.	72.3%
VIETNAM	73.7%
JAPAN	74.3%
FRANCE	75.9%
BELGIUM	76.0%
COLOMBIA	76.4%
IRELAND	76.4%
PORTUGAL	76.6%
MEXICO	77.2%
U.K.	77.9%
ISRAEL	78.1%
THAILAND	78.7%
GERMANY	78.7%
SAUDI ARABIA	79.3%
ARGENTINA	79.3%
AUSTRIA	79.9%
AUSTRALIA	79.9%
SPAIN	80.0%
PHILIPPINES	80.7%
SWITZERLAND	81.8%
NEW ZEALAND	82.0%
SWEDEN	82.1%
DENMARK	83.6%
SINGAPORE	84.4%
CANADA	84.9%
HONG KONG	85.6%
MALAYSIA	86.0%
NETHERLANDS	88.0%
TAIWAN	88.1%
SOUTH KOREA	89.3%
U.A.E.	99.0%

△ SOCIAL MEDIA USER NUMBERS MAY NOT REPRESENT UNIQUE INDIVIDUALS. VALUES ARE NOT COMPARABLE WITH PREVIOUS REPORTS DUE TO SOURCE CHANGES.

Hootsuite®

we are social

SOURCES: KEPIOS (JAN 2021), BASED ON DATA FROM: COMPANY EARNINGS ANNOUNCEMENTS; PLATFORMS' SELF-SERVICE ADVERTISING TOOLS; CNNIC; CAFEBAZAAR; OCDH. VALUES CAPPED AT 99%. NOTES: DIFFERENCES IN LOCAL DATA AVAILABILITY MEAN COUNTRY FIGURES MAY NOT CORRELATE WITH GLOBAL TOTALS. *ADVISORY: *USER* FIGURES MAY NOT REPRESENT UNIQUE INDIVIDUALS. ⊕ COMPARABILITY ADVISORY: SOURCE AND BASE CHANGES. DATA ARE NOT COMPARABLE WITH PREVIOUS REPORTS.
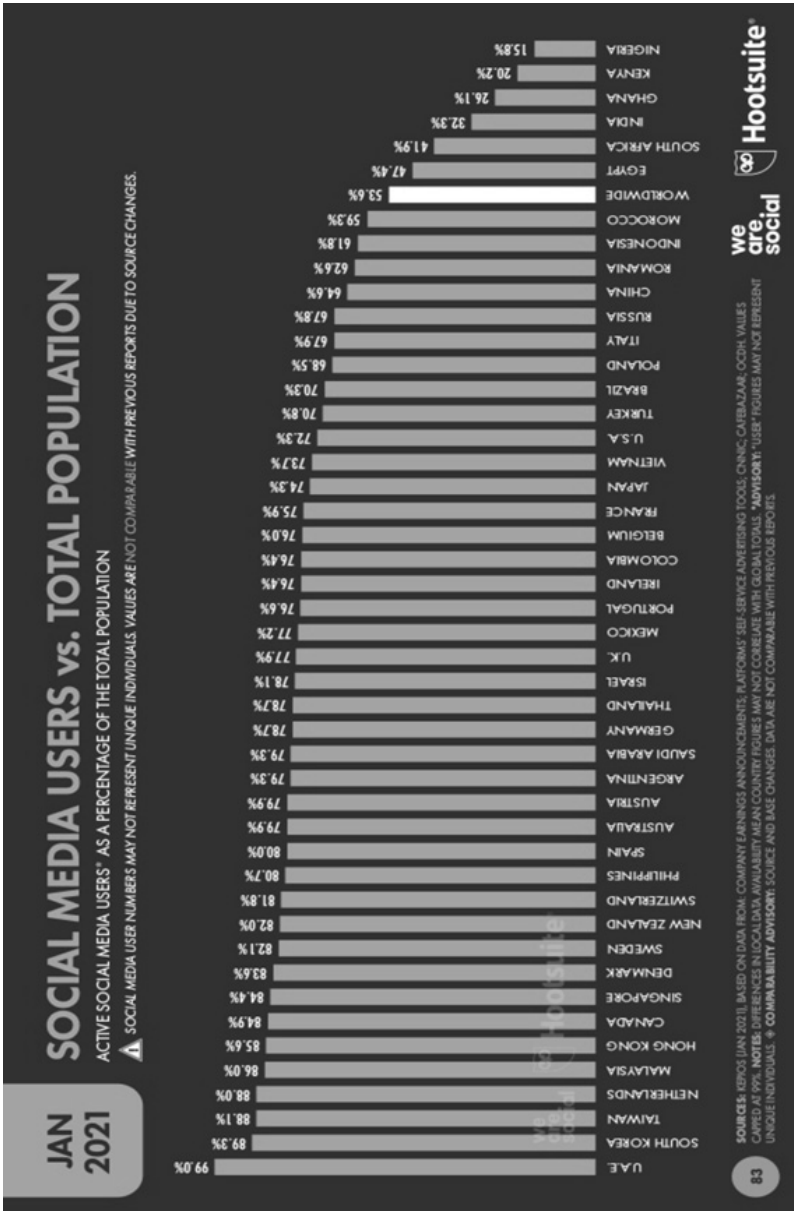
83

Figure 1.2. Social Media Users and the Total Population
(We Are Social 2021)

With the development of the internet, as stated, it has become inevitable for communities that come together physically to come together in the virtual environment. This development has led to the emergence of virtual communities. In this section, information about virtual communities, which are an essential tool for consumers and businesses, will be given.

Virtual Communities

The evolution of the worldwide network, known as the internet, has led to the formation or construction of virtual communities that will take place. These virtual communities are groups of netizens (internet citizens) who share common interests, hobbies, and likes. They are created through links with social media networks and other social interactive sites. With the development of the internet and social media technologies, it has become more accessible for people to come together on online platforms (Osatuyi 2013). Social media technologies have transformed people's daily lives in society into places where they can comfortably talk to each other and exchange ideas (Tajvidi et al., 2018). Thus, people have become more willing to share and search for information with virtual platforms (Lin and Wang, 2020). Although communities have been interacting online since the 1970s, the concept of a virtual community is relatively new and has certain connotations (Turkle, 1995).

Virtual communities are registered members who come together on online platforms to share information (Tseng et al., 2014: 28-49). They are social media sites supported by their technological infrastructure (See-To and Ho 2014: 182-189; Liou et al, 2016: 187-216).

According to Rheingold (2000), the 'virtual community' is a social collective of personal relationship networks in cyberspace that communicate over the internet, chat, know each other to a certain extent, are loaded with emotions, and share specific knowledge. More and more people are becoming involved in information cooperation in virtual communities. A virtual community is an online social network in which people with common interests, goals, or practices interact to share information and knowledge in social interactions (as cited in Chiu et al., 2006).

Virtual communities are personal relationship networks formed by a sufficient number of people on the internet. Since online groups do not come together realistically, it is a matter of debate whether these groups should be called communities (Baltaci 2008: 1). According to Rheingold, the structural formation in virtual communities has features such as

partnership of interests, shared consciousness, and group thought to experience. Unity, integrity, and reciprocity, are essential elements in the virtual community structure (Robins 1999: 162-163).

Figure 1.3. Virtual Community Word Cloud
(Created by the author)

According to Maloney-Krichmar and Preece, (2005: 203) virtual community interactions, non-verbal agreements, rituals, protocols, rules, and laws, together with policies conducted with a common interest or purpose, and social interaction in the format, to support and facilitate a sense of togetherness, is defined as a group of people who use computer systems.

Carver (1999), defined virtual communities as an essential tool that brings people together. People come to virtual communities to be able to connect with other people. That is why virtual communities are places of interest. Because virtual communities have tighter relationships of trust and honest insight, it is easier and faster for people to enter these communities.

Romm and Clarke (1995), defined virtual communities as communities where humans communicate face-to-face in a physical environment, and come together through electronic, instead of physical, media.

The results revealed from these definitions of the virtual community can be deciphered as the realization of discussions between people, information flows, and social meetings on online platforms.

Virtual communities involve the exchange of information over a certain period of time, chat rooms, online forums, and bulletin boards on the internet, such as the social set (Baker 2002; Balasubramanian and Mahajan

2001; Blanchard, 2007). The community is built around a common interest, experience, or task, guided by both explicit and implicit rules of conduct that members have (Hagel and Armstrong, 1997). These individuals create personal relationship networks (Rheingold, 2000) that provide each other with friendship, information, belonging, and social resources (Wang et al., 2012). Although virtual communities are located in a virtual environment, group members act as a physically public community with standard rules, values, and codes of conduct (McWilliam, 2000).

Virtual communities are online social entities in which members communicate to share information for mutual learning or problem-solving (Lechner and Hummel, 2002). Therefore, online transactions, travel, restaurants, entertainment, online games, and internet transactions are also accessed, along with various others, including the exchange of information and resource usage (Pai and Tsai, 2011; El-Manstrly et al., 2020; Dong et al., 2020; Luo et al., 2020; Garcia Martinez, 2017).

Virtual communities play essential roles in people's daily interpersonal communication, information exchange, and more (Lu et al., 2010). As a result of repeated interactions, members form emotional bonds with other members (Fernback and Thompson, 1995). Meyer et al., (2001) defined such emotional connections as members' commitment to virtual communities, and stated that this might affect the cognition and behavior of members in virtual communities.

Figure 1.4. The World of Virtual Communities

According to De Valck (2005: 29), virtual communities have no complete definition. However, the separation of virtual communities can be considered in six dimensions, considering the organizational structure. These dimensions are pretty important because the impact of a virtual community on members is relevant due to its establishment. These six dimensions are;

- **Commercial and non-commercial virtual communities**: Virtual communities vary according to their commercialization status. A commercial virtual community can generate revenue through sponsorship and advertising. For example, Unilever sponsored ivillage (or i-village) and placed many ads on it. Examples of non-commercial virtual communities are virtual communities established in the academic community (such as TRKPA, the Electronic Group of Turkish Marketing Academics).

- **Virtual communities, with and without supporters:** Virtual communities can be associated with businesses, organizations, associations, communities, and various other organizations. For example, virtual communities for a brand are in relationships with the manufacturer. The producers are the managers of such communities. Nevertheless, even if one person is a member of these communities, there may also be members who have problems with the company. For example, there are virtual communities created by Star-Trek fans and Anti-Nike groups.

- **Open system and closed virtual system communities:** Most virtual communities are open to anyone who wants to join. Nevertheless, some virtual communities are aimed only at a privileged community. The intranet closed system is an example of a virtual community. Virtual communities that provide access and information after payment are also closed systems. The degree of openness of the systems of virtual communities has an impact on the group dynamics.

- **Virtual communities in correlation with real life and virtual reality:** Online communities, other than commercial communities, may be based on a physical topic. These can have a geographical focus and be related to news, events, people, and regions, in a residential area. In specific periods, members can arrange face-to-face meetings.

- **Regular and irregular virtual communities:** Although some virtual communities have a strict order, there is no order in others. Professional

employees hired by the company are managers in virtual communities for the brand. Such managers initiate, stop, or intervene in discussions. Other virtual communities find administrators voluntarily. However, most virtual communities do not have administrators, which may create difficulties when they are faced with racist, hostile and unpleasant situations. Group dynamics, on the other hand, are connected with the degree of order.

- **Virtual communities in the form of registration-based participation or participation without registration:** Virtual communities differ according to the degree of registration. In virtual communities with an open system, participants have the right to read conversations without registration. Diversity is also observed in registration. Sometimes, only one e-mail is sufficient, while in some cases, registration of personal information is requested (Erdoğan and Torun 2009: 56-59).

When the definitions mentioned above, and the literature are examined, there is no standard definition of virtual communities. In this context, virtual communities (Leimeister et al., 2008: 353):

- Interact and encounter other people,

- Connect with special attention,

- Decouple through a technical platform,

We can define them as groups of people who can establish social relations or who feel they belong to the group in which they are located.

Virtual communities, as digital platforms, facilitate knowledge sharing among members on matters of mutual interest through solid social relations, a shared history, community rituals, continuity of communication, and a common platform (online meeting space) (Stanoevska Slabeva, 2002: 71). There are no geographical boundaries in virtual communities, and they are located geographically independently (Teller 2008, Flavián and Guinalíu, 2005). Utilitarian and hedonic purchases provided by sales transactions made somewhere in the last century are now provided online (Babin et al., 1994; Arnold and Reynolds, 2003). This development has created an essential factor for strengthening enterprises that do not have real estate (Bollweg et al., 2018). However, given that today large enterprises do not usually have real estate, the importance of physical space is decreasing daily. In addition, having a mobile phone usually

brings a significant burden. However, it depends on time, knowledge, and financial instruments to participate actively in virtual capital enterprises (Bartelheimer et al., 2018). In addition, local businesses that do not have an online store are irrelevant for geographically dispersed members of virtual communities. Local businesses are missing out on critical economic benefits that virtual communities have in their digital channels for promoting and selling their products (Olbrich and Holsing, 2011).

This situation raises several discussion questions. The first of these is whether individuals exist in a physical environment. A person either exists or does not exist. However, the feeling of presence in online communities is perceived differently. Salmons (2015), expresses this feeling with four concepts. These are:

- Environmental asset,

- Personal assets,

- Social presence and

- It is a cognitive entity.

Environmental feeling also refers to an environment that exists in a virtual or online environment and interacts with a person. It is associated with being able to create a character online and return to it again in an environment appropriate for their interests and behaviors. In a personal being, there is a feeling that a person physically exists in that environment. Individuals experience a state of physical existence in virtual communities. In social existence, situations such as creating and maintaining relationships in online communication through a computer, creating productive and social systems, conducting meaningful interactions, and feeling subjective about being related and together with others, are referred to. There is a perception of a person's potential to participate in a critical approach with a cognitive entity (Kalafatoglu 2015: 387).

Looking at the historical development of virtual communities, the first virtual communities appeared in the 1970s to build relationships. In the 1990s, with the development of websites, there was an increase in virtual communities due to e-mails, chat rooms, and other message systems (Flavian and Guinaliu 2005: 407). Nowadays, it continues its development rapidly with the help of developing technologies. The historical development of virtual communities is given in Table 1.1.