

**Virtual sport communities: Exploring participants' perspectives on member-initiated versus organisation-sponsored brand communities**

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Abstract 492**

More people use the Internet to participate in virtual communities than to make purchase transactions (Porter, 2004). The immense popularity of professional sports has brought fans to the Internet in search of ways of communicating with like-minded others (Farquhar & Meeds, 2007). This paper reports on a longitudinal study that is examining the online interactions of participants within two virtual communities in relation to the same sporting team. The two online communities are differentiated by how they were initiated. The first is a member-initiated community which was established by, and remains managed by, the members within that community. The second community is organisation-sponsored in that it was initiated by the sporting organisation as part of their online presence and marketing strategy (Porter 2004). The purpose of this study is to compare the attributes of these two communities from the members' perspectives to explore the potential advantages and disadvantages of both models in engaging consumers in the building of a sport brand community.

Brand communities were defined by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p.412) as "based on a structured set of relationships among admirers of a brand." In sport, many of these communities evolve about sporting teams as members interact to discuss their shared interests and parade their identities. To date, most virtual community research has focussed on member-initiated communities, perhaps due to the nature of evolution of virtual communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Yet virtual communities that are sponsored by organisations are increasing in prevalence (Bughin & Zeisser, 2001). It has been hypothesized that companies could improve their brands and build stronger relationships with their customers through organisation-sponsored virtual communities (Shang, Chen & Liao, 2006; McWilliam, 2000). Alternatively though, it has also been hypothesized that consumers may be less open within an organisation-sponsored environment where privacy concerns are considered an issue as compared to a member-initiated community (Sheehan & Hoy, 1999). This study explores these questions from the community members' perspective within the context of the two virtual sport communities.

This study is examining the behavior of the members in their online communal setting. The data for the paper was collected across a six-month period of time during the playing season for the sport. Two primary methods were utilized in the collection of data. The first is observation of the computer-mediated communications within the groups. This includes analysis of forum threads, polls, photos, and files that the groups have created during their online existence. The second is online interviews with community members using chat software.

References:

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