Virtual Family, Gap Holders, Toolbox and Online Club: Four Profiles of Online Communities in Organized Sports

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Aim
Social Networking Sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter are increasingly implemented in voluntary sports clubs (VSCs) as channels for organizational communication. By using SNSs, the sports clubs are, in fact, building virtual, online communities as an extra 'communication layer', for members and non-members (e.g. fans, sponsors, friends). Although we know that communication, among other things, functions as an instrument to retain members and that almost all 25,000 VCSs in the Netherlands use SNSs as organizational communication channels, there is little insight into how these SNSs function together as virtual communities. To fill this gap, this study suggests that two types of frameworks are important: (1) frameworks that focus on social media communication (e.g. information richness, media richness or information adequacy) and (2) frameworks that focus on community building (e.g. social connectedness and sense of community). If voluntary clubs understand how the processes of online communication and community building interact, they can develop sustainable virtual communities that, ultimately, contribute to organizational goals. From this consideration, we formulated the following research questions:

(RQ1) Which aspects of online communication and community building are currently interlinked?
(RQ2) How do these aspects contribute to profiles of online communities?
(RQ3) Which key concepts to online community building in VSC can be identified?

Theoretical Background and Literature Review
Communities create value because members have a feeling of belonging, that they matter to one another and that they have shared commitment (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). One essential aspect of this 'sense of community theory' is that members feel connected. Social connectedness is often defined as the social interactions, relationships and networks that people have in a larger context than family and friends, and the benefits of it to individuals and to organizations (Lee & Robbins, 1998). In this research, we assume that in organizations the social connectedness between members is the reflection of the communication climate. This communication climate is often defined in terms of openness and trust, have a say, information adequacy and supportiveness (Smidts, Pruyn, & Van Riel, 2001; Trombetta & Rogers, 1988).

Nowadays, communities exist both off-line and online, through social networking sites (SNSs), that, together form so called 'virtual or online communities', online spaces with potential of integration of (member-generated) content and conversations. SNSs are seen as effective (rich) communication channels, because they offer opportunities to immediate feedback, interpersonal communication and vivid content (Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012). To commercial brands, virtual or online brand communities are of vital importance to customer engagement (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014). Our research project focuses on

online community building in member organizations, such as voluntary sports clubs and measures the impact of aspects of community building and social media communication.

Methodology and Data Analysis

To answer the research questions, we analyzed essays from 22 students of the bachelor program Sports Communication, all members of VCSs. Because of their age, interest and experience with SNSs, we expected the students to discuss the SNSs of their clubs more as experienced users than as theoretical experts. Since young adolescents are a risk group when it comes to retaining membership, it is important to gain more insight into their perceptions and ideas about SNSs as organizational communication channels of VSCs. With a qualitative approach, particularly the writing of an essay, we expected that we could identify the individual perceptions and ideas about SNS use and community building and thus gain an in-depth understanding. In order to carry out the task, students were asked to write about their experiences and ideas regarding the SNS of their VSCs. After two coding rounds (deductive and inductive), using the Atlas.ti.8.0 coding tool, we were able to derive 64 themes from the essays of the students. These themes were in line with or an extension of aspects of our frameworks (online communication and community building). We then interconnected these themes by using a repertory grid and were able to construct profiles (types of communities) and to identify key concepts.

Results and Conclusions

The results revealed four demarcated profiles that portray how students perceive the SNSs at their club: (1) the online club (strong at social media communication and community building), (2) the virtual family (strong at community building), (3) the online toolbox (strong at social media communication), and the (4) gap holders (weak at social media communication and community building). Furthermore, we were able to identify several key concepts that are important indicators of the four profiles, such as 'identification with the club', 'presence at SNS', 'empowerment strategy', 'sense of togetherness', 'perceived benefits of SNS'. Although we realize that the samples of students are quite specific, the results provide insight into SNS use and the potential of SNSs for building virtual communities in membership organizations, such as VSCs.

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