

Online Sport Communities: Lurking, Participation and Commitment

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More people use the Internet to participate in virtual communities than to make purchase transactions (Horrigan, 2001). The popularity of virtual communities reflects the fact that individuals are using new technologies, such as the Internet, to fulfil both social and economic goals (Rheingold, 1993; Wind and Mahajan, 2002). Virtual communities of consumption are a specific subgroup of virtual communities that can be defined as 'affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities' (Kozinets, 1999). Consumption communities can be found for a multitude of sports, teams and recreation activities. Indeed online sport communities are amongst the most numerous and fastest growing brand communities on the Internet (Devasagayam & Buff, 2008). Research has shown that parading and confirming identity along with information collection and dissemination are among the primary motivations that attract consumers to actively participate within online communities (Devasagayam & Buff, 2008). However little research has focussed on those who participate non-publicly. Non-public participation within an online community is referred to as lurking and occurs when an individual joins a community, but infrequently posts.

It is estimated that up to 90% of community membership consists of lurkers (Ridings, Gefen & Arinze, 2006). This can be an important consideration since advertising and sponsors to support the existence of the community are often attracted on membership size. Yet obtaining an understanding of this silent majority can be difficult. Since lurkers do not actively post, but rather observe, it is difficult for community moderators and sport organisations to gather information about them from within the community conversation. Yet it is important to know about them as their presence does affect the community and it is likely they are affected by the community content and possibly community sponsors even if they do not actively contribute. This study examines the nature of lurking within online sport communities. It is specifically examining why people lurk, their motivation for membership within the community and considers commitment both to the sport or team of interest and the community. Differences that may exist between posters and lurkers that impact consumption behavior external to the community exist are also sought. Data was collected across three online sport communities. In-depth interviews were conducted with 45 members of the communities identified as lurkers, low-frequency posters and frequent posters. The content of the interviews is being analysed for dominant themes. Initial results show that lurking is considered positively by most community members interviewed and that many of those lurking do feel and consider themselves community members.