Manager interest in online communities stems from the influence they are believed to have on members’ decision making, and the opportunity they offer to rapidly disseminate knowledge and perceptions regarding new products. Online communities are an aggregation of people who share a common interest and communicate through electronic mailing lists, chat rooms, internet user groups or any other computer-mediated mechanism. Online communities vary between those tightly bound, closely knit networks of individuals who come together in the mediated digital environment and have little chance of ever meeting physically. A well managed online community has potential to extend customer relationship management initiatives to include interaction among customers, leveraging such interactions to attract and retain customers.

Limited research into online communities has investigated a specific context/industry, namely online travel communities and computer software online communities. In addition, researchers have examined individual motivations and social influences on participation in online communities and behaviours resulting from the desire to act as part of a group. The limited application of this research gives rise to an increasing importance to adapt the model to new contexts. In addition, very limited research has investigated the impact of online communities on social capital and offline social interaction. The internet’s impact on social capital has received attention in the literature, however online communities have not been specifically investigated. As online communities often foster millions of individuals, it is worthwhile understanding how online participation in these communities impact social interactions in the ‘real world’.

Online communities are particularly relevant to sport organisations. Sport is unique from other sources of entertainment or industry through evoking high levels of emotional attachments and identification. Here, the strong desire of fans to connect or identify with the organisation drives a range of behaviours, such as basking in reflected glory (or BIRGing), that are highly uncommon in other industries. The value of online communities in connecting fans not only with the team, but with other fans is also obvious for an industry that increasingly is seeking to connect with fans who are reducing attendance expenditure and cannot attend live games to grow revenues. Online communities have been successfully established around the world in multiple sports, for example over 14 million people have joined Cristiano Ronaldo’s Facebook page, and over 100 000 individuals have contributed to Manchester United’s online community.

The premise of the proposed research model is that participation within an online community is manifested as a result of three progressive stages, ‘Value perceptions’, ‘Social influence variables’ and ‘Decision making & participation’. The ‘Value perception’ phase consists of an individual considering what personal benefits can be gained from participation within the online community; these can include single or multiple benefits. The ‘Social influence variables’ are those external factors that influence the individual to undertake participation within the community; these include the opportunity to develop a social identity as well as the influence of group norms. Finally, the desire to act as part of a group influences the individual to ultimately participate. This study proposes to research these three stages in the sporting context then proceeds to research and investigate the association this participation has on the individual’s attitudes and behaviours toward the sporting organisation. In addition, this model proposes to research the impact participation within these communities has on offline social interaction and participation. The model is adapted from previous studies relating to online communities and motivations for participation within them. This model provides variables highly relevant to the sporting context, such as the ability to develop a social identity among other fans and identify with a group of individuals of which one belongs. It also provides the ability to show personal knowledge and expertise in an area of interest. Amongst many others, it also provides fans with the ability to act and participate as part of a group with a common goal.

Preliminary data collection is underway, implementing mixed method research by way of focus groups and online surveys. Understanding the motives comprising desire to participate in such online communities allows managers to adapt their website offerings to foster realisation of those motivations. In addition, understanding the role online community’s play in the life of sport fans allows organisations to synergise their online and offline activities to maximise involvement of their fans. This study furthers previous research by researching the motivations to participate in an online community in an untested and new context. In addition, it investigates the individual attitudes and behaviours proceeding participation within an online community, such as whether online participation complements or substitutes offline community interaction and purchase intentions toward the club. This was an area identified as requiring future research.