

## **[Abstract]**

# **Social Capital in Cyberspace: Analysis on the Forum of 'Company I'**

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This study aims to understand the process of social capital formation in the cyberspace by analyzing cyber communities brought to existence thanks to information science technologies.

These new information technologies, including the Internet, take up increasingly important role in the everyday lives of ordinary people. In addition, people spend more and more time on-line. The cyber space is one in which interaction and communication among individuals are computer-mediated(CMC), where people enjoy more opportunities to get in touch with strangers. The formation and disconnection of social relations are more easily carried out because the underlying social constraints and sanction might be weaker in the cyberspace than in the traditional social setting. People with various backgrounds form groups of their own according to their interests and purposes, which are usually called cyber communities.

If so, will this formation of social relations in the cyberspace characterized by convenience and freedom contribute to enriching individual lives both

quantitatively and qualitatively? This question can also be seen in the context of social capital research currently in vogue in the social sciences, because the latter emphasizes the creation of diverse values by means of relations. Although it is true that social capital research so far has largely focused on off-line relations, the impact of online relations is also worth careful examination especially when we consider the prediction that the latter will become more and more important in a near future.

Starting from this context, the current study attempted to single out the combination of various factors that can contribute to the formation of online social capital and thereby enriching the lives of individuals and groups.

The results show that, although the online social relations are formed in a unstable situation where the strength of ties are usually weaker and the information about one another is scanted, they can be transformed into beneficial social capital if there were stability of relationship and a certain set of institutional arrangements. More specifically, two types of cyber community stood out from the many currently alive in the Forum of the 'Company I'. One is those providing instrumental social capital, in which members can get practical help and information. The other is those providing a more comprehensive form social capital from which member can expect emotional as well as practical benefit. This result suggests that cyber communities, originally made possible by identical social and technical conditions, eventually diverge into multiple types, leading to different forms of social capital. The causes underlying this divergence are the role of the leader and the differences in the institutional arrangements in the community.

**Key Words:** cyberspace, social capital, cyber community, computer-mediated communication, weak tie, the Forum of the 'Company I', comprehensive social capital, instrumental social capital