Netnographic Analysis of User-Generated Online Community

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It has been noted in past literature that online communities can be classified according to their ownership and origin: user-generated (UG) and firm-sponsored (FS) online communities. UG communities are those that are established, run and managed solely by the members that comprise the community. FS communities are those that are sponsored by either commercial or non-commercial organisations and are under the firm's ultimate control. In a sport context, UG communities are typically owned and operated by fans of sport teams, whilst the teams, broadcast partners and the sports governing bodies, maintain their own FS communities. Differences between the two generally include the level of moderation, how strictly rules/guidelines are adhered to and the percentage of 'outsiders' or individuals who don't support the club/league.

Generally, FS online communities have received greater attention in the literature; however research in this entire field is still in its infancy. Research findings comparing UG and FS online communities are even more limited. The work that does exist shows members of UG online communities found perceived information quality and system quality as more important in enhancing commitment to an online community than in company-initiated communities. Past research has also found that FS online communities “have different operating mechanisms than a consumer-initiated one”.

Researchers have also identified the perceived benefits gained from participating in online communities, called 'Individual Value Perceptions'. Individual Value Perceptions include Purposive values (participant has the ability to seek/distribute information), self discovery (accepting and deepening of salient aspects of one's self), maintaining interpersonal interconnectivity (benefits obtained from developing and maintaining contact with other members), social enhancement (participation enhances one's professional reputation) and hedonic benefits (personal enjoyment and entertainment).

Given the embryonic state of research into online communities, there are still many unanswered questions. Notably, the motivations identified have not been examined in terms of their relative contribution to overall engagement with online communities. These motivations have been primarily examined quantitatively of late and within a limited context scope. There are a number of reasons why UG communities might differ in both content, user motivation and user characteristics given that they are less moderated, have no affiliation to official sporting clubs and include variable information/rumours. The first step in this process is to understand what UG communities are currently being used for, and examine if that differs from what we know of FS communities.

Our research question is therefore - What are user-generated online communities being used for? When investigating the content of online communities, previous studies have employed adapted qualitative techniques such as netnography. “Netnography”, or ethnography on the internet, is a relatively new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study online cultures and communities. Like all content analysis techniques, netnography provides the ability to identify the types of consumers inhabiting each type of community, discussion topics, perceived attitudes, and reported offline behaviours.

Sport was selected as an appropriate industry to research UG online communities given the passion of sport fans and the high degree of social media adoption by sporting organisations and fans. In addition, sport is a fundamental socialising agent and topic of discussion for communities across race, gender, class and geographic location. An online community related to the Australian Football League (AFL) was chosen as the specific focus of this exploratory study. The AFL is the most popular sport in Australia and boasts the highest attendance figures. The competition comprises 17 teams with membership of teams ranging from 30,000 – 60,000 season ticket holders. Consumers are having increasingly higher levels of engagement and involvement with their clubs, therefore this exaggerates the need to understand how AFL fans are engaging with not only their club, but other AFL fans via an online medium.
The online community selected for this study was a UG, not for profit, online community specifically for supporters of the AFL team, Essendon Football Club (EFC), called ‘BomberBlitz’ (www.bomberblitz.com). This forum was created in 1997 in order to develop a virtual community in which EFC fans, worldwide, could congregate and discuss matters relating primarily to AFL and the EFC. As the target sample was AFL fans, this online community was deemed a ‘research question relevant group’. At the commencement of this study, BomberBlitz had 245,429 member posts, showing an abundance of ‘traffic’ postings. It also had 6,470 registered members, with 449 active users online on the date accessed (28/06/2011) illustrating a large number of message posters. This online community had over 2,500 topics of discussion, consistent with previous online communities studied suggesting ‘detailed or descriptively rich data’. The EFC is estimated to have approximately 620,000 fans.

An exploratory sample of 508 posts, from 9 threads were analysed over a 1 month period. This has been found to be a good sample size and procedure in previous research. The process for specifically selecting threads to be analysed included selecting threads that had been created within the last 48 hours of data collection. This allowed for the researcher to analyse a random selection of forum posts without selections bias and also to gather data from a vast and diverse range of topics. Data were subsequently downloaded and coded in Nvivo 8 according to the definitions and items of constructs from Individual Value Perceptions. In total, 285 on-topic posts were analysed and categorised into one of the five motivations - purposive values, self, maintaining interpersonal interconnectivity, social enhancement and hedonic benefits.

A total of 82 posts from the 285 on-topic posts (29%) were identified as pertaining to purposive value, for example “Only player to kick more than 100 goals at 3 clubs.”. A total of 16 posts, or 6%, were identified as self discovery and included quotes such as “I defy anyone to convince me that Mick (COACH) wouldn’t be coaching the Pies (TEAM) next year for any reason other than the Buckley (COACH)/2 year contract.” Maintaining interpersonal interconnectivity aggregated 59 posts or 21% and included quotes about non-football discussions, for example “Also I can very much endorse the overall vibe of her show at Big Day Out (MUSIC FESTIVAL)”. A total of 76 posts, or 27%, were identified as social enhancement, for example “Yay, I’m right I’m right!” Finally, 52 posts, or 18%, were identified as Entertainment motives such as humorous comments like “I hear that his position at the Pies (TEAM) next year involves hugging players after Buckley (COACH) loses them consecutive GF’s (GRAND FINALS).”

This research has given initial insights into the content within sporting online communities and suggests that the major motivations for participating within sporting online communities include information seeking or providing, creating or fostering relationships within the community, and finally, having the ability to assert knowledge, status or superiority over a community group. These findings somewhat support previous research in FS online communities, particularly research that suggest individuals use the internet for status enhancing as well as seeking information. Future research should look to more directly compare and contrast UG and FS online communities on their motivations to participate by sampling posts from UG and FS online communities.