

Online Leisure Communities: The Case of Tennis Enthusiasts

by

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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ABSTRACT

Online communities represent important virtual spaces “where people come together with others to converse, exchange information or other resources, learn, play, or just be with each other” (Resnick & Kraut, 2011, p. 1). They are communication vehicles independent of time and location (Rheingold, 1994) offering users a convenient, timely, and a reliable way to socialize with others (Chayko, 2008). As such they may replace, or at least extend more traditional communities. In a tennis context, traditional clubs bring together members so that they can share their common interest in tennis. In general, the clubs facilitate their connection to the sport of tennis. This same club, in a virtual format, can play this same role but the members need not come together in a physical sense. Club members may be located from around the globe as they share and interact with their fellow club members. Online thousands of these members can engage in simultaneous discussions of any aspect of the sport.

The overall goal of the study is to better understand online dynamics between posters as they interact online. The message board Talk Tennis was selected as a test site. It is the oldest and largest message board of its type and is devoted entirely to the sport of tennis. The board was monitored using three guiding questions. First, how does online community develop and evolve within Talk Tennis? Second, how do tennis enthusiasts use Talk Tennis? Third, how do tennis enthusiasts influence each other within Talk Tennis? In particular, the evolving nature of word-of-mouth communication was considered as posters share, debate, aid, and support fellow posters. Group dynamics were monitored within 19,782 messages posted to 54 Talk Tennis discussion threads.

Results suggest that posters tend to use the message board to fulfill three basic functions: to express themselves, to seek utility, and to offer help to others. The online dynamics were often complex as posters sought to fulfill their various goals. For example, posters adopted a variety of roles to ensure the smooth functioning of this online community. Throughout, posters exchanged information, experiences, outside resources, collectively helping with the decision-making. They actively engaged their network while focusing on community success. These insights suggest how traditional face-to-face dynamics are reproduced and enhanced online.

Keywords: netnography, interpersonal dynamics, message board, tennis

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The list of the abbreviations presented here was modified from a policy based discussion thread¹² to include abbreviations presented in this dissertation. Please note, that it is not an all-inclusive list of abbreviations commonly used in computer-mediated communication, such as IM (instant messaging). Instead, the list is representative of the sport specific jargon and abbreviations used by posters of Talk Tennis.

AD	Abu Dhabi tennis tournament (http://www.mubadalawtc.com/)
Admins	administrators, those who manage technical aspects of the message board including rules, database operations, etc. In Talk Tennis, administrators can act as moderators.
Alles gute	all the best in German
AO	Australian Open
ATP (tour)	Association of Tennis Professionals
bagel	set result 6:0
breadstick	set result 6:1
BTW	by the way
cyborg:	term used to refer to professional tennis player Novak Djoković
Djoker	Novak Djoković
Fedal	Federer and Nadal match up
Feddites	Federer fans
FFS	For fuck's sake!
flashscore	live tennis scores from (http://www.myscores.ca/tennis/)

FO	French Open
frame	tennis racquet
GIF	graphics interchange format that supports static and animated images
G.O.A.T. or goat	greatest of all time
GS	Grand Slam (each of the four majors)
H2H	head to head
HC	hard court
HTH	hope that helps
lmao	laughing my ass off
Lol	laugh out loud
MP	match point
Mains	strings on a racquet parallel with the length of the frame
mods	moderators, forum staff who oversee and manage threads; they ban members who violate policies (troll, spam) and can delete threads
Nadalians	Nadal fans
nr2	number 2 (referring to world No. 2)
PC	personal computer or politically correct
PS	Pro Staff, refers to a type of racquet
PWS	Perimeter weighting system (stringing)
ReRe	short for Serena Williams
RF	short for Roger Federer
RG	Roland Garros or French Open, one of the four Grand Slams

RPM	type of string, Babolat RPM blast
Safin	Marat Safin, Russian retired tennis player and politician
SF	semi final
Spoiler	a thread that contains a recent match result
Stanimal	nickname for Stan Wawrinka
SW	Serena Williams
TB	tie break
Troll	someone who makes posts simply to argue or gain attention
TTW	Talk Tennis Warehouse
TW	Tennis Warehouse
Ultron	name of a marvel comic book hero used for referring to Novak Djoković
USO	US Open
utr	universal tennis rating
WADA	world anti-doping agency
WTA	Women's Tennis Association
WTF	world tour finals
ZX	type of tennis string, Ashaway MonogutZX

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Online participation has been on a rise for the past decade (Internet Live Stats, 2017). Online communities are characterized here as “any virtual social space where people come together to get and give information or support, to learn or to find company” (Preece, 2001, p. 348). Such spaces encourage people to share stories and day-to-day experiences. Anyone with access to the Internet can find and participate in numerous online communities.

Several conditions characterize communication within online communities. First, online communication tends to be one-to-many (Dawson, 2005; Qualman, 2009, 2013). Participants who post information or commentary do so for the entire community. Second, the messages tend to be uncoordinated and fragmented. Given their multiple sources like peer-to-peer communication, they can be diverse and even contradictory. As a result, messages in forums and online, in general, can get muddled (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). This can pose ongoing challenges for sporting organizations, such as tournament organizers, needing to develop a clear and cohesive social media strategy (Thompson, Martin, Gee, & Eagleman, 2014).

Online communities also represent an opportunity for participants and the sport alike. Such communities can offer consumers very personal and meaningful opportunities for conversation and connectedness. Through such means, understanding can be enhanced and lasting relationships developed. Through online outlets, problems may be identified and solutions created (Qualman, 2009).

The Challenge for Event Organizers

Broadly, this research focuses on sports enthusiasts; tennis fans and participants. Fans are those who devote their time, attention and resources, such as money to a team, athlete or sport

habitually (see Dionisio, Leal, & Moutinho, 2008). A fan is enthusiastic about the sport or an athlete (see Wann, 1995). Fans may be participants themselves but this is not a necessary condition for fandom. Indeed, many fans may not play the game but may still be deeply interested in various facets of the sport. Of particular interest, within the fan community is the spectator of professional tennis events. Spectators are those who “merely watch and observe” (see Sloan, 1989). For this study, a tennis spectator is someone who watches and observes a particular event like the Australian Open, a match, such as a quarter-final, and/or a performance significant in nature including a favourite player or a historical match, such as Serena competing for the 22nd Grand Slam title. A spectator can follow these matches using a number of outlets, like in person through event attendance, on television through channel subscription, such as TSN or ESPN, listening to the radio, or streaming online.

Given this perspective, a spectator represents a subset from within a fan community. A spectator is a fan but a fan need not be a spectator. Some fans may seek sport related paraphernalia, may study historical statistics or even the lives of the players. They need not spectate in order to express their fan status (see Robinson, Trail, Dick, & Gillentine, 2005). This research, though, is message board poster based. These posters are sports enthusiasts. The study focuses on posters, sports enthusiasts, who can be both spectators, those who “merely watch and observe” an event, a match, or performance and participants and fans, who in various ways, “live the sport”.

In my master’s thesis, I explored the challenges spectators faced in order to take part in their intended activities and how participants negotiated the various challenges they faced (see Ayer, 2010). The results revealed that spectators have positive expectations of conditions surrounding the event, ranging from favourable weather to noteworthy performance on the court.

When these positive expectations were unfulfilled, spectators experienced disappointment and considered modifying future participation patterns. In particular, they were uncertain of their future attendance. During interviews, spectators stressed using online communities, such as Facebook, Twitter, IM, and YouTube to vent, share experiences, seek information, and follow matches. This suggested the growing importance of online venues as the tennis community sought to better enjoy their sport. This dissertation seeks to follow up on this insight.

E-Leisure

Nimrod and Adoni (2012) refer to much of the online activity I explored in my masters' thesis as electronic leisure activity. Tennis enthusiasts may log onto tennis specific websites like Wimbledon and Australian Open or online forums, such as Talk Tennis, seeking information on events and players of interest. They may seek a variety of goals ranging from connecting with other fans to reliving the thrill of a recent match. The online environment enables them to read the posts of others, watch matches, or discuss these same matches with others.

This involvement in and of itself can provide its members with a leisure experience (Nimrod, 2014). Benefits include companionship and stimulation. As part of the impact on social life, Nimrod (2014) discussed how respondents appreciated the quality of anonymity and invisibility as well as accessibility within online communities. The anonymity enabled seniors in Nimrod's (2014) study to reduce social anxieties and feel more confidence while talking to others and trying new things. The easy accessibility of the communities was appreciated and described as 'immediate solution for loneliness' that could be the result of age, decreased health, widowhood, and/or being geographically remote (p. 257). This online companionship made seniors in Nimrod's (2014) study feel less isolated. Loneliness was less intense as a result.

Nimrod's study suggests that online options can reach into the home (or indeed life) of the community member. Whereas traditional communities much depend on physical proximity and accessibility, virtual communities are not limited by proximity or even mobility. They are the ultimate "home delivery" in that they thrive in remote locations as tiny as a phone. In this way, community members can, with ease, reach out to others who share their interests and desires. In such a way, virtual communities may extend or even replace traditional face-to-face communities because they relax the demands that traditional communities place on their members.

We still do not know; however, how online formats play out for participants. Online formats can be limited in many ways. The communicator is facing a screen and a keyboard rather than another human. The communicator is typically physically alone. This represents an emotionally neutral or even cold environment so feelings of isolation may prevail. It is unclear that, even given the reach of online forums, they offer the same potential for "connectedness" that traditional tennis clubs might offer.

Goals of the Study

This study intends to clarify the nature, meanings, and associations formed within a tennis fan subculture of a message board. It is guided by symbolic interactionism (see Blumer, 1969) and related theories that help explain enthusiasts' behaviour within online communities. Consistent with symbolic interactionism, tennis enthusiasts are believed to create shared meanings through interaction with others. These meanings then guide and shape how they perceive the world around them. Enthusiasts' actions toward others can also be shaped by these meanings. For example, the Talk Tennis message boards are largely populated by tennis enthusiasts. They expect, and perhaps even demand, that others who post possess that same

enthusiasm for the sport. They may react in a variety of ways when they perceive that other posters lack this same passion for the sport. Their reaction may be hostile (as they reject the neophyte) or welcoming (as they seek to bring the poster into the tennis community). In both cases, the reaction is determined by the importance they assign to the sport of tennis.

In related terms, two theories that help explain online behaviour are 1) social exchange theory (e.g., Blau, 1964) and 2) social identity theory (e.g., Hogg, 2006; Tajfel, 1982). Social exchange theory focuses on individual players and the relationships they develop and maintain (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The theory focuses more on the dynamics surrounding costs, rewards, and available alternatives. It assumes that people want to maximize benefits from relationships with others (Blau, 1964; Dainton, 2004). It also acknowledges the importance of feelings, such as obligations, gratitude, and trust (see Blau, 1964). The theory helps explain sustainability of enthusiasts' involvement in an online tennis community. If they feel that other community members offer support, appear to share common beliefs and values, then ongoing membership is likely. This is, even more, the case when alternative communities lack these same qualities.

Social identity theory focuses on group behaviour (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Trepte, 2006). It assumes that people identify with others and, in doing so, build solidarity with in-group members and may disassociate from out-group members (Trepte, 2006). Social identity theory can help explain intergroup dynamics, such as posters' perceptions of and attitudes toward their respective online community and its members. This theory can help in understanding the role of posters' self-conception of group membership and intergroup relations, such as group cohesiveness (Hogg, 2006).

Taken together, these theories suggest that people gather with others when they believe that these others share common concerns and values. As they come together they develop

common ways of thinking about and acting toward the world around them. They gather meaning and well-being from their interactions with these very important “others”. As this meaning grows, they identify more and more with the group and its values. When the group ceases to offer this sense of value and self-verification, their membership in the group may fade and even fail. These processes will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two. At this point, it is important to note only that this study uses the theoretical understandings suggested above as the guiding principles seeking to explore how these processes suggested by the theories play out in an online tennis community. The overall goal of the study is to better understand online dynamics between posters as they interact online. This study is the work of a collective dynamic between posters within an online tennis community (a tennis forum) and not the tennis enthusiasts as individual members. Three research questions guide the study:

1. How does an online community develop, in this case, around tennis?
2. How do tennis enthusiasts use an online community?
3. How does online community participation influence related behaviours?

The third research question served as the starting point in this study as I explored the social dynamics among posters in the online tennis forum. The first and the second research questions were explored as the result of the observations guided by the research question three.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Understanding Fans

This research is devoted to understanding sports enthusiasts' involvement with online communities, such as the tennis message board. Earlier, I noted that enthusiasts encompass both, fans and spectators. Fans are "enthusiastic devotees of a given diversion" (Robinson et al., 2005, p.43). They may be active participants, collectors, posters or simply promoters. Spectators, on the other hand, represent a subset of a fan community. An early definition by Sloan (1989) characterized spectators as those who simply watch events. As suggested in Chapter One, spectators are those who seek to follow matches at events of various calibers, such as Grand Slams, Masters, or 1000 series events, watch earlier (qualifier) or later rounds (semi-finals), observe their favourite player performances, or seek to view history in the making, such as moving up in rankings and reaching a Golden Slam. Spectators may also seek to interact and share their spectating experiences with the like-minded in online forums. Their participation is emotional as well as physical. It is likely that all forms of tennis enthusiast will be part of this study. The message board format permits and even encourages the posting of a variety of threads. As such, it seems the ideal venue to explore how enthusiasts interact in a virtual setting.

Involvement, Commitment & Loyalty

Any research on sports fans must acknowledge the role of behavioural and emotional elements like involvement, commitment, and loyalty. All three are relevant to our understanding of sport spectating and resulting interest in online communities. All help understand the energy fans are willing to devote to an online community like Talk Tennis. All help grasp the motives and desires of the community members.

It should be noted, though, that there is some confusion surrounding the three variables. For example, the terms involvement and commitment are used interchangeably in sociology (e.g., Moore & Scott, 2003). There is also conceptual confusion over the terms. Various involvement types exist (including enduring, situational, ego, and purchase) so the actual terms may relate to a variety of issues and concepts (e.g., Beatty, Homer, & Kahle, 1988; Kyle, Absher, Norman, Hammitt, & Jodice, 2007). To offer a bit of clarity, these various terms are defined here:

Involvement - The word involvement refers here to “ego-involvement”. Ego-involvement has its main roots in social psychology (Sherif & Cantril, 1947) and can be defined as “an unobservable state of motivation, arousal or interest toward a recreational activity or associated product” (Havitz & Dimanche, 1997, p. 246). People can become ego-involved with work and recreation. Ego-involvement is multi-faceted and best understood through importance, pleasure, such as attraction, sign, such as self-expression, and risk perceptions including probabilities and consequences (see Havitz & Dimanche, 1997).

An enthusiast may become immersed in the activity of watching and following tennis matches and events in various forms including online forums. Ego-involvement may be both enhanced and expressed by watching and following tennis in any form. Such participation may provide enthusiasts with a sense of pleasure and fun (attraction). In particular, discussing matches, players, and events with other forum members can be enjoyable (fun), fulfilling (importance), central (social bonding), and affirmatory (sign, identity). Some enthusiasts may become involved with these sports-related activities because of social bonds with friends and other fans’ actions. Online discussions around matches, players, and events can be an opportunity for fans to affirm and express themselves to others (see identity affirmation in Kyle

et al., 2007). Their involvement can be expressed in terms of participation in the activity itself (see Iwasaki & Havitz, 2004) such as watching, playing and discussing tennis but may also be made manifest by activities with related products (purchase/collection of related artifacts or paraphernalia).

Involvement has been used to better understand the relationship between consumers and products, including market segmentation and target description (see Laurent & Kapferer, 1985; Kyle, Kerstetter, & Guadagnolo, 2002). Involvement can also provide insight into how consumers may behave over time (enduring involvement) and in certain situations (situational involvement). Enduring involvement, a type of ego-involvement can be understood as a trait (intrinsic); is believed to remain stable over time; with the importance of an activity influencing (sustaining) the ongoing interest (see Havitz & Howard, 1995). Here, the perceived relevance of an activity may be related to one's goals, needs, values, and activity knowledge, such as attributes and benefits (Celsi & Olson, 1988). It is often linked to notions of identity and well-being.

Situational involvement can be understood as a state; is believed to be dynamic, changeable and transitory (Kyle et al., 2007), and those who care about an activity (sports enthusiasts) are more prone to situational involvement (Naylor, 2006). Situational involvement is less stable than its enduring counterpart and can be emotional in nature. It can also be linked to specific events (see Kyle et al., 2007). For example, a headline that garners public outcry may create considerable short-term interest in a sport, player, or event. Lance Armstrong's admission of performance-enhancing drug use, for example, created a great deal of situational interest in cycling and the Tour de France in particular. It is unlikely, though, that this interest was sustained over time.

Commitment - Commitment, or psychological commitment, rooted in social psychology (Becker, 1960, Crosby & Taylor, 1983) can be defined as “the tendency to resist change in preference in response to conflicting information or experience” (Gahwiler & Havitz, 1998, p. 7). It can be understood through resistance, such as unwillingness to change beliefs, volition including freedom of choice when deciding, cognitive complexity including reasons, such as beliefs and information restraining one’s attitude, and position involvement, such as evaluation of the product perceived values and self-image (see Pritchard, Havitz, & Howard, 1999). Trust may be important in participants’ commitment to an agency and their willingness to accept changes in service usage (see Winter, Palucki, & Burkhardt, 1999). Strong attachment to settings, such as parks, does not always result in behavioural reciprocity (see Raymond & McCarville, 2002). In that case, people supported the notion of various parks but never intended to visit them. The emotional commitment was not mirrored in behavioural commitment.

Committed Talk Tennis posters would be expected to show stable feelings and beliefs toward their favourite players. This might be the case despite negative messages received from media coverage or other members in the forum. Instead, these fans might ignore unfavourable messages focusing rather on positive memories or more supportive information (see sports media in Funk & Pritchard, 2005). In this way, the positive attitudinal component within commitment plays out. It very much affects emotional attachment, cognition, such as beliefs and knowledge about the service provider, and some behavioural intentions (see Kyle, Mowen, Absher, & Havitz, 2006).

Loyalty - Loyalty, consisting of psychological attachment (attitude) and behavioural consistency (participation intensity), can be defined as “a process in which various alternative brands are psychologically compared and evaluated on certain criteria” (Backman & Crompton,

1991, p. 2). Here, different levels of loyalty may exist including high (strong attachment, high intensity), spurious (high intensity, weak attachment), latent (strong attachment, low intensity), and low (weak attachment, low intensity). Levels of loyalty may differ across leisure activity types (see Howard, Edginton, & Selin, 1988). Loyal tennis fans then would display high levels of online forum involvement. This may play out in terms of participation in message board discussions. These fans can be expected to have a strong attitude or commitment toward tennis spectating, such as following, watching and discussing matches, players, and events. They may also be motivated or encouraged by performance outcomes, such as match results, player performances, and event scheduling.

Involvement, commitment, and loyalty complement each other. Someone may be psychologically committed to a brand like Adidas, Nike, and Dunlop. A brand might take the form of a specific place, event, retail offering, or an athlete (see Iwasaki & Havitz, 1998, 2004). This commitment may have psychological and behavioural aspects ranging from notions of self to activity patterns. More than that, they may be transient or persist over time. The three may interact as posters on Talk Tennis discuss and debate their sport online.

Social Exchange Theory

Fan and spectator activities are profoundly social in nature (Gantz, Fingerhut, & Nadorff, 2012). These individuals seek to learn, share and participate with others who share their values, goals, and preferences. Social exchange theory helps us understand these interpersonal dynamics. Historically, social exchange theory, a broad theoretical framework, merges together several disciplines, such as sociology (Blau, 1964) and social psychology (Homans, 1958; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Generally, social exchange theory considers interactions interdependent and contingent on others' actions that can generate obligations and important relationships (see

Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Emerson, 1976). Social exchange theory helps clarify relationships, when and why they develop, are continued and end. The theory can be understood as the function of relationship satisfaction, such as rewards and costs (see Thibaut & Kelly, 1959). From this perspective, social exchange theory rests on three assumptions: 1) relationships are a function of comparison between benefits gained and losses incurred to attain those benefits; 2) people want to maximize the benefits while decreasing the costs; and 3) by nature, humans are selfish and look out for their gains first. Here, the theory is understood through outcome including the ratio of rewards to costs, comparison level including expected rewards and comparison level of alternatives (see Thibaut & Kelly, 1959).

Naturally, relationships can bring rewards and costs. Rewards are perceived benefits, such as joy or support received to achieve one's goals, while costs are drawbacks perceived as unpleasant and preventative in pursuing aspirations (see Dainton, 2004). Tennis enthusiasts may evaluate their relationship within the online forum by the amount of time they put into developing threads and discussions versus the feedback and support they receive from other posters or administrators. Forum posters may find interactions with others rewarding because it provides them with necessary resources to watch the match. Subsequently, they may experience a relational cost when posting in the forum discussions is limited due to the system's delayed status attainment approval, such as a transition from newbie to rookie.

A positive outcome is expected when rewards outweigh the costs. Similarly, the negative outcome would occur when costs outweigh the rewards. However, the varying nature of human behaviour including perceptions and unpredictability can make the outcome analysis challenging (see Dainton, 2004). More specifically, the negative outcome cannot always predict relationship termination. A tennis fan may continue to participate in Talk Tennis regardless of the lack of

response from others if the forum is the only one suitable for the discussion (comparison level of alternatives). This would make the poster dependent on the online relationship because limited alternatives exist, such as other tennis forums.

Previous online experiences (comparison level) can also influence tennis fans' expectations of the forum and relationships within. A tennis fan is expected to be satisfied if their online forum participation meets or exceeds their expectations. Subsequently, s/he is expected to be dissatisfied if forum participation does not meet their expectations. However, only when an enthusiast perceives their alternatives, such as other forums to be greater than both, outcomes and comparison level of the current forum are they expected to leave. A tennis fan may be satisfied with Talk Tennis but could still leave the forum if another one of the same caliber is easier and faster to use.

The broad application of social exchange theory can make its core components difficult to define, which can lead to multiple interpretations (see Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; West & Turner, 2004). A number of concepts, such as rewards, resources, costs, satiation, deprivation, comparison level, comparison level of alternatives, dependence, interdependence (reciprocity), power, distributed justice, equity, trust, satisfaction, commitment, and normative orientations have been associated with the theory (see Emerson, 1976). Understanding them all can be overwhelming. However, theory's related concepts and subsequently its critiques can help alert the researcher of its broad application to view its utilization in explaining behaviour as one of the many possibilities.

Interpersonal & Group Dynamics

It is not surprising that social exchange theory has been used to understand coaching relationships (e.g., Lafrenière, Jowett, Vallerand, & Carbonneau, 2011), motivations (e.g.,

Guillet, Sarrazin, Carpenter, Trouilloud, & Cury, 2002), organizational support and coaching performance (e.g., Rocha & Chelladurai, 2011), team cohesion (e.g., Mach, Dolan, & Tzafrir, 2010), event ticket sales (e.g., Howard & Crompton, 2004), interuniversity athletics (e.g., Armstrong-Doherty, 1996), and social impact of the Olympics (e.g., Waitt, 2003).

The theory's successful application in various research contexts suggests its appropriateness for understanding participation in online tennis communities among tennis enthusiasts. According to social exchange theory, tennis fans may seek to interact with others to build a positive relationship. More specifically, the interaction between posters can focus on specific issues (such as reasons for poor player performance). Such debates offer, by turn, both costs and rewards to community members. Costs may be incurred if other posters are unsupportive. But rewards may also be enjoyed as posters offer information that is new and helpful. In particular, some may enjoy or gain additional insight from the discussion by learning something they did not know about the player. Posters may reveal caring actions by protecting others' feelings, such as being sensitive, supporting the topic, such as gathering additional information, expressing respect, trust and belief in each other.

Sense of Identity & Group Memberships

Group members inevitably form a number of identities. These relate to how they view themselves (personal) and how they are viewed by others (social). They may result from a conscious sense of self or from subconscious reactions to experience (see Erikson, 1968). These identities unfold over time and can become stable (Erikson, 1968), can evolve (Murphy & Longino, 1997), or be variable as different identities emerge in different contexts (Giddens, 1991). People can form identities within various life contexts like work (teacher), family roles (big brother) and leisure hobbies (tennis player). For example, people may often develop

identities in terms of activities. These identities may emerge from experience arising from competence and skill level (see Baltes & Baltes, 1990). Others' perceptions (admiration or ridicule, for example) then further influence the person's sense of identity (Goffman, 1959).

But identities extend far beyond mere individual participation in leisure activities. People can develop strong feelings, attachments, and identities toward a sports team, such as the Chicago Bears, Toronto Maple Leafs, or Raptors, and a pro athlete like Djoković, Nadal, Serena, or Federer. When fans develop such identities, they will tend to behave in ways that support that identity (see James & Ridinger, 2002). They may, for example, acquire knowledge about their team/athlete, have a positive outlook for future performances and defend against criticism. They would not stop being a fan because of a loss, instead, they would proudly display merchandise by wearing team's clothing (Neale & Funk, 2006); they might also describe themselves to others as fans (see Wann, Royalty, & Roberts, 2000).

Social Identity Theory

This sense of identity that people develop based on their group memberships can be explained through social identity theory. Social identity theory has been used in various contexts including sports (see social perceptions of fans in Wann & Grieve, 2005). According to the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), people develop group identities toward an activity and those involved in that activity.

Tennis enthusiasts could develop group identities toward the online forum and other posters. More specifically, it can be expected that online forum involvement can give tennis fans a sense of social identity, a sense of belonging to the social group that comprises Talk Tennis. Posters may show this sense of identity through their membership status on the site (categories include G.O.A.T., semi-pro, and legend); by creating avatars using pro player pictures; and

interaction with others, such as providing support for the likeminded vs. lack of support for the outsiders.

Social identity theory assumes that people display in-group favouritism and out-group derogation (see Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This behaviour may be exacerbated under threatening circumstances. On this site, for example, there might be considerable angst expressed over poor performance on the part of a pro. A tennis spectator whose favourite player lost a match may choose to view a thread dedicated to their player as preferable to another devoted to a rival player. Further, they may discriminate and hold negative views toward those who post such threads perhaps leading to rejection of the out-group (see Rahmati, Kabiri, & Shad Manfaat, 2014). Posters may express hostility if the topic is portraying negativity toward their favourite player. For example, a Nadal fan might take offence and strike out at those suggesting Nadal's time for retirement has come.

The Emerging Importance of Social Media

The Internet has brought an abundance of social platforms, websites and applications, such as Facebook, Google +, Twitter, MySpace, LinkedIn, Hi5, Digg, and Delicious. These platforms, websites, and applications are known as “social media”; allowing people to create and share content as well as participate in social networking (Oxford Dictionary, 2014). Social media is popular and used widely. There are ca. 600 tweets sent per second (Hutchins, 2011). In 2008, Facebook had 67 million active users (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009) and as of December 2016, it accounted for 1.86 billion active monthly users worldwide (Facebook Newsroom, 2017). The popularity of social media further extends to search engines, such as Google, that actively direct person seeking information to providers' sites (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

In the social media world, news travels fast, easily and is timely. It enables people to seek, gain access to and post information easily and conveniently. It can be engaging involving videos, pictures, stories, and blogs of interest to the viewer. It is so accessible and compelling that it helps community members stay connected with others (see Qualman, 2009).

Communities

Traditionally, a community was believed to be situated within a geographical area, such as a city or one's immediate neighbourhood (Graham, 2007). Geographic boundaries were an essential element to any community. Indeed, towns and cities were often discussed as being synonymous with community. However, there is a longstanding assumption that community can also be described in terms of association. Tönnies (1887), a sociologist, suggested that humans may create two types of associations, that of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society), the former dealing with the social interactions and the roles, values, and beliefs based thereon and the latter dealing with indirect interactions, impersonal roles, formal values, and beliefs. A community then may refer to a group affiliation, which can be small, such as a family unit, or large, such as an online community (Graham, 2007).

Communities are comprised of a number of elements including locus, sharing, joint action, and social ties (MacQueen, McLellan, Metzger, Kegeles, Strauss, et al., 2001). Locus deals with the sense of place, suggesting that a community could be located and described. Gusfield (1975) referred to this as a territorial community. This is consistent with the traditional importance of geographic boundaries to the development of community. Gusfield also suggested the relational nature of community. Like Durkheim ([1893] 2014), he noted the need for interaction and exchange among community members. With the advent of the Internet, it was perhaps inevitable that it would be used to create and support relational interactions. We now

know that affiliation and interdependence can grow and even proliferate in virtual settings (Wood & Smith, 2005).

While it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to debate the territorial vs. relational nature of community, it is useful to note that some scholars suggest that Internet settings can be territorial in nature. Many users assign the notion of space even to virtual settings. As such, Zhang and Jacob (2012) describe it as a metaphor for familiar places that we use as part of everyday living. We describe, for example, cyber settings as “cyberspace”. Users can gain access to fellow users while in this space. They identify with the space and its many characteristics. They search within it, they communicate, and they browse all within the confines of that space. For these reasons, when attempting to explore community, it may not always be useful to distinguish between virtual and “real” space. As Zhang and Jacob (2012) suggest, “space and place are independent concepts imbued with different connotations. However, space and place are intertwined both practically and experientially because they constitute mutually complementary roles and function in social life” (p. 91).

Sharing suggests common interests and perspectives among posters. Joint action refers to “a source of cohesion and identity” while social ties involve interpersonal relationships (MacQueen et al., 2001, p. 1931). MacQueen et al. (2001) suggest that such ties provide the “foundation” for any community. Consequently, a community can be defined as “a group of people with diverse characteristics who are linked by social ties, share common perspectives, and engage in joint action in geographical locations or settings” (MacQueen et al., 2001, p. 1929). This is not to suggest, however, that all affiliations are characterized by positive interaction and social bonding. An online community can be considered a large social unit, and as such, greater heterogeneity, abundant social relationships, and more complexity can be expected (Hillery,

1955). As MacQueen et al. (2001) suggest; there can exist considerable diversity in a community and this diversity can lead to some degree of turmoil within the community.

Community Components

Perhaps, more than any other concept, the notion of social ties is central to any discussion of community. These ties may be built around 3 inter-dependent conditions. They are 1) consciousness of kind, 2) shared rituals and traditions, and 3) sense of moral responsibility (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). The consciousness of kind deals with connections community members may feel toward each other, such as being collectively different from others (Gusfield, 1978) or having a shared knowledge of belonging (Weber, 1978). Community rituals are based on and promote shared meanings that rest on history, culture, (see Douglas & Ishwerwood, 1979) and social solidarity (see Durkheim, [1912] 1995). Community traditions deal with practices that exhibit celebrations of its norms and values (see Marshall, 1994). A sense of moral responsibility deals with a sense of obligation (duty) toward the community and its members. Depending on the circumstances, such as external threats, collective action may be undertaken by group members (see Chayko, 2008, Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001).

In all cases, sense of community can contribute to one's identity and roles within other social contexts, such as family, work, and society (Graham, 2007). From a psychological perspective, a sense of community deals with four elements including a membership, influence, reinforcement or integration and fulfillment of needs, and a shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Based on these four elements, McMillan and Chavis (1986) define a sense of community as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p. 9). Sharing of interests and perspectives among

community members is believed to contribute to the sense of community through feelings of comfort, familiarity, and togetherness (MacQueen et al., 2001).

Groups of people and the dynamics between them can be complex, which may create challenges for community development and sustainability. Technology can help ease some of the challenges, such as that of geographical space (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001); allowing more people to participate, making the community more accessible in reducing the effects of structural constraints of transportation, for example. One key difference between online and offline communities can be the sheer volume of the audience reached in that lurkers, those, not part of the community, such as posting members can also have full access to the information exchanged.

Emerging Examples of Communities

Various fields of study, including sociology, anthropology, (social) psychology, communication, computer science, and consumer behaviour among others contribute to our understanding of community, its characteristics, and processes. Research from these fields has resulted in a number of community types, such as brand communities, learning communities, and more recently, online communities. Subsequently, with various community types emerging, different definitions of community are possible. Perhaps the most prominent distinction is that of “territorial” and “relational” communities (Gusfield, 1975) where territorial communities deal with physical space of location, such as neighbourhoods, and relational focus on the interests and skills. The relational communities are believed to be the product of modern society (Durkheim, [1893] 2014). This study's focus is on the relational community that deals with shared interests around the sport of tennis.

Brand Communities

It may be useful to think of a tennis community as a sort of brand community. Brand communities are “non-geographic” communities in that they are “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand” (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412). In these ways, the tennis community being considered in this study is very much a type of brand community. It rests on the common interest in a brand and the differentiation from other brands/sports (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001). We know too that brand communities share characteristics consistent with a more traditional community. For instance, according to Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) and Laroche, Habibi, Richard, and Sankaranarayanan (2012), a brand community consists of a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. They are distinct from other communities in that they are purely commercial in nature built (by a brand owner) around a brand (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001). According to Muñiz & O’Guinn (2001), these communities can strengthen interpersonal relationships, give voice to the consumer, and serve as an information base (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001). More importantly, brand communities are believed to be essential by fostering communal affiliation that many seek (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001).

Since communities are relational in nature, they may elicit a number of dynamic relationships. In a brand community, it has been found that more than one group of people can form a community. More specifically, the key relationships within a brand community are believed to exist between customer and brand, customer and product (service), customer and customer, and customer and marketer (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). McAlexander et al. (2002) found that a “holistic sense of community” develops around relationships that are based on the consumer experience, which may be expressed as feelings

about the products (services) and the brand. These relationships can contribute to the community integration and brand loyalty (McAlexander et al., 2002).

Brand communities can be geographically concentrated (Holt, 1995), scattered (Boorstin, 1974), or exist in an entirely non-geographical space, such as the Internet (Kozinets, 1997). Interactions within brand communities can occur in various social contexts including offline (face-to-face), mass media (advertising), or online with the access to a large amount of information on the product, brand, and other posters. To McAlexander et al. (2002) communities can be stable (enduring over time) or temporal (periodic). As suggested by McAlexander et al. (2002), communities can overlap and people can be members of an infinite number of communities at the same time.

Understanding Online Communities

Online communities can guide and direct the behaviour of their members. This seems consistent with trends observed elsewhere. Followers may use online sources to seek guidance on everything from choosing a school, finding a job, buying a car, and dealing with illness (Kotler, Armstrong, & Cunningham, 2005). Nielsen (2012) found that 70% of global consumers used social media once a month to learn about others' experiences, 60% sought information about products and 50% used it to express concerns.

The latter use is of particular importance. If community members complain online, their complaints may well influence others who seek guidance from the sites where the complaints were posted. This influence can be dramatic because of the reach achieved by many online sites. As suggested above, the one can reach the many. Every post could reach virtually everyone in a given community. Those who see the post can then be guided by that information (Qualman, 2009). More than that, the message can continue to find new readers. For example, an average

Twitter user follows a 100 people; if 5 % of people pick up the Twitter post and pass it onto their network, additional 50 people could be influenced (Qualman, 2009).

This unprecedented reach suggests the true power of online communities. Traditionally, people sought information about products and services from family, friends, or neighbours; members of a small circle populated by those with whom the individual was familiar and trusted. Online communities can provide an immediate connection to the same individuals, but their daily use has extended the circle to include strangers and people one may never meet. Online communities are different from traditional word-of-mouth communities in that they offer: 1) larger communication network of more people involved and 2) a flexibility with the information now available independent of time and location where followers can read reviews at their convenience (Cheung, Luo, Sia, & Chen, 2009).

People may listen to electronic word-of-mouth more when the product is new and within their community of choice (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008). People can evaluate messages based on the argument strength, such as convincing information, source credibility, such as posting history and ratings, and confirmation of consumer's prior belief (Cheung et al., 2009). Positive word-of-mouth can lead to positive outcomes (more sales) and increased expectations, difficult to satisfy (Litvin et al., 2008). Negative word-of-mouth can lead to negative outcomes, such as reduced interest (Litvin et al., 2008).

Consequently, information that is shared in online communities can alter, enhance or replace actual attendance at tennis events. The intent of this study is to further our understanding of how online activity patterns evolve among tennis enthusiasts. More than that, this research explores how such activities, and their emotional elements, influence poster experience.

Online Communities Are Comparable to Face-to-Face Communities

Online communities can serve the same purpose as the traditional communities. They offer opportunities for learning and information sharing, companionship and social support, and entertainment (Resnick & Kraut, 2011). As Rheingold (1994) suggests, online users do almost everything they would do on a face-to-face basis. The difference being that online interaction is electronic, achieved through the use of “words on computer screens”, and therefore, independent of time and location (Rheingold, 1994, p.58). As a result, they can break down the barriers of “time,” “space,” and “scale” (Resnick & Kraut, 2011). Technology-driven online communities offer people a convenient (fast and easy), timely, and a reliable way to socialize (Chayko, 2008). In online communities, people may receive support from anyone with digital access from around the world. More than that, they may receive this assistance on an ongoing basis (Chayko, 2008; Preece, 2000; Resnick & Kraut, 2011). This timely and worldwide scope increases the number of potential “helpers” who may offer assistance to fellow community members (Resnick & Kraut, 2011).

Any discussion of online community must acknowledge the inherent complexity that plays out within those communities. Preece (2000) believed that online communities rely upon 1) people interacting to play a role or satisfy a need, 2) a shared purpose, such as interest, 3) shared policies guiding interaction, such as rules, and 4) a supporting computer system. While these basic elements are present in all online communities, the ways in which they play out are dynamic. People interacting may indeed all play roles, but these roles may be contradictory or conflictual. Community members may have a common love of tennis but their ideas and beliefs regarding the sport may be at odds. Policies and rules may both control and create dissension.

So, while Preece's (2000) fundamental insights are useful, I was interested in how they might "play out" in an online tennis community. Specifically, I wondered how posters might use online means to interact, share, and support. While I use Preece's (2000) material for insight and organization, the content offered in this dissertation emerges solely from Talk Tennis message board. These materials give texture and depth to Preece's (2000) categories.

The Growth of Online Communities

Internet use has been on a continuous rise since the beginning of the century. For instance, in 2012, 82.5% of Canadian households had access to the Internet, which is an increase of 4.4% since 2010 (Statistics Canada, 2015a, CANSIM table 358-0171). This increase is evident across the country and its provinces. Worldwide, as of July 1, 2016, 46.1% of the population or 3.4 billion people had access to the Internet (Internet Live Stats, 2017). As of June 2015, 80% of the billions of Internet users reported using the Internet to look up product information and 20.6% used it to go to a discussion forum or chat room in the past 12 months (Statistic Brain, 2015a).

With the wide use of the Internet, it may not be surprising that online communities are growing exponentially. From 2013 to 2014 Facebook usage increased by 22% accounting for 1.37 billion users as of June 2015 (Statistic Brain, 2015b), which later increased to 1.86 billion active monthly users as of December 31, 2016 (Facebook Newsroom, 2017). On average, it has been reported that as of March 2015, Canadians spend 7.7 hours per month on social networking sites (Statistic Brain, 2015c). In 2012, 24.0% of Canadian Internet users aged 16 years and over participated in discussion groups such as message boards, which is an increase of 4.8% since 2010 (Statistics Canada, 2015b, CANSIM table 358-0153). This may be expected as online

message boards have been popular since the 2000's and are even considered the safest option for users due to anonymity and content ownership (Abraham, 2015).

In order to achieve these staggering numbers, users typically gain access to social media regularly and use it as part of their daily routine with 48% of 18-34-year-olds checking their Facebook when they wake up (Statistic Brain, 2015b). Social media importance is evident in Facebook's availability in 70 different languages (Statistic Brain, 2015b) and wide use among its almost 1.9 billion users worldwide (Facebook Newsroom, 2017).

Within this online milieu, tennis communities are abundant. Popular options include Talk Tennis (<http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php>), British Tennis (<http://britishtennis.activeboard.com/>), and Talk about Tennis (<http://www.talkabouttennis.com/forum/>). Their popularity lies in the frequency of use and number of posts, such as topics and responses. Other popular online activity among enthusiasts may be the development of a fantasy tennis draw by making personal picks on who will win or lose (e.g., Fantasy Tennis Tour, 2015; Tennis Draw Challenge, 2015). Some of these are interactive in nature while others represent a solitary exercise (Stebbins, 1992).

Understanding Online Community Development

In the introduction of this study, online communities were characterized as any virtual social space where people come together. Several related definitions of online community exist. Resnick and Kraut (2011) define online communities as “any virtual space where people come together with others to converse, exchange information or other resources, learn, play, or just be with each other” (p. 1). Rheingold (1998) offers another view. He defined a virtual community as “a group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks” (p. 116). To

Rheingold (1998) a virtual community can be a “collection of people who adhere to a certain (loose) social contract and who share certain (eclectic) interests” (p. 116). Similarly, Booth (2017) refers to community as “social groupings of individuals with shared interests, joined together through some form of mechanism of membership – the self-selected organization of a group of fans who both enjoy an extant media object, and who create additional content about that extant media object” (p. 25). Taken together, they suggest common elements of an online community to include, to some extent, shared interests, social gathering, social contract, potential real-life influence, and membership.

In these ways, online communities are similar in nature to traditional offline communities. They both share values, goals, and interests and offer opportunities for social bonding, such as a sense of identity (see Warburton & Hatzipanagos, 2013; Wood & Smith, 2005), friendships and rivalries (Rheingold, 1998). Online communities are not restricted by the geographical proximity of its members as in traditional offline communities, such as a neighbourhood, town, or district (Resnick & Kraut, 2011). Instead, they are seen to have a “geographically local focus” usually associated with a more extensive realm (Rheingold, 1998).

Various terms have been used in the literature to describe communities that develop on the Internet. These include “online communities” in Preece (2000) and Resnick and Kraut (2011), “virtual communities” in Rheingold (1994) and “portable communities” in (Chayko, 2002, 2008). Whether referred to as “online”, “virtual”, or “portable”, these communities deal with the mental aspects of place and are perceived as “real” (Chayko, 2002, 2008). They are real in a sense that they can affect users’ lives in the real world as they bond through the exchange of intimate stories like marriages, births, deaths, etc. (see Rheingold, 1998). This reality grows through both usability and sociability (Preece, 2000). *Usability* refers to computer systems that

are easy to use, controllable, predictable, and consistent in supporting learning, skill retention and low error rates (Preece, 2000). Online, people can easily communicate, find information and navigate the software (see Figure 1.1. in Preece, 2000, p. 27). *Sociability* deals with the overall goal of the community, participants'/members' roles and policies shaping their social interaction (Preece, 2000). Usability and sociability link knowledge, such as behaviour to social planning, policies and software design (Preece, 2000). Registration into online community (filling out forms) is based on the software design, while enforcement of this registration is based on the sociability decision, such as the impact on who joins (Preece, 2000).

Participation in the online tennis activities is very much consistent with traditional notions of leisure. While the electronic format is new, the motives and participation characteristics seem familiar. Participants may engage in online communities, such as forums, groups, and blogs during their free time. Participation in such communities is freely chosen. Tennis enthusiasts may log onto tennis specific websites or social platforms like Talk Tennis to seek out information on events and players of interest (see Ayer, 2010). They may seek to engage with other fans to relive the thrill of a recent match. They may engage online by reading the posts, watching a match, or sharing in discussions. Again, motives and behaviours are driven by personal interest.

The examination of leisure in online settings is not new. Leisure researchers who ventured into the online community context have explored family communication (e.g., Ivan & Hebblethwaite, 2016), isolation (e.g., Parry, Glover, & Mulcahy, 2013), social identity (e.g., Schmalz, Colistra, & Evans, 2014), stigmatization (e.g., Mock, Plante, Reysen, & Gerbasi, 2013), leisure constraints (e.g., Nimrod, 2014), and destination image (e.g., Potwarka & Banyai,

2015). Social media has even been considered as a coping mechanism (e.g., Schmalz et al., 2014; Parry et al., 2013).

However, the study of sport-related message boards is still in its infancy. The in-group dynamics, such as interaction, culture, and meanings that characterize these communities are still unclear. This netnographic study aims to enrich the leisure literature by exploring engagement in an online tennis forum. It will explore the development, use, and effects on other tennis related activities, such as playing, spectating, and purchase patterns. Related insights suggest how traditional dynamics are (or are not) reproduced in online settings.

Sustainability of an Online Community

A successful online community is based on its ability to attract those who participate and actively contribute (Resnick & Kraut, 2011). Commitment, feelings of attachment to something like an organization, group/person or a community, can determine one's willingness to stay and contribute (Resnick & Kraut, 2011). Highly committed members are likely to contribute (post) and be satisfied, and less likely to search for alternatives (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). Within an online milieu, there is a possibility for few members to help sustain the community through regular participation via content creation. For instance, Baym (1993) found that 10% of the online community members were responsible for half of the messages she observed within a newsgroup r.a.t.s. In this sense, an online community, to be successful, has to attract committed members who are willing to participate on a regular and ongoing basis.

However, the absence of geographical proximity in online communities could make it easier for people to leave them. Naturally, there are a smaller number of sport club alternatives in relation to compatible online communities available.

Varying Foci of Online Communities

Online communities vary in size and are supported by a number of technology platforms, such as email lists, forums, blogs, wikis, and networking sites (Resnick & Kraut, 2011). They can be “broad” or “focused” (Lee, 2014). Broad online communities are social networks that include a wide range of people who socialize regularly with others through sharing of skills, talents, knowledge, and preferences (Lee, 2014). Twitter or Facebook are examples of such online communities. Focused online communities are more specialized, dedicated to people with common interests and needs, such as professions or hobbies (Lee, 2014). Talk Tennis represents such a community of ca. 39,842 members gathering to share information on tennis related activities, such as pro players, events, equipment, and instruction.

Considering Fandom

The world of the fan is both dynamic and complex. Fans can spend a considerable amount of time and give their undivided attention to an event. For instance, they can watch live, televised, and later re-view taped matches, highlights, and read to scrutinize details of the event. Fans are believed to view events with emotional proximity and critical distance (Jenkins, 2013). Through such practice, fans can make meaning of events through sharing, articulating, and debating of interpretations.

It is perhaps not surprising that fan activities can be diverse. They can relate to 1) a mode of reception, 2) critical and interpretive actions, 3) a base for activism, 4) forms of cultural productions, traditions, and practices, and 5) functions of alternative social community (see Jenkins, 2013, pp. 277-280). Jenkins (2013) goes on to suggest that the activities undertaken by fan communities may be a function of power differentials between consumers/fans and providers. To some degree fandom may arise “as a response to the relative powerlessness of the

consumer in relation to powerful institutions of cultural production and circulation” (Jenkins, 2013, p. 278). In this way, fans can often speak and raise their opinions about their preferences in relation to culture, as well as a desire for any alternative developments they want to see in sport. For example, Talk Tennis members may produce their own instructional videos on stringing racquets, on-court performance, and so on. Accordingly, fandom can create its own content and can be viewed as an alternative establishment to tournaments and television networks having elements of an institution, such as production, distribution, exhibition, and consumption (see Jenkins, 2013).

Within fan communities, there can be no clear differentiation between the content producer and that of a sport consumer; suggesting that all fans are potential creators whose talents are waiting to be discovered (Jenkins, 2013). For instance, Talk Tennis posters may discover skills and talents as they engage with others in the same community. They may also receive the encouragement from other members on video analyses, stringing or playing skills that they otherwise would not get elsewhere (e.g., tennis club). In this way, a fan community, such as Talk Tennis can be influential in providing additional opportunities to posters to further explore their talents and pursue their abilities (e.g., coaching – stroke evaluation, etc.).

Fans may also critique and interpret events and practices within their community (see Jenkins, 2013). Within this context, the debate can be emotional and even acrimonious. Indeed, Jenkins (1992) defined fandom using terms that focus on this debate. He considered fandom as “an institution of theory and criticism, a semistructured space where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are proposed, debated, and negotiated where readers speculate about the nature of the mass media and their own relationship to [them]” (p. 86).

Fan communities have been characterized as “utopian” because they can serve as a space devoted to democratic values where mutual and collective priorities can be expressed (see Jenkins, 2013). In terms of Talk Tennis, fans can express outrage at violations of sport values. A fan community can serve as an “alternative reality” consisting of values that may be more compassionate and egalitarian than those found in everyday society (Jenkins, 2013). In this sense, the online fan community of Talk Tennis can offer solutions to tennis related problems, such as playing tennis, buying equipment, and getting a racquet repaired. As such, Talk Tennis can be constructing an alternative culture; that of a responsive and attentive society focused on its members’ needs for friendships, community, affiliation, etc.

All these activities may be enabled through online means. Online sporting communities may utilize texts on newspaper releases, autobiographies, forum posts, player blogs and social media accounts, such as Twitter and Facebook, and video whether televised or streamed events as they debate, cajole and share. I treat tennis fandom in this study in the context of an online tennis community, a Talk Tennis forum, that consists of a discourse created by tennis enthusiasts as they interact via posts online.

Understanding Online Fan Communities

Online communities offer a space for people with similar interests to discuss, debate, and share their passions (Rheingold, 1998). In this way, online communities enable fans to find others with similar interests and values. These others can extend beyond the scope of one’s immediate friends, family, and even neighbourhood.

In an online fan community environment, posters (fans) can engage in two practices: 1) interpretive practices that can include personalization (interpreting what is meaningful to them), character interpretation, and speculation; and 2) informative practices like updates (retell),

spoilers (pre-tell), trivia, and sightings/reporting of seen shows (see Baym, 2000). All these elements observed by Baym (2000) among soap opera fans, can be present in any fan community, including sports communities, such as Talk Tennis. For instance, in Talk Tennis, posters are guided by the provider to use Pro Match Results sub-forum if including spoilers in their posts. At the same time, the forum provider warns its members that certain sub-forums, such as Pro Match Results contain spoilers, alerting those who may not have seen the match of the final results presence and event happenings. Thus, it may be expected for some tennis enthusiasts who happen to be tennis forum members to discuss anything tennis, including experiences, but also not excluding pre-telling of match happenings.

Exploring Online Sports Fan Communities

Sport fan communities support sports fans' engagement, collaboration and relationship building with sports teams, athletes and other fans (Katz & Heere, 2013). These communities are typically organized by professional sporting organizations and teams where fans can come together, co-create social experiences, increase product skill, and build "camaraderie" with other fans (e.g., Grant, Heere, & Dickson, 2011). Fan communities are characterized by shared consciousness, rituals, and traditions and even a sense of moral responsibility (e.g., Grant et al., 2011, Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). Online engagement, positive word-of-mouth, enhanced product use and member responsibility can play an important role in encouraging sports fans' behaviour (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnold, 2009).

Defining and Classifying Online Sports Fan Communities

A sports fan community is a brand community within a sports context (Yoshida, Gordon, James, & Heere, 2015). Consistent with social identity theory, a sports fan community can be seen as a "specialized, non-geographically bound community based on sport fans' personal

identity with the cultural milieu surrounding a specific sport team” (Yoshida et al., 2015, p. 91). This suggests that community can exist in both offline and online environments. Using the sports fan community definition, a tennis fan community can be considered as a specialized, non-geographically bound community that is based on relationships and interactions among enthusiasts surrounding the sport, events, and players. Online sport fan communities can be “fan-initiated” or “team-initiated” (Jang, Olfman, Koh, & Kim, 2008). In a tennis context, a fan(demand)-initiated community may be a Facebook page dedicated to Rafael Nadal’s fans. A team(supply)-initiated community can take on two forms: “player-initiated” and “event-initiated”. The player-initiated community could be Serena Williams’ site informing fans of her life events including a schedule of play, instruction, and foundation initiatives with interactive opportunities, such as “Ask Me (Fridays)” (<http://serenawilliams.com/>). The event-initiated type would be “Australian Open Social” (<http://event.ausopen.com/social/>) overseen by the tournament organizers. All types, whether formal (player-initiated) or informal (fan-initiated), can help build relationships between the fan and the provider.

The Appeal of an Online Community

Online participation offers a great many benefits for the prospective user. As with any community, the online environment can offer the opportunity to share, to experience, to feel and so on (Chayko, 2008; Jones, 2003).

Past research suggests several motives for participation in an online community. They include 1) convenience and practicality, 2) passing time and having fun, 3) desire for a “safe” environment, and 4) social support.

(1) Convenience & Practicality

Online communities, such as support groups can be practical and convenient. They can be used for learning using forums like online courses, commercial sites, scientific and research settings and so on (Chayko, 2008; Van Dijk, 2005). Online communities are available at the time of need, such as during a job search, house hunt, or a shopping expedition (Chayko, 2008). Online, people have the flexibility (Chayko, 2002, 2008) to respond whenever they feel the need (Ling, 2004). Socializing and meeting others is rendered more convenient, efficient and (often) successful (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002).

Technology-based applications, such as message boards are so practical that daily connections are possible (Hargittai, 2002). This convenience has changed how activities are organized, how gatherings are structured, and even how plan changes are communicated (Chayko, 2008; Ling, 2004), leading to “low entry and exit costs”, such as turning an invitation down (Chayko, 2008). These characteristics help explain the widespread acceptance of online venues (see Wang, Chung, Park, McLaughlin, & Fulk, 2012).

(2) Passing Time & Having Fun

The time people spend online may also be viewed as a playful interlude (Chayko, 2008). Using technologies, such as smartphones and tablets in social platforms can be fun (Sandvig, 2006) and can alleviate boredom (Chayko, 2008). Common online activities include serious talk, joking, gossiping, flirting, and playing games (Chayko, 2008). Online communities can be ideal gathering places for people to unwind and relax (Chayko, 2008). Creating what Chayko (2008) calls a “friendly and sociable atmosphere”. Being able to just hang out and have a good time is related to the concept of play (see escapist activity in Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). On the other end of the involvement spectrum, online play may be consistent with notions of flow experience

(see full activity emersion in Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) where participants may become fully engaged. They can engage in sometimes extraordinary feats, such as fighting mythical monsters, playing a professional sport, and generally ignore the bonds of reality. This offers great potential for passing time and having fun.

(3) Desire for a “safe” environment

People may join online communities because they wish to participate in a relatively safe environment. This safety may lie, for example, in the anonymity online groups offer. Anonymity can provide the opportunity for free expressions of sensitive feelings, such as guilt, grief, and happiness (Chayko, 2008). With no pressure to disclose personal information, anonymity can encourage involvement. People may be more likely to disclose personal information online than offline, developing trust and relationships (Hardey, 2002). Remaining anonymous and secretive while socializing with others can be fun, enjoyable and exciting (Chayko, 2008), providing control of what to share and with whom (Nippert-Eng, 2010).

(4) Social Support

People can also join online communities for social support. Naturally, people may feel the need to help and be helped on a daily basis (Chayko, 2008). Online communities can offer a reliable way to connect and stay in touch (Flanagin & Metzger, 2001). Tennis enthusiasts may wish to interact while a match is in progress via forum messaging, group postings and twittering. It has been suggested that tennis spectators who cannot attend live events tend to search for other outlets to watch and stay informed about the match (Ayer, 2010). When spectators’ subscription does not grant them the aired match they may turn to online opportunities, such as YouTube, IM, streaming channels, and scorekeeper on tournament sites (Ayer, 2010).

Challenges do exist, however. Online members can have negative experiences with the system (computer) or with other posters preventing or hindering them to continue participation (Nimrod, 2014). Nimrod (2014) suggests that constraints may hamper participation. These constraints may be structural, interpersonal and intrapersonal (see Crawford & Godbey, 1987). Nimrod (2014) identified lack of time, lack of energy, other offline responsibilities, low level of interest, Internet accessibility, health problems, such as poor vision and back pains, challenging software, and language barriers as primary constraints faced by online community members.

Types of Online Community Engagement

Online community users can range from creators, facilitators, providers, to consumers. Each can participate for several reasons; all may play different roles, satisfy various needs, and contribute to the overall experience within the same community. It may help to outline a few of the more prevalent roles adopted by members in a typical online community. These roles are (1) posters and creators, (2) lurkers and (3) trolling.

(1) Posters & Creators

“People are the key to a thriving online community” Preece (2001, p. 35). Preece (2001) believed that there is no community without people, highlighting the importance of participation over time. Online communities can encourage creativity (such as content creation) and curiosity (such as watching and following) (Chayko, 2008). Online community engagement often involves some form of posting and sharing of information. People can respond (comment), share, and like their own and other people’s posts. Posters are active community members who post information (Bishop, 2013; Chayko, 2008; Preece, 2001) to be shared with fellow community members. Their activity has the potential of enhancing and helping the community grow (Bishop, 2007).

(2) Lurkers

Online communities can prompt curiosity in people, resulting in lurking. A lurker is someone who visits and uses online community but does not post messages (Bishop, 2013). It is believed that the majority of online community members are lurkers (Chayko, 2008). As of March 2015, there were 645.7 million Twitter users out of which 40% do not tweet but read others' tweets (Statistic Brain, 2015). Tennis spectators could log into forums and review others' comments regarding matches, tournaments, and players without posting and sharing their opinions and experiences.

Lurkers can be perceived both negatively (e.g., Bishop, 2013) and positively (e.g., Chayko, 2008; Warburton, 2013). In negative terms, they can be accused of not enhancing the community because they do not contribute to content. While their motives are unclear, Bishop (2013) suggests that their reticence to post may result from previously negative posting experience, resulting in isolation, withdrawal, and rejection.

In more positive terms, however, lurkers may be just as emotionally involved as their more vocal counterparts, posters (e.g., Nonnecke & Preece, 2000; Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Lurking is an active engagement where information is gathered and, perhaps, decisions are influenced. Lurkers may use the information they gather to determine their own behaviour patterns (Nonnecke & Preece, 2000). Lurking may be especially appealing to neophytes in an unfamiliar online space (Warburton, 2013). It can alleviate feelings of anxiety and awkwardness thus saving self-esteem and online reputation (Warburton, 2013).

Although lurkers may be content in their role of visiting the forum and reading its content without posting, lurkers often become members. This practice of "unlurking" was observed by Baym (2000) and it occurs when a poster, a new member, introduces themselves to the rest of the

community offering some personal information, such as their occupation, pets, and the length the member has been lurking prior to joining the community. According to Baym (2000), this practice may not be common in online communities.

(3) Trolling

Conflict in online communities is often expressed as trolling. Trolling includes irrelevant or derogatory comments used to distract community members (Chayko, 2008). More specifically, trolling exists “where an individual baits and provokes other group members, often with the result of drawing them into fruitless argument and diverting attention from the stated purposes of the group” (Bishop, 2013, p. 112).

Trolling is often comprised of flaming (Bishop, 2013) where people post hostile comments (Chayko, 2008). The anonymity offered by online communities may exacerbate such activities. Those involved may believe, with considerable justification, that they will not meet the individual they flame in person (Preece, 2000).

Trolling activities are common (Chayko, 2008) and are consistent with the notion of group conflict. During the data collection phase, I explore any strategies posters use to minimize trolling’s negative effects within this community. Due to their potential negative effects on the community monitoring is often necessary within online communities. Monitoring represents a balancing act between dealing, handling and preventing flames and trolls without compromising the freedom of interaction (Chayko, 2008).

Benefits of Online Community Involvement

Nimrod (2014) suggested that online communities offer several tangible benefits. They are: 1) service, such as feelings of accomplishment and leadership through utilization of skills to serve and help; 2) self-expression, associated with a sense of growth (skill improvement), change

(enjoying other opportunities), and a high level of openness and self-disclosure (discussing sensitive feelings anonymously); 3) companionship, such as making friends and depending on others for information and emotional support; 4) joyfulness, such as positive attitude toward life, feeling good about oneself, and enjoying others; 5) stimulation, such as being excited by the ideas (intellectual) and doing something different (experiential); 6) standing out, such as growing confidence and skill with posting of own work (writing and poetry); and 7) autonomy, such as a sense of achievement when completing an activity alone using new technology.

Nimrod (2014) also observed that online communities can become part of people's daily routine, to the extent of even affecting their social life. They may aid in networking to find a job, to find romance, to acquire technical support or even to promote one's own or other's services. These communities may help with everything from information exchange to encouraging activity/altering behaviour.

With the proliferation of online opportunities, users may "shop and hop" from one site to the next seeking out the venues that best meet their particular demands. When costs of participation are high and viable alternatives are numerous, members may leave to join another community offering greater or equal benefit. Online communities cannot continue to exist if they fail to meet their members' needs (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalú, 2013). It will be interesting to explore what elements drive long-term success of a sport-related tennis site.

Of particular interest to this study, it will be interesting to consider the various elements that users seek from a tennis related site. The literature suggests generally that six categories of benefits drive involvement in online environments. These benefits can be used as sensitizing concepts as themes and patterns emerge during the interpretation phase of the study. The first category is that of the development of self.

(1) Development of Oneself through Self-Expression & Self-Identity

It is common that people share things about themselves. Some do so “to document and archive, to preserve and promote identity” (Krotoski, 2013, p. 10). Documenting life events can include the birth of a child, promotion at work, purchase of a new car or first home, and relationship status announcement (Krotoski, 2013). Self-expression is easy to achieve through personal profiles (Chayko, 2008). Online, people can create many “selves” and tweak these identities, enhancing their current image. Such self-expression can have a “social-psychological” benefit (Kang, Tang, & Fiore, 2014). High levels of openness and disclosure can be therapeutic, allowing people to freely express feelings, such as empathy (Nimrod, 2014). Given the flexibility of online formats, people can express themselves through personalized stories such as blogs, videos, and even tweets.

People want to be perceived positively (e.g., impression management in Goffman, 1959) and providing a safe online environment can be very positive within the self-development process (Warburton, 2013). A shy person may find it easier to talk to people online than in person (Chayko, 2008). In such ways, concerns regarding image and reputation can be reduced (Donath, 1999).

Understanding Digital Identity & Its Types

Digital identity is a representation of the characteristics; values of the person in online environments (Rannenbergh, Royer, & Deuker, 2009). Several digital identities may be present within an online community. They are eponymity, nonymity, anonymity, pseudonymity, and polynimity. Eponymity is a set of distinctive individual features, such as a name used for identification and authentication (Jäkälä & Berki, 2013). Nonymity, non-appearance, deals with an unidentified individual, such as a name, title or affiliation (Jäkälä & Berki, 2013). Here,

people consciously or subconsciously avoid being detected by others in the online community. Anonymity, “the freedom from identification” is associated with the lack of distinctiveness, such as an unnamed person (Jäkälä & Berki, 2013, p. 7). The difference between anonymity and nonymity is that while both hide identity, the anonymous members are known to be present while the nonymous are out of sight (Jäkälä & Berki, 2013). Pseudonymity occurs when a person is identified by a pseudonym or a nickname (Jäkälä & Berki, 2013). A pseudonym tennis example is “Little Mo”. The nickname was given to Maureen Connolly, the first woman to win Grand Slam of tennis, by a sportswriter, Nelson Fisher describing her on-court power to the firepower of the USS Missouri known as “Big Mo” (Maureen Connolly Brinker Tennis Foundation Inc., 2015; Seymour, 2008). Later, the same nickname was used for youngster Monica Seles (Wikipedia, 2015). This name has been adopted by a poster perhaps as a way of paying homage to the greats in the larger tennis community. Pseudonyms can serve as the “catalyst” for participation and inclusion in online communities (Jäkälä & Berki, 2013). Perceived as the most widely used digital identity type, polynymity deals with having multiple names (Jäkälä & Berki, 2013).

All of these identities can suggest how members of a community like the one of Talk Tennis may engage in the larger community. Some members may choose to use their own names, reveal their residence, and even display own photograph for avatars (e.g., Andres, 32 male from Mar del Plata, Argentina). While some can be bold in their identification, others may hide behind pseudonyms, such as Mr. Federer. Some create these identities to help clarify their interests, being a Federer fan, while others may adopt many identities. Even though the policy does not permit members of Talk Tennis to hold double accounts, they can adopt various avatars. For instance, a member may have a nickname “psamp14” suggesting Sampras allegiance, and an

avatar of victorious Federer indicating Federer allegiance. In this case, the poster holds two identities that of a Sampras and Federer fan. Also, members and non-members can hide entirely in such forum by lurking, being invisible to others or only recognized as “guests” by the platform. Overall, members can choose how much information to disclose in Talk Tennis.

(2) Online Relationships

Online communities can serve as ‘virtual pubs’ as they facilitate post-game conversations, debriefs, debates, and chats. During such encounters, people can easily develop friendships (Bishop, 2013; Krotoski, 2013). Friendships are developed through communication, disclosure and intimate exchanges involving support, acceptance, trust, and/or loyalty (e.g., Fehr, 1996; Karbo, 2006). Online, friendships can be defined broadly and loosely. People become friends to access more information and may do so because they were “friended” first, to fit in and to be perceived as popular (Chayko, 2002, 2008). Online friendships can be more intimate and social in offering a more accurate view of one’s personality (Baker, 2005). The tensions of face-to-face dynamics, such as visual cues and appearance judgments are absent, resulting in less distraction and perhaps greater attention to what is said (Ling, 2004; McKenna et al., 2002).

The exchange of information online is both easy and efficient (see Kang et al., 2014), so posters have the capacity to disclose as much information as they desire (McKenna et al., 2002). In this way, relationships can be strengthened and sustained (Baker, 2005; Chayko, 2008). When emerging friendships are supported through both online and offline venues, higher intimacy (Igarashi, Takai, & Yoshida, 2005) can result.

(3) Giving & Receiving Online Support

People may invest in, develop trust and become committed (Henderson & Gilding, 2004) to their respective online communities. They give and receive support that can, in turn, be

formal, informal, emotional, and instrumental (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005). Online community members may share experiences and feelings about fears, solutions and available resources (Burnett & Buerkle, 2004). Mutual support, empathy, warmth, and humour can be very much present (Chayko, 2008). Receiving online support can offer relief, sympathy and the opportunity to vent (Chayko, 2008). Conversely, offering online support can have emotional benefits like the sense of well-being and satisfaction (Chayko, 2008). There are many opportunities for offering support and they include helping others, making a contribution, taking on a responsibility, providing leadership, and general utilization of skills (Nimrod, 2014).

Online support is cooperative and reciprocal in nature (Chayko, 2008; Preece, 2000), which can empower, reduce stress, decrease depression, and help build strong identity (Maia & Valente, 2013; Radcliffe, Lumley, Kendall, Stevenson, & Beltran, 2007). Giving and receiving online support can be a social-psychological (Kang et al., 2014) or companionship-based benefit (Nimrod, 2014). Companionship includes elements of concern, care, and emotional support, which can be strengthening to those experiencing distress (Nimrod, 2014).

(4) Feeling a Sense of Online Community

The sense of belonging, one of the human basic requirements (Maslow, 1943), deals with a sense of connectedness, providing “ontological security” (Giddens, 1984). Such security emerges when people perceive support to be both dependable and available. The ability to quickly and frequently contact others can restore a sense of connection (Ivan & Hebblethwaite, 2016) and decrease levels of isolation (Chayko, 2008). Feeling another’s presence can lead to a sense of belonging in lurkers (Chayko, 2008). Online communities can also reduce social and physical barriers. They represent social spaces for integration of new residents and persons with

disabilities, reducing the negative effects of physical space, such as the lack of ramps to buildings (e.g., Wellman & Hampton, 1999).

(5) Being Satisfied, Happy & Having Fun

Connecting with others who share similar interests can be satisfying and fun (Chayko, 2008). Finding a group of others who share those interests can be a source of happiness (Schrock, Holden, & Reid, 2004). Sharing within these groups offers both validation and excitement (Hardey, 2002). These emotions can be strong, intimate and authentic (Chayko, 2002). The resulting feeling of pleasure, fun, and entertainment offer hedonic benefits (Kang et al., 2014) that can lead to a more positive outlook on life (Nimrod, 2014).

(6) Having Control & Choice over Interactions

There are many advantages to online communication that can facilitate the creation of community. For example, online communication offers some control and choice over social interactions. Lurkers can observe others; only getting involved at the time and in the space, they find most comfortable (Warburton, 2013). Never having to meet someone face-to-face can enhance inner strength and reduce anxiety thus making it easier to say no or to deal with conflict (Chayko, 2008). This level of control is often impossible in face-to-face communities. There is also a permanence that some may find satisfying. A post may take on a life of its own as others read and re-read it and perhaps offer their own comments (Chayko, 2008).

Technology also allows customization of communication. People can customize ringtones to recognize sender's identity, reorganize email filters to block unwanted messages and delay posting messages (Chayko, 2008). Such advantages within online communities can make people feel comfortable, relaxed and intimate, facilitating the creation of both commitment and community.

Online Community Involvement & Its Meaning for this Study

Clearly, people can become profoundly engaged in online communities. The literature suggests that an online tennis community may develop around any topic that tennis enthusiasts find meaningful. These topics can relate to events, match results, players, equipment, and instruction. Tennis enthusiasts may use forums to like, follow, share, and comment. They may join forums to engage with other fans. They may join because they find talking to likeminded fans entertaining and they value the often-non-threatening environment such a site can represent. In these communities, enthusiasts may lurk or post. Some may also troll and flame others by provoking, challenging, and opposing their beliefs.

This is all facilitated by the ease of participation. Online venues are typically very accessible. Posters can participate online in the comfort of their own home without having to travel to a physical club. Online community members can influence each other through the support they give and receive. It is common, for example, that posters inform the larger community of a planned equipment purchase and ask for input on racquet specifications. While this example may seem pedestrian, it suggests the level of support these posters seek from other community members. The online community may be very influential in terms of members' thinking, attitudes, intentions, and behaviours.

Resulting Online Commitment

So, it becomes clear why tennis fans may be emotionally attached to a message forum, such as Talk Tennis. This attachment has implications for their own beliefs, knowledge, and even future intentions (see Kyle, Mowen, Absher, & Havitz, 2006). As this attachment grows, members may become attached to the community, its structure, and offerings, as well as the other people involved. Some of this may emerge from shared priorities and interests and some

may emerge from a sense of obligation. They may feel obligated to a community and its members emerging from loyalty to the sport and notions of reciprocity (Ren, Kraut, Kiesler, & Resnick, 2011). They may help because they believe that those who receive help and insight should offer something in return (Gouldner, 1960). For instance, posters may help anybody on the message board out of obligation to the community that has helped them; however, they may also selectively support only those who have helped them in the past (see indirect and direct reciprocity in Nowak & Sigmund, 2005).

Summary

Recall that online communities are “any virtual space where people come together with others to converse, exchange information or other resources, learn, play, or just be with each other” (Resnick & Kraut, 2011, p. 1). A tennis fan community can be defined as a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on relationships and interactions among enthusiasts surrounding the sport, events, and players. Online communities are popular and widely used. Within them, people can post (share), lurk (observe) and flame/troll in order to provoke.

A successful online community relies upon its ability to attract active members (Resnick & Kraut, 2011). Online community involvement can have implications for consumer behaviour in that members can influence each other through sharing of experiences, opinions, support, and advice. Electronic word-of-mouth can be very influential due to speed, convenience and broad reach (Sun, Youn, Wu, & Kuntataporn, 2006).

People may join online communities to pass time, have fun, feel safe, and experience social support. What may motivate one to join can deter another. For example, the degree of anonymity can be appealing to some posters (Chayko, 2008) while it can present problems to others (Broom, 2005). Motives can drive types of participation like lurking and activity

engagement, such as shopping (Chayko, 2008). People may lurk because they are shy or find posting time-consuming (Chayko, 2008).

Studying online communities, such as Talk Tennis is important because of their increased popularity, individual benefits, and service improvement strategies they can offer. Increased knowledge of online involvement including motives, nature, and meaning can help organizers and platform designers develop a successful community that is sustainable over time.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Recall that the overall goal of the study is to better understand online dynamics between tennis enthusiasts as they interact online. The study seeks to understand how an online community might develop around tennis, how posters use it and how their participation might influence behaviour. This study intends to clarify the nature, meanings, and associations formed within a tennis fan subculture of a message board. Three research questions guiding this study are:

1. How does an online community develop, in this case, around tennis?
2. How do tennis enthusiasts use an online community?
3. How does online community participation influence related behaviours?

Setting

Talk Tennis is used in this study because of its popularity and wide use, consisting of 39,842 voluntary members with more than 10.01 million posts as of February 15, 2017 (<https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php>). Discussions on this message board are accessible with its broad selection of topics that may appeal to a large number of people. Its topics encompass a wide range of interests including pro players, results, equipment use (pros), college tennis, former pros, adult league and tournaments, racquets, strings, shoes and apparel, classic racquets, other equipment (pressurized balls), stringing techniques, tennis tips (instruction), health and fitness, and tennis travel (<http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php>). *Talk Tennis* adds new topics each hour within its competitive tennis talk, tennis equipment, talk tennis international, classifieds, and miscellaneous categories. Each of these categories has four to five subcategories (see <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php>). Its worldwide outreach is evident

in “Talk Tennis International” category, broken into discussion boards in English (Australia, Europe), German, Spanish, French, and Italian (<http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php#competitive-tennis-talk.6>).

Of main interest in this study are two categories within Talk Tennis. They are the “General Pro Player” and the “Pro Match Results” discussion boards. In the “General Pro Player” category, there are 81,976 discussion threads as of December 11, 2016. “Pro Match Results”, its second largest forum category has 20,524 discussion threads as of December 11, 2016. Both are followed by those interested in professional tennis and may include spoiler threads on events, matches, and results (<http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?forums/pro-match-results-and-discussion.29/>). They may also offer streaming channels and opportunities for live viewing. Additional two categories including the “Tennis Equipment” and “Tennis Tips/Instruction” were also of interest. Both deal with advice seeking on technical aspects of the sport and are believed to provide insights into behavioural influences.

This study’s focus on online tennis community participation is timely. Tennis popularity in Canada is expected to rise with pro tennis players, such as Raonic breaking the top 3 on the world list (Wikipedia, 2016). More sports exposure through televised commercials on CBC at the grassroots level and news coverage on Sportsnet including discussions on players’ performances, expectations, and injuries, is evident. Improved performances by the pro players like Raonic may be the reason that Sportsnet has increased their coverage of events, such as Davis Cup (Gonczol, 2011). Tennis popularity may increase through community-based initiatives organized by leisure providers, sports organizations, foundations, and private clubs.

In 2014, more than 6.5 million Canadians played tennis, a 32 % increase from 2012 (SIRC News Hub, 2014). More Canadians (51%) are interested in the sport, a 38% increase from

2012 (SIRC News Hub, 2014). Whether its popularity will have a lasting effect on sports participation in Canada will show over time. With the increased television event coverage, media exposure, and improved performances by the Canadian pro players, the sports interest and participation in its related activities, such as playing, gaming, betting, and spectating can be expected.

Researcher's Preconceptions

Patton (2002) believed that every researcher has preconceptions of the problem studied regardless of the utilized research design. The researcher is then advised to reflect on how their perspectives could affect what they observe and their interpretations of those observations (Patton, 2015). Following Patton's (2002, 2015) recommendation of self-reflexivity on experiences, values, and assumptions, here, I outline my involvement with the sport.

I have been a sponsored athlete since age 13 and a coach since age 18. My initial involvement revolved around taking private and group lessons, translating into tournaments and varsity play. My coaching experience included development, delivery, and evaluation of programs at the grassroots, recreational and national level of play in collaboration with others including coaches, school boards, parents, and sponsors. My spectating evolves, as I use various live, televised, and online opportunities to enjoy tennis. Researching sports experiences that began with my Master's thesis has helped me gain insight into other spectators' preferences and behaviour patterns. I personally view online communities as spaces for the like-minded to share experiences, follow updates, seek and offer support in a timely (immediate responses) and affordable (free membership) fashion. My experiences and perspectives help enhance my awareness and sensitivity to tennis enthusiasts' experiences.

Netnographic Design

This study utilizes a netnographic research approach. Netnography is “participant-observational research based in online fieldwork” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 60). Netnography can be observational, participant-observational and autonetnographical (see Figure 10.1 in Kozinets, 2006, p. 133). Like all netnographic approaches, data were collected using technology. Specifically, I have utilized aspects of observational netnography by collecting information from Talk Tennis in a lurking manner. Posters were unaware of my presence or intent. The goal was to “arrive at the ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural and communal phenomenon” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 60).

There were many advantages to using this approach. Netnography, developed as an online marketing research technique to provide consumer insight, is faster with automatic transcription, cheaper with readily available data and unobtrusive (Kozinets, 2002). The downside of netnography can be its narrow focus, such as the context of an online community and lack of participant identifiers including their demographics (see Kozinets, 2002). In Talk Tennis, the presence or absence of demographic information, such as age, gender, and residence, is determined solely by the wishes of the respective poster. Consequently, the presence of such information appears inconsistently within the forum.

Consistent with netnographic approaches, this study follows six steps: 1) the research plan, 2) entrée, 3) data collection, 4) interpretation, 5) ethical standard, and 6) research representation (see Figure 4.1 in Kozinets, 2010). It is important to note though, that the “neat” and “clean” representation of the six-step process usually does not occur in practice where organization and analysis often can overlap (Kozinets, 2010). This research follows these six steps in a general sense and each is discussed briefly below. To me this six-step process was not

static in nature, instead, I treated it as a continuous process; open to changes and improvements. This meant including additional sub-forums in the analysis, being open to newly posted information within discussion threads, and refining the research questions, allowing data to guide the process.

To prepare for this observational netnographic study I have first narrowed down the research focus to include poster dynamics in a popular tennis forum with a clear set of three questions (introduced earlier) to help guide my research. I was focused on developing broad questions concerned with the exploration of the central phenomenon, in this case online interpersonal dynamics. I was seeking to understand how online community may develop in Talk Tennis. I sought to describe and report my observations as they pertained to signs of online community, use patterns within the online tennis forum, and indications of poster-on-poster influence.

As part of the planning stage, I investigated a number of tennis outlets to help me locate an appropriate online site for this study. I was specifically looking for a site that was used for connections and communication vehicles, where people share culture, suggesting communal elements. I explored professional websites, those of major events as well as the provincial and national organizations to gain insight on some of the online group meeting places. In addition to websites, I explored a number of tennis forums and chose Talk Tennis because of its popularity, the sheer volume of exchanges organized around the sport.

The Talk Tennis site seemed to offer insight into my research questions. It was current, active, and decidedly interactive. There was constant communication among posters with a vibrant culture of debate, thread development and exchange. More than that, Talk Tennis has an international focus so opinions and information sources would be diverse. Overall, the Talk

Tennis forum seemed to offer rich data, descriptive in nature with posters offering detailed information.

Netnography is a process of discovery and to use it to good effect, the researcher should keep a reflective field log of observations (Kozinets, 2015). For me, this participant approach took on a form of recording daily thread discussions on pro tennis including players and matches as well as instruction and equipment. I attended to instances that are both unique and routine. Daily observations of discussion threads provided me with the insight into interpersonal dynamics including emotional reactions, such as excitement, anticipation, and frustration; expectation and influence. During this time, I also paid attention to occurrences in the tennis world, such as media coverage of popular thread topics around events like big upsets, injuries and Grand Slams. This helped provide context-based information and additional insight into the online forum conversations and poster dynamic. I had started to keep my field notes early in the research process. I kept notes on decisions on site selection, and revisions to the study focus and the research questions. Not only did I keep notes of my observations of data in the field log but I also kept information on my codes, understandings, and decisions about the data, and preparations in conducting research. My field notes were a combination of handwritten notes in my strap tie leather vintage journal and typed up notes in Word saved in a folder on my PC.

Collecting Data

Netnographic research treats data collection and data analysis as a combined process (Kozinets, 2010). Data were collected through online observations and direct copying from computer-generated communications of posters in Talk Tennis. Data included discussion threads developed from December 14, 2015, until January 31, 2016. Two main topic discussions of interest within this forum were “General Pro Player Discussion” and “Pro Match Results”, which

provided insight into trending topics, expectations, opinions, and advice. To answer research question three, discussions within a subcategory “Tennis Equipment” and “Tennis Tips/Instruction” were observed to help provide insight into effects and influences. Astounding 19,782 messages posted to 54 Talk Tennis discussion threads were analyzed.

Generally, the online discussions were focused on top professional players that kept the debate and exchange active. The professional tennis tournaments serve as a point of reference through which the players could be discussed. For example, the timing of the data collection was such that several lower tier tournaments, like the Auckland Open and the Brisbane International, were also topics of conversation. In the case of Talk Tennis, lower tier tournaments seemed of interest because they offered clues as to players’ upcoming performances, helping to set the stage for inevitable predictions for the upcoming Australian Open.

Posts hummed with anticipation for the Open. Posters in Talk Tennis seemed eager to debate any possible outcome or set of outcomes. The uncertainty offered by any tournament fuelled by a blend of nostalgia and anticipation created thousands of posts. Often the discussions focused on the former top player performances and expectations (e.g., Nadal’s comeback), as well as up-and-comers entering the tour. The posts could deal with any aspect of the professionals’ lives (e.g., Murray pulling out if his pregnant wife goes into labour or Hewitt’s retirement), their previous performance results, or speculations on player status (e.g., Federer apparently injured) in the upcoming Grand Slam. Posters would hypothetically question the performance outcomes of certain players (e.g., Stan Wawrinka to win Australian Open?). The speculations were entertained (e.g., Australian Open 2016 Prediction League), which often extended into predictions of the exact match results, to betting and fantasy draws involving the players who were entered in the tournament of discussion.

Forums are one of the “oldest and richest online community forms” that offer rich text-based exchanges (Kozinets, 2010, p. 85). The format allows its members to post messages in the text form that can include a combination of photos (and memes), hyperlinks, etc. The format is remarkably adept at generating and organizing commentary of all sorts. In particular, Talk Tennis provided a complete record of comments as they come and go. There, most discussions occur on the day the discussion thread is developed. Thus, there was a certain immediacy to the discussion. A post is debated and the discussion then moves on. A question is posed or statement is made and those interested in the content comment. The commenters then move on to another topic of discussion.

The online forum is remarkable, though, because posts and discussion threads have some degree of permanence. Posters may return to the same thread at a later time. For instance, a thread was created using a statement that appeared in Eurosport by Andy Murray on his chances of winning the Australian Open (http://www.eurosport.co.uk/tennis/australian-open/2016/murray-hopes-for-djokovic-drop-off-at-melbourne-park_sto5055358/story.shtml). The thread was entitled, ‘Murray: Djokovic is going to have to drop off if I’m going to win in Melbourne’. While many discussions drop down the list within a day or two after a post is created, many tend to spark interest long after its initial appearance. In the case of Murray thread mentioned above, a poster returned to the discussion once the match had occurred twenty-two days after the thread was created. The poster had the benefit of new insight once the match was over, and commented, ‘Well, Murray was right I guess? Looked like the world nr2 lost the match before he even stepped on the court’. In this way, discussions and debates can continue over time as events take place and new insight emerges.

This capacity or ‘memory’ offered through online means can help sport enthusiasts reflect upon and return to discussions that interest them. This may be compelling for community members. More than that, these virtual memories, were very much present in Talk Tennis. They facilitate more informed and thoughtful debate; posters can reflect upon earlier comments and monitor results as they occur. In this sense, it is fair to say that data, regardless of the timing, offered very rich exchanges among tennis enthusiasts who seem to steadily show a great level of excitement for tennis.

During data collection, I did not simply copy the online interactions, instead, I read the postings on the screen seeking to understand the group of posters interacting within the context of the online tennis forum and its communal and cultural elements. During this time of reading and copying of the online data, I contemplated the interactions, looking to understand and learn from the posters through their interactions how to live or exist in this particular online community, and how to identify as a Talk Tennis member.

Overall, I had two sets of data. The first were the archival data collected from the online tennis forum including the communications of Talk Tennis members. This data was posted by the members to the discussion threads developed within a month data collection period stated above. The online interactions were collected to these select discussion threads throughout the length of the study. Often, I would refer to the threads for any additional, newly added posts by members. At times, to help learn more about this online community and its membership, I would extend my observation to discussion threads on policies, for example. This archival data was representative of the communication of Talk Tennis members as I had no direct involvement in creating or promoting any of the interaction within the forum. I remained a lurker for the entire research process, not acquiring the membership to the forum.

The second set of data were my field notes. This data dealt with making sense of the observations, such as identifying emerging patterns and offering analytic explanations of them. My field notes represented my observations of the Talk Tennis community, its members, interactions between them, and suggested meaning as expressed in their online dialogues. I noted in my field notes that I did not participate in the forum and was learning about Talk Tennis members' sense of membership through their interactions, and textual expressions. I reserved my reflective notes from the field notes for my personal use as a way of helping me with the data interpretation and reporting. More on this under "data analysis" section to follow.

Inclusion Criteria

Forum threads had to meet two criteria to be included in observations and analysis. More specifically, threads had to be posted during the data collection period. They also had to be engaging having 100+ replies, creating enough buzz and conversation between people to create content, reaction to others' posts and a range of shared opinions and experiences. A newly developed thread, if interesting to the members, can spark frequent replies and posts within minutes and hours of its appearance. One such thread can result in over 1,000 replies within days while a less popular thread may have less than 100 replies within the same time frame.

Due to the sheer amount of online information, two screening questions were developed: 1) Does the thread deal with one out of the seven events, and 2) does the thread deal with a player entered in one of the seven events. To be included in the analysis, threads had to satisfy both questions. Figure 1 outlines the inclusion of threads procedure. Note that for research question three, forums on equipment and tips/instruction did not have to meet the screening question criteria presented here. Instead, they had to meet the above-mentioned criteria of having enough interaction (100+ posts) and occurring during the data collection period.

The topics being discussed were also considered as threads were included in the analyses. Topics that generated more attention (finals, history-making events, and breaking records) were considered in the thread inclusion. Unexpected events like announcements regarding gambling, retirement and tournament withdrawal plans were also included. Finally, threads that dealt with the smooth operating of the forum were also considered. Such threads might relate to forum policies, and frequently asked questions. They too were included if they were both timely and popular.

Data Organization

Direct transposing of discussion threads was organized into three Microsoft documents, one for General Pro Player Discussion, one for Pro Match Results, and another for Tennis Equipment and Tennis Tips/Instruction. The document for General Pro Player Discussion was 265 pages long, for Pro Match Results, 56 pages long, and for Tennis Equipment and Tennis Tips/Instruction, 3 pages long. Less popular threads with less than 30 replies and later those with less than 100 replies were then removed from these documents and included into two separate documents, one per forum, called “less popular threads”. Additional threads were removed based on the two screening questions into a separate Word document called “screening exclusion”. A total of three final documents, one per each forum were included for final analysis.

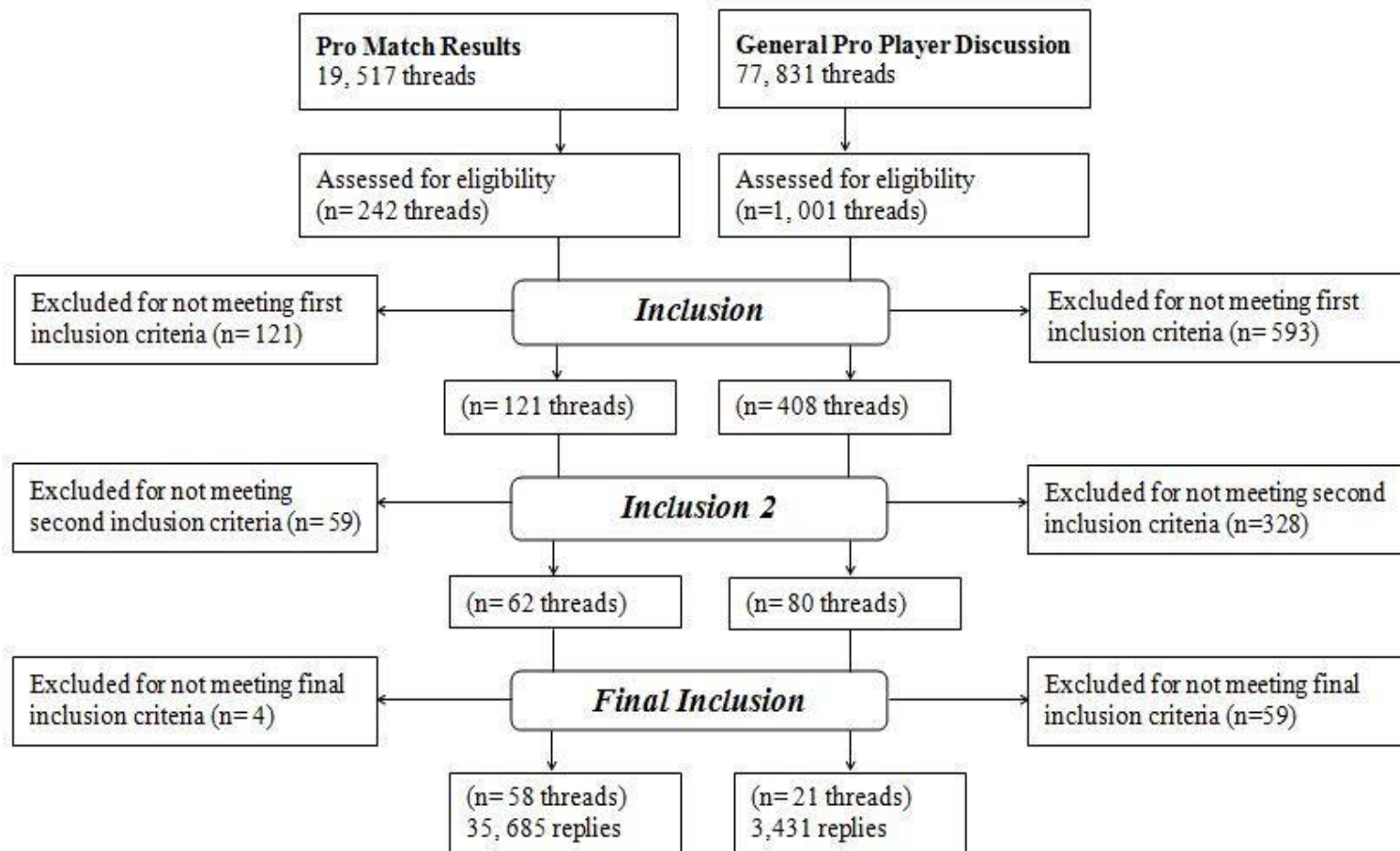


Figure 1. Eligible threads those within timeframe December 14, 2015 – January 31, 2016. 1st inclusion criteria threads of >30 replies.

2nd inclusion criteria, threads of >100 replies. Final inclusion for analysis based on “yes” to two screening questions: 1) Does a thread deal with 1 out of 7 events and 2) Does a thread deal with a player entered in one of the 7 events?

Information Sought

The data collection was done in a lurking manner without researcher's disclosure. Online observations of discussion threads helped provide a broader aspect of enthusiasts' behaviour, such as types and nature of discussions. The purpose of observations was to gain an understanding of the online culture and community activities. Attention was devoted to posters' discussion patterns.

The first research question dealt with the online community development. Here, observation of thread development patterns, such as a number of threads, when new threads start to emerge, topics of focus and their popularity during the events was noted. In particular, thread development patterns were observed regarding the "what", "when", and "how". The observation was focused on identifying what sparked the thread development, when threads were developed and how they started. Observation also focused on message board structure, poster activities, and roles. These data helped provide insight into how an online community may develop around tennis and how poster participation in it can play out.

The second research question explored how enthusiasts use Talk Tennis and the nature of their participation. The kinds of information posters seek and share, their interactions with others, when and how they engage in the online forum was observed. I noted examples of when a poster was helpful and how this information was perceived by others. Observations of membership length and tendencies in posts on group identities and their potential meanings were noted. Characteristics of self-expression, where present, were described and their potential meanings interpreted using posters' suggestions, explicit expressions, and admissions.

Research question three focused on the influences within Talk Tennis. Posters may reminisce, discuss and provide examples of how previous interactions with others have affected

them. Tennis fans may freely inform their fellow posters of not seeing a match to receive help, such as additional information and streaming resources. The poster may share their event attendance, online subscriptions, equipment demonstrations and use, promoting and encouraging others to do the same. In this sense, online forums can be influential. How, when, and whether posts are influential can be inferred and observed as posters follow up on the information, offer and receive technical advice, and refer to outside sources (streaming URLs). All can serve as good indicators that poster interactions can be influential.

Observations

The forum observation was not limited to the initial posts and patterns. I was aware that trends may emerge as the online observations progress and was willing to follow up on new threads and their themes as they emerged. For example, screenshots and thread imports were updated regularly to represent additional comments that may happen since its initial download. In this sense, my data collection and online observations of the selected discussion threads continued as long as the investigation of the online tennis forum was providing me with new insight on topical areas (see saturation principle in Fetterman, 1998).

Attention to habits and tensions were noted to help provide additional insight into the content and nature of the interaction. Online forum discussions included video, picture, and IM interactions; offering immediate and timely responses with emotional cues, such as emojis (see Appendix F for kinds of responses posters use in Talk Tennis).

Analysis

I initially read through a large number of posts about competitive tennis (pros, tournaments, and matches), tennis equipment including racquets and strings, and discussions on instructional tennis tips. While reading these posts I made general notes about what I saw and

where I found these data, such as specific sub-forums within Talk Tennis. Then I focused on threads that had many discussions related to professional tennis in particular. These included professional player performances in general, match specific performances, gear and general equipment from racquets to attire used by such players. I was intrigued by the influences I was reading as expressed when discussing players, their gear and performance, and how such information sparked interest in equipment and technique. It was clear that pros were trendsetters and influenced posters' own decisions with many trying to play, dress, and act like the pros.

I treated the data collection and analysis as a simultaneous process; the online observations including messages posted to discussion threads were imported and analyzed as they emerged. Comments occurring after initial data import were added on an ongoing basis. Online content was downloaded and indexed. Indexing occurred to organize commonly discussed topics (such as what sparks the conversation), interactions (like how problems are presented and solved), and cultural characteristics (including forum abbreviations used). (For a sample list of abbreviations used in Talk Tennis, please see Appendix G). Instances of when, why and how conversations occurred helped clarify enthusiasts' motives, nature of their participation, associations within the group, and potential influences of community engagement.

Data analysis extended beyond the content analysis method. Utilizing the netnographic method, the emphasis was on the cultural contextualizing of the online forum data (Kozinets, 2015). More specifically, messages in discussion threads were coded to help develop categories identifying patterns and themes. Attention was given to meaningful instances (such as receiving advice and providing feedback). From these events, major themes were developed.

Microsoft Office was used for data analysis, coding, and overall organization and visual representation of data using tables and figures. Microsoft Office tools were considered

appropriate to a netnographic study design seeking to develop a comprehensive story on the online tennis fan subculture (R. Kozinets, personal communication, December 14, 2015).

Microsoft Word was used to organize discussion thread topics and overall online community profile, such as the total number of threads, engagement frequency and member characteristics, such as status and nicknames.

I chose to manually code data. Instead of using a pen and paper technique, I used jottings on computer files. I used the review feature in Microsoft Word to track codes and make comments on interpretations, such as suggested meanings assigned by Talk Tennis members through interactions. Manual coding is considered manageable when data do not exceed 1,000 pages of double-spaced text (see Kozinets, 2010). I did most of my coding in smaller Microsoft Word data files on my personal computer, which were each less than 100 pages in length. Often, I have used the word processing search capabilities within these files to look for repeat instances of my observations. These repeat instances then helped in the coding of the data, confirmation, as well as disconfirmation.

In total, I had 54 different Word files each representing a discussion thread included in the analysis. The files ranged from 100 to 3,501 comments. Talk Tennis has discussion threads that go back as far as 2004, which provides an overview of a 13-year period. This type of archival cultural data was useful in providing a cultural baseline and the historical background of the forum. In a sense, this type of data helped serve as a supplement for cultural participation. It extended and deepened my knowledge of the cultural context of Talk Tennis and its members. I use some of this archival data when describing the message board, reporting the policies and changes in the platform (usability of the forum), as well as providing a context into the length of memberships, group status (e.g., G.O.A.T.), and in-group popularity. In the future, I plan to use

such archival and historical data to further help extend and deepen my knowledge on the long-term involvement within the forum. In particular, this would help identify patterns on group conflict resolutions, initiatives taken, and status (power) perceptions. More specifically, I plan to follow and observe conversations added to the discussion threads I have coded and analyzed for this dissertation at a later time (well after this study has been conducted). This, in my opinion, will continue to enrich and extend my interpretations of the historical and cultural context of Talk Tennis and its members.

Netnography utilizes field notes as they are viewed to add “valuable interpretive insight” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 113). As a netnographer, my job was to build a codified body of knowledge through focused and detailed analysis of the publicly available online information. It is important to remember that this study was not a study of texts found in an online forum; instead, it was a study on Talk Tennis members’ interactions through technologically mediated means, such as this forum. Here, I studied meanings of posters’ acts and utterances.

In terms of the field notes, for me, they played a crucial role in recording and reflecting on all the noteworthy events occurring outside the online postings. For example, I have reflected on the changes that occurred in the platform (appearance and posting changes) and what they could mean for posters. I have also recorded events in the tennis world at the time of the observed thread developments. I noted some patterns I was observing, making sense of the importance of such events in professional tennis outside of Talk Tennis.

I kept my field notes in a field log, or in my case, as previously mentioned, the vintage leather journal. I entered my notes throughout the entire data collection and data analysis process; outlining time spent observing and personal reflections of the online observation experience and content. Information on how the codes, themes, and regularities were developed

was also included (see Creswell, 2007). These personal reflections provide a record of my observations of excuses, eventualities, actions, as well as my own experiences and emotions reading the online posts. For example, in my field notes, I recorded my feelings to sexist and demeaning arguments on the coaching competence of an openly gay, former world No. 1 player, who won two Grand Slam singles titles, Amélie Mauresmo. At the time of my observations, Amélie was coaching Andy Murray, ranked world No.1 in men's singles. In my observations, I describe my frustrations in reading about the judgments, arguments, and stereotypical comments, in general, made by a couple of posters, and how I felt sad about my realization of the prevalence of sexism in sports today. I go on to explain how reactions to such comments from many others in the forum made me feel better and hopeful of the open resistance toward the use of "gender" as a premise for one's coaching ability.

Through these reflective field notes, I record my journey from being a complete outsider to the forum to my learning of policies, members, language used (e.g., common abbreviations), rituals (e.g., Wooden Spoon), and practices (developing threads – commenting on discussions). I also reflect on my involvement as a lurker in the forum of meanings and personalities. These field notes provided key insight on the online tennis culture in particular. They proved useful in providing context when data were analyzed. For example, my field notes helped me understand why a thread, comment, photograph, meme, or hyperlink was made by a particular Talk Tennis member at that time. Often, members would start a thread as a reaction to a statement read somewhere else like the newspaper or another thread.

Often, I have recorded my observational field notes in the margins of the downloaded data in the Word document. This helped elaborate on nuances and distinctions that I noticed at the time I read through the conversation in the discussion thread. These field notes are important

because the observations are not always captured in the text or data itself. For me, these field notes provided insight on the social and interactional acts and processes that make up the members of Talk Tennis culture and daily happenings within such community.

Social interactions between Talk Tennis members were part of an unfolding process. Here, I placed great importance on initial impressions of the community, its discussion threads, community members, and key events or incidents. These impressions helped me contemplate my findings and I tried to use this time to help me understand the experiences of Talk Tennis members. For instance, I asked, were others shocked at the disrespectful posting toward female player coaches as I was? The process of reaction and observation is contextual (Kozinets, 2010). As a netnographer I was concerned with, as observed by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2012), how members of a particular setting, in this case, an online community, address their meanings as they relate to and interact with others. In addition to recording contextual answers to “when”, “where”, and “where” questions in my field notes, I also tried to capture my own impressions and expectations about the “why” questions that arose.

This study of online tennis culture transformed, to some extent, the way I consume tennis, the way I think about coaching tennis, the way I talk about tennis, and the way I relate to other tennis enthusiasts, in general. During the study, I kept observational field notes about my changing tennis habits, about my conversations with tennis family members, about my tennis related reading choices, and about my trips to the local tennis courts as a player. During this process, I have captured a considerable data about the effect that the online community lurking experience had on my social life and relationships with family, friends, and my own tennis performances and consumption. For instance, I was following and reading more about the tennis incidents discussed by the Talk Tennis members and I also talked more about the tennis facts and

analyses presented with family and close friends who were tennis players, coaches, and enthusiasts, in general. This elaborated and usually, led to more discussion and insight into the topic and the forum at hand.

Netnographic methods allow the researcher to understand “the emics of experientially close observation of online communities and cultures and etics of experientially distant, theoretically focused representation of them” (Kozinets, 2006, p.134). The emics would be a description of behaviours and beliefs that seem meaningful to enthusiasts, while etics would be a description of behaviour and beliefs by the researcher. This study’s analysis focused on posters’ shared experiences, opinions, and activities in Talk Tennis. The unit of analysis was the social act or behaviour and not the individual undertaking the act (see Kozinets, 2015). Interpretations of how this online community culture works were sought.

Six Steps of Analyzing and Interpreting Talk Tennis Data

Netnography utilizes an inductive data analysis approach (Kozinets, 2010). Induction can be viewed as “a form of logical reasoning” where researcher’s observations are “built up” for general statements about the studied topic (see Kozinets, 2010, p. 119). Overall, I looked to process and refine my data as well as extract its core elements. More specifically, I engaged in six common analytic moves including coding, noting, abstracting and comparing, checking and refinement, generalizing, and theorizing (see Kozinets, 2010). In my analysis, I treated the six stages as fluid, flexible in nature, with researcher freely moving from one step to the next and work their way backward, revisiting the data and interpretations as needed. In this way, I sought a hermeneutic interpretation of the online data (see Spiggle, 1994; Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994).

In particular, I sought to produce an interpretation that was coherent, consistent, and apprehensive. This interpretation was accompanied with pertinent examples, complimented with literature. It was to be informative and insightful in nature, helping revise and enhance the understanding of tennis and online culture, in general. My goal was to put my nuanced interpretations into an interesting, appealing, persuasive prose (see Arnold & Fischer, 1994) that rest on the social and historical context of the online data (see Thompson et al. 1994). Kozinets (2010) outlined that a skilled netnographer would utilize both, the analytic process (the six-step analysis discussed here) and the hermeneutic interpretation. I do this in my netnographic example below. Here, I briefly outline how the six stages of analysis played out in this study:

Coding – As part of my coding practice I affixed codes and categories to data drawn from both my field notes and Talk Tennis posts. During this stage, I assigned a combination of codes, classifications, and names to separate units of my data. These codes served as a label to organize data into examples of some general phenomenon, such as “word-of-mouth”. Codes and categories emerge inductively as a result of my reading of the data. They were not intentionally imposed by any prescribed categories read elsewhere.

Noting – During the data analysis, I noted my reflections on the data and other remarks, such as topic importance. This is a form of an annotation or memoing (see Kozinets, 2010) that helps record my reflections on what I was learning from the data. These reflective notes, which I often place in the Word document margin, are my ideas about concepts, essential elements in the data, and their relationships as I understood them.

Abstracting and Comparing – I have worked to sift and sort through the online posts in discussion threads to help identify related phrases and expressions, relationships, and noticeable differences. This process of abstracting is believed to build the defined codes into general,

conceptual formulations (see Kozinets, 2010). During this process, I compared similarities and differences evident in the online tennis data incidents.

Checking and Refinement – I would return to the Talk Tennis message board on an ongoing basis. This checking in within the selected discussion threads allowed me to clarify, analyze, and outline the previously identified patterns, processes, common themes, and discrepancies in my data. In particular, checking the discussion thread again for new insights helped confirm my old insights, the ones gained earlier in the analysis. For example, the concern with etiquette was a common theme that was extended in the form of expectations for both, the player and the forum members. This was confirmed for me by reading additional Talk Tennis posts encompassing a discussion on various tennis contexts, ranging from professional player performances to online social exchanges, such as disagreements between posters.

Generalizing – My generalizing was on a smaller scale dealing with explanations of the consistencies in the dataset. For example, I identified through the hundreds of posts that the focus on performance was a constant; driving much of the debate and discussion in this forum.

Theorizing – I have looked back to the existing literature to approach my data interpretations and generalizations. I used this body of knowledge to help further make sense of the data and the findings. Here, what I was observing often was explained with the help of previously identified construct or theory. At times, I make a connection and state that the data suggest something observed elsewhere. At this stage, I have also constructed new theories by outlining potential explanations of the online interactions. My theorizing was done by considering both, the data and the existing literature. For instance, I take Preece's (2000) construct of "usability" not to be a uniform notion in this online tennis forum. Instead, a level of uniformity and comfortable space

or as I call it, “virtual market”, tends to exist with much diversity, conflict, and various tones emerging to create a complex online community.

Data Analysis – My Netnographic Example

I share my netnographic data analysis example including manual coding completed in a Word document of the forum posting in Figure 2 below. As previously mentioned, I use manual coding because it is fairly easy to perform in short posting types such as a conversational exchange between two or dozen posters in discussion threads. My coding uses a variety of terms that relate to the posting’s technical, on-court performance based quest “expertise”, “advice”, “terminology”, “trial and error”, “student-centered”, “intention”, “cooperation”, etc. The terms I use also try to pick up some of the emotional aspects of the exchange as conveyed in the postings, emotion that might be driving the on-court performance quest, such as “care”. Repeatedly I circle techniques and place different pieces of terminology inside of parentheses. These repeat instances start to tell a story. I write notes, questions to myself, as I memo on the margin of the document about this posting; offering suggestions, trying to make sense of what the posting is telling me. Combined elements of the coded text suggest a consistent pattern to unfold. The pattern of seeking technical advice to improve one’s game, triggers an expertise-driven aid, the aid that involved a combination of precise, technical, professional, expert feedback, and player-focused coaching.

I think **your hitting elbow is a little too close** [expertise? /technical advice] to your side during your **take-back** [terminology/technicality/refers to backswing (stroke)], your left arm is **never really involved** (as in pulling it back to start your initial **shoulder turn** [technical]), so **I would hold the racquet longer** [genuine but yet professional advice] with your **left hand** [technical] during take-back and then use that left arm for **momentum** [technical] so that your **core** [technical] is involved more, **I think that may help with your off balanced** [care for other's success!] form **after contact** [technical] (where **your torso and body are leaning off to the left side and back**) [technical]. HTH [care!]

I am going out today to practice [shares intention] **I will try to hold the racket longer** [willingness to learn/ appreciating advice] with my left hand. **I think some of my problem is late set up** [shares thoughts] [cooperation!], because **I have tried to hold the racket longer while hitting in the past and it did seem to help.** [Value of advice!] But that was **on easy rally shots where I had time** [past trial/error- failed execution/ new problem identification], **once it speeds up some I feel like I am late if I hold** [new problem/ seeks more input] with left hand to long.

Figure 2. Manual Coding of Talk Tennis Posting

- N **Nadina**
Coach based approach
"Student centred" approach.
- N **Nadina**
Who is this poster? Knowledgeable. Possess the knowledge of an expert.
- N **Nadina**
Serves as an expert. ("Being helpful").
- N **Nadina**
Suggests expert opinion. Technical identification of the problem (specifics and detailed analysis – arm/elbow positioning, swing, balance, momentum).
- N **Nadina**
A fellow poster offers help in response to a personal playing video by another poster. Tries to help them out.
- N **Nadina Ayer**
Shortcut for "hope that helps"
- N **Nadina**
"Listening to the advice" offered by another poster.
- N **Nadina Ayer**
The poster seeking advice shows appreciation for the input, values the feedback by stating intent – gives credit – wants to learn more – explains the previous problem utilizing the same strategy offered by poster 1.
- N **Nadina**
This forum allows 1 on 1 exchange (resembles that of a coach).

This was the basis for my hermeneutic interpretation, which helped broaden and open my analysis. One of the first things to notice about the post in Figure 2 is that Poster 1 is providing advice, which Poster 2 finds valuable and helpful. Poster 2 who was seeking help by informing others in the forum of his on-court difficulties; shared his experiences, creating a cooperative, immediate dialogue about his past, current, and future events relating to his personal on-court performances. In response, Poster 1 not only shares their expertise, but also identifies the potential problem, and as a follow-up, offers a possible solution. Poster 1 uses terminology to help explain what might be the problem. They offer specific steps in improving the stroke, such as longer follow-through and keeping the balance. This is not just any feedback and advice offered to the fellow poster, it is specific player analysis feedback dealing with backswing (taking the racquet back), positioning, balance, and momentum.

The technical language of Poster 1 plays an important role here. Any sport enthusiast can probably guess what the poster is talking about when they speak of “shoulder turn” or being “off balance”. But what do they really mean by “holding the racquet longer”, or “using the left arm for momentum”, or “their hitting elbow being a little too close during a ‘take back’”? These qualitative clues suggest that the forum is used to demonstrate and to teach – and to teach in order to demonstrate – the specifics of playing tennis. I discovered in my further investigation of Talk Tennis, that in this forum and to its members, also evident in the posting in Figure 2, performance is central to tennis.

This offers an outline, a beginning of a “thick” interpretation built on analytic codes with a hermeneutic interpretation (see Kozinets, 2010). From one posting shown in Figure 2, we learn about this online tennis forum’s rituals, motivations and concerns, and interactional practice for building and maintaining the community. Knowledge of the technical tennis elements and of

tennis playing, in general, seems to be a requirement for Talk Tennis members, and those interested in studying the community like myself.

In my example above, I demonstrate that netnographic textual interpretation begins with breaking down of online posts into its essential elements, arranging them, finding relative patterns among them, intently exploring all their components, questioning the motives behind them, checking and investigating with more data, to learning about the culture they suggest (see Kozinets, 2010).

Pragmatic-Interactionist Approach

Recall how symbolic interactionism, a theoretical framework explained by Blumer (1969), helped guide my study. This theoretical framework was especially helpful to me in the way I analyzed the online data. As suggested by Kozinets (2010), during the data analysis, the symbolic interactionism was paired with the linguistic philosophy as outlined by Wittgenstein (1958). Taken together, the unit of analysis was the behaviour, the interpersonal dynamics of tennis enthusiasts, rather than the posters themselves. When applying this interactionist approach to the context of online tennis culture, every posting in the discussion threads was viewed as social action and treated as “a relevant observational event in and of itself” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 132).

Here, I considered the online tennis community as a social world and treated the online data (members’ postings) as a social act. I assumed that online tennis forum has social and language games (see Wittgenstein, 1958) with associated rules, courts, players who may be winners and/or losers. I sought to understand the meaning of the social acts as displayed in the tennis forum in the context of the tennis culture, in general. Through it all, I noted and considered observations of posters’ actions, such as images including photographs, memes; as

well as videos of match highlights, personal performances, music videos, etc. shared with the rest of the community and the responses including comments and likes received for such actions.

I did not rely on or need to know who was posting the information, such as their gender, age, real name, residence, etc. Although I make a note of interesting and common observations in terms of membership length and status within the forum, I was more concerned with the observations of the interactive, interpersonal dynamics displayed and performed in the forum and online tennis culture, in general. In this sense, my netnographic data analysis consisted of contextualizing the meaning of the social exchange and interaction in the online tennis forum circle. I also considered the relationship between the online and off-line tennis world. This included any article that seemed relevant and important, as identified or introduced in the forum discussions. I attended to subtexts, context, and text in the postings. I paid close attention to my field notes and data on how Talk Tennis members communicated. Understanding how they communicated with each other helped enrich my understanding of the complex lived experience of communal interaction.

The overall goal of my analysis of the online tennis community was to build theoretical explanations and propositions while providing a rich, thick description filled with comparisons, clarifications, and classifications. In that way, this study is not intended to be interpreted as a demonstration of what is typical of an average tennis enthusiast using an online sport forum. It is rather a case, a demonstration of what is possible within the context of an online tennis community. Throughout, I present my findings based on the special or unique instances I identified within the data.

Reporting Findings

I have organized the findings into major themes that help answer each research question. Descriptions of the online setting, enthusiasts, and events are included. Observed trends in the community dynamic are described. These descriptions are presented in a chronological order of events (see Creswell, 2007). Tables, figures and other items, such as emojis, avatar pictures, video links, and memes are used to present the experiences, interactions, meanings, and regularities in the data. Direct quotes are presented to support identified themes, describe engagement and offer vicarious experiences of the events. The representation of the findings is grounded in theory and data. Inferences from data are drawn while theories were used to help provide structure to interpretations (see Creswell, 2007). Issues, such as ambiguities encountered by the researcher are also discussed (see Kozinets, 2010).

Ethical Issues

The researcher's main responsibilities include participants' well-being, professional conduct of research integrity, familiarizing and coping with challenges using evolving methods (Creswell, 2009). This study collected information on actions and shared experiences from people in an online forum and as such needed to consider and anticipate ethical issues.

Since the study used the online communities as a tool for collecting data, ethical issues, such as data privacy, confidentiality, and integrity were considered. What is public or private including data ownership and longevity can become complex in online communities, posing a threat to persons' reputation by making them identifiable (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2012). Problems can arise when the terms of use within online forums are not fully understood by the participant.

This research was guided by two ethical priorities including protection of participants' identities and expectation of privacy when dealing with readily available online data. To ensure privacy and adequate study procedures, clarifications from the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Waterloo were sought.

For unobtrusive online observations from Talk Tennis, ethics clearance was not required. Panel on Research Ethics' (2015a) Article 2.3 outlines that "research ethics board review is not required for research involving the observation of people in public places where: 1) it does not involve any intervention staged by the researcher or direct interaction with the individuals or groups; 2) individuals or groups targeted for observation have no reasonable expectation of privacy, and 3) any dissemination of research results does not allow identification of specific individuals" (<http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-eptc2/chapter2-chapitre2/>). Here, it is understood that "observational research is used to study acts or behaviour in a natural environment" (Panel on Research Ethics, 2015b). According to Panel on Research Ethics' (2015b) Chapter 10, observational studies can be undertaken in virtual settings, such as Internet chat rooms (<http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-eptc2/chapter10-chapitre10/#toc10-1b>). This study is non-participant observational research in that the researcher observes but does not participate in the message board. More specifically, the researcher engaged in covert non-participant observation and did not seek consent (<http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-eptc2/chapter10-chapitre10/#toc10-1b>).

Talk Tennis message board outlines their policies and terms of use to their users (<http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/tw-message-board-policies.3/>). The policies remind the user that the message board owner, Tennis Warehouse "will not be held responsible

for the content of any message”, reserves the right to remove users and delete comments that violate its policies including but not limited to obscene language, personal attacks, trolling/flaming of admin, promotion, sales, pornography, spamming, trademarked usernames, one username per user, discussion of junior players other than those who are pros, and accusations of others using double accounts. It outlines that those using Talk Tennis agree not to violate any law, “infringe the rights of any third party”, transmit content that is unlawful, such as private information of others, impersonate or misrepresent any person or entity, manipulate identifiers, disrupt computer server, disseminate off-topic messages or promoting boards, such as unsolicited electronic e-mail messages, and post torrents or downloads of copyrighted material. Finally, Talk Tennis reminds its users that the forum is Internet-based, recommending to its members not to post information they want to keep private. This outlines that participants using the forum are not to expect their messages to remain private when posted on the Internet.

On Talk Tennis, people who post and share information do not use their real names, instead, they use pseudonyms, such as “poisoned slice” and “spin to win”. This reduces one’s ability to track the person’s identity. To further protect Talk Tennis participants’ identity, online observations of the commonly discussed topics and the nature of interactions were paraphrased. To ensure participants’ confidentiality, responses were disassociated through the use of pseudonyms, such as poster 1, for individuals’ nicknames (Kozinets, 2002). Posters sometimes disclose a “real” location but such information was only used to summarize the forum’s characteristics and patterns of use. Other available demographics used for additional insight into forum’s characteristics included avatars, membership length, status (number of posts), and trophy points. Honesty, fairness, and respect toward posters were exercised by acknowledging their views through the use of direct quotes and in-vivo codes (see Charmaz, 2007).

Computer and online cloud data obtained from discussion thread observations were encrypted and password protected on personal laptops and an office computer to minimize its loss and misuse by any third party (Creswell, 2009). For the fair presentation of the findings, an effort was made to use unbiased language as patterns and events were described.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter reports the results of an extensive review of online discussion threads within a Talk Tennis message board. The majority of the results are from the Competitive Tennis category and its two discussion sub-forums, General Pro Player Discussion and Pro Match Results during mid-December 2015 until the end of January 2016. The third research question is addressed using data from threads of two additional message board categories, tennis equipment and miscellaneous. Observation of these threads occurred from mid-October 2016 until mid-November 2016. The chapter is structured around the three research questions. Each question is addressed by reporting insights gathered from the data. Themes are identified that help answer each research question. Quotes from the various sources are used to support conclusions and observations.

Background Information

First, I start by outlining the background information on the tennis events, which occurred during the data collection. I then follow the discussion by describing the context of the message board and its two relevant forums including a section on participation guidelines and posters' characteristics. Finally, I complete this section by outlining the observed trends in the data that pertains to community dynamic. The background information discussed here helps provide some context allowing the reader to situate the findings within a bigger network of an online tennis community.

Tennis Events

Professional tennis events take place on a weekly basis throughout the year. Based on such a busy schedule, posters' interaction in this tennis community was expected to be high. The events were dynamic in that early exists, last-minute withdrawals, injuries, big upsets, and/or history-making were all possible. Table 1 outlines a total of seven events taking place on both, the ATP and the WTA Tour during the data collection period. The most significant and anticipated event during this period is the Australian Open. It occurred in the last two weeks of January or four months after the last Grand Slam, the US Open.

For players, the Grand Slam could mean career advancement with a higher point system and exposure associated with any success enjoyed during such tournaments. For tennis enthusiasts, Grand Slams can introduce up-and-comers or highlight veterans. Due to the length of such events, more threads and interactions are expected in forums during the two weeks of the Australian Open. Less traffic is anticipated during lower point tournaments, such as Hopman Cup (<http://hopmancup.com/>) or Brisbane International (<http://www.brisbaneinternational.com.au/>).

Table 1.

List of Women's and Men's Professional Events during Data Collection Period

Event	Category	Week	Characteristic
Hopman Cup	WTA & ATP	4 January	ITF Mixed Teams Championships; \$1,000,000; hard (8 teams, RR) Perth, Australia
Brisbane International	WTA & ATP	4 January	ATP World Tour 250, \$461,330; hard (28S/16Q/16D), Brisbane, Australia WTA Premier, \$1,000,000; hard (30S/32Q/16D), Brisbane, Australia
Shenzhen Open	WTA	4 January	WTA International, \$500,000; hard (32S/16Q/16D), Shenzhen, China
Chennai Open	ATP	4 January	ATP World Tour 250, \$482,085; hard (28S/16Q/16D), Chennai, India
Qatar Open	ATP	4 January	ATP World Tour 250, \$1,283,855; hard (28S/16Q/16D), Doha, Qatar
Auckland Open	WTA & ATP	11 January	ATP World Tour 250, \$520,070; hard (28S/16Q/16D), Auckland, New Zealand WTA International, \$250,000; hard (32S/16Q/16D), Auckland, New Zealand
Sydney International	WTA & ATP	11 January	ATP World Tour 250, \$461,330; hard (28S/16Q/16D), Sydney, Australia WTA Premier, \$753,000; hard (30S, 32Q/16D), Sydney, Australia
Hobart International	WTA	11 January	WTA International, \$250,000; hard (32S/32Q/16D), Hobart, Australia
Australian Open	WTA & ATP	18 – 25 January	Grand Slam, ATP, \$22,000,000; hard (128S/128Q/64D/32X), Melbourne, Australia WTA, \$14,835,728; hard (128S/96Q/64D/32X), Melbourne, Australia

Note. \$value represents total tournament prize money, draw size identifiers include S= singles, Q= qualifier, D= doubles, X= mixed doubles, type of event RR represents round-robin draw; “hard” refers to the court surface.

Talk Tennis at Tennis Warehouse (Talk Tennis)

Talk Tennis is the oldest existing online community of its kind. In 1992, this community started out as a specialty shop transcending into online shopping in 1995. It is considered the world's "most active tennis equipment message board" with approximately 10,000 posts per month and 50,000-page views per day (Tennis Warehouse, 2016). As of February 15, 2017, Talk Tennis consisted of 526,004 discussions and a total of 10,012,229 messages (<http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php>). The continued use and growth may be due to its inherent appeal to tennis enthusiasts as well as the ease and flexibility provided by ongoing system improvements. For example, Talk Tennis has wall posting, characteristic of Facebook, allowing its posters to participate in an already familiar and perhaps a preferred way (see Appendix A).

Contextually, Talk Tennis is an international community, focused on a wide range of topics and region based discussions available in English, German, Spanish, French, and Italian. It consists of five categories: 1) competitive tennis talk, 2) tennis equipment, 3) miscellaneous, 4) talk tennis international, and 5) classifieds. Each category is broken down into sub-categories for a total of twenty-eight topics (<http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php>). This classification can satisfy a wide range of enthusiasts, providing a culturally diverse environment.

Talk Tennis represents a non-geographical community (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001) and can be situated within a sports fan/brand based community. It is a virtual space organized around specific interests and needs. In this case, the interests focus on professional tennis, players, events, sport participation (instruction), and equipment. Further, given the heavy emphasis on information exchange, its characteristics are also consistent with a learning community (Cross, 1998). Its focus is on tennis, events, gear, and /or pro players.

As a message board, Talk Tennis comes with a set of rules, policies, and user tools for wall posting and messaging. These rules are intended to facilitate and encourage usability and sociability (Preece, 2000). Within this context, social roles can form and relationships can emerge (Gleave, Welser, Lento, & Smith, 2009). The goal is to provide posters with an opportunity for interaction and sharing. Simultaneously, it allows lurkers a connection to the sport through observation of the conversation.

As a researcher, I acknowledge that pursuing the first research question (How does an online community develop, in this case, around tennis?) may seem problematic when using the oldest most established site of its kind. After all, doesn't its age suggest that community has already developed and that the research has missed the growth period? However, this study focused on the ongoing dynamics within the site. I assumed that the forum was continually evolving, new patterns were emerging, and this would not be altered by the age of the site.

Understanding Participation Guidelines and Policies

Talk Tennis has a clear set of policies and consequences for violations. Its policies relate to language, behaviour, advertising, spamming, new product sales, pornography, usernames, and discussions (<http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/tw-message-board-policies.3/>). Posters must agree to adhere to the community rules; violation of its policies can result in post removal, suspension of posting privileges or user ban.

Posting Privileges

Posters in Talk Tennis achieve a status based on the number of posts (see Appendix B). Their status can range from a new user of 0+ posts, a rookie, semi-pro, professional, hall of fame, legend, G.O.A.T., Talk Tennis Guru; to the bionic poster of 30,000+ posts (see Appendix B). Note the names of these categories. They are intended to encourage posting behaviours and use

labels valued within the sport to acknowledge success. More than that, rights increase with the number of posts. The goal is both to encourage posting but also to ensure thoughtful involvement among the posters. For example, to ensure accountability, new users cannot edit their posts or avatars until they surpass 50 posts (Tennis Warehouse, 2016).

Control over Information

In this community, several parties have control over information. Posters have control over whose content they see. They can control content by adding unwanted posters to their ignore list. The community deletes its threads if content becomes irrelevant. As one administrator put, “If we see a thread is going downhill with no chance of returning to a regular discussion, the thread will be deleted. We do not ‘automatically’ delete any threads.”

(<http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/ttw-faq-read-before-posting-sigs-avatars-pictures-etc.319306/>). The community also removes content on third party demands. On June 27th, 2006, the staff warned and thanked posters for their understanding in having to remove all non-official website links to live streaming of Wimbledon (<http://www.wimbledon.org/wimbledonlive/>).

Talk Tennis classifies its members based on their characteristics including staff members, such as administrators and moderators, and those with most messages (“Break Point”), most likes (“stringer tom”), and most points (“Rafa the King”) received. These members are identified as “notable members” with a total of seven bionic posters, those with 30,000+ posts (<https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?members/>). The number of messages posted, likes and points received can offer insight into community commitment and perceptions of a social status.

These policies and procedures help to shape and mold the dynamics within the site. They encourage participation while still ensuring some uniformity and a level of quality. As will be noted later in the dissertation, what emerges is a dynamic that is very much like the sport of tennis itself. The concern is for performance, sportsmanship, and expertise mirroring the game.

Condition of Entry: Posting Requires a Membership

Talk Tennis is a large community consisting of 39,842 members as of February 15, 2017 (<https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php>). To observe and read the discussions in this community, membership is not required; this information is publicly available. Those who wish to participate in its discussions must obtain a free membership and sign in with their credentials prior to posting. In this case, posters are seen as members who join the community to fulfill their need to share with others (see membership in McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Since only posters require a membership and lurkers can read the information without it, the terms poster and member are used interchangeably in this study.

Posters' Characteristics

In this community, posters are characterized by their avatars, nicknames, status, year joined, the number of messages, and location. The location can be real, such as Canberra, Australia, but can also be made up as in “no man’s land” or “in the future”. The avatars, status, membership length and the number of posts may hint at posters’ involvement in the forum and commitment to the community over time.

Posters can join the community at any time. The community keeps track, outlining newest members and those celebrating birthdays. Members differ based on their status and membership length. The longest serving members, such as “sliceroni” tend to be those who

joined the community when it was formed, in 2004. The membership length like the achieved status can suggest a social ranking within this community.

Posters use a wide range of pictures as their avatars. Many use pictures of pro or retired tennis players and tennis related elements, such as rackets, shoes, tennis balls, shirts, tennis court, and stands. Other photos used include those of animals, non-tennis athletes, and celebrities (see Appendix C for a sample of avatars used). Avatars are important as they can relate to self-expression, such as player allegiance.

Information including nickname, status, avatar, date joined, the number of messages, trophy points, and likes received are displayed in what appears to be a membership card format. This card also displays information on when the poster was in the forum and which thread they viewed last (see Appendix D). Those visiting the discussion threads can see whether a poster is online, which is indicated by the green cornered ID (see Appendix E). The online status can be important, providing an immediate and timely response during a discussion.

Talk Tennis posters are fans of tennis. They can be emotional and passionate about the game and their player. As such, they can be very expressive and illustrative when conveying their feelings. As one poster put, “Being a Nadal fan is like being strapped into a crazy ass rollercoaster in the dark.”¹ Posters then can express tennis importance via emotional engagement and care for player success. As one poster commented,

Using both my heart and my head I see their final slam counts being: Federer - 18. Ok, almost entirely heart on this one. Djokovic - 16. Hard to predict more than this at his age. Cautiously optimistic. Nadal - 15/16. Can't fathom him not winning one more French. 30-40% chance he adds another slam after that.¹

Here, the poster makes predictions using their “heart” and/or “entirely heart”.

Posters can also reveal a considerable investment in the topics. They often craft a detailed reply. An example below depicts this well,

I'm talking on aggregate. I've seen that Nadal can give amazing peak levels on HC...albeit he produces them less frequently than Djokovic and Federer...he produced tennis that landed him a H2H against the best players of the era...25-8 against the Big Four? His peak on grass is probably worse than Federer's AND Djokovic's in my view, though the latter is debatable, but his superiority on clay is so abundant that he wins the overall peak level war. We can at least compare peak displays of Nadal on HC and grass to Federer and Djokovic but I can't return the favour for Federer and Djokovic against Nadal on clay, where the only meaningful display of comparable peak occurred in the 2013 RG SF. I understand that Masters are not worthless but have to use Slams as my main barometer.³

The way Talk Tennis posters interact suggests that they are far more than a regular tennis spectator who simply watches the game. Instead, these posters elicit behaviour consistent with considerable involvement and dedication. For instance, they seem prepared to offer a detailed analysis of player's performance, provide supporting evidence for arguments suggesting a historical grasp of tennis competitions, providing informed opinions, and advice on all aspects of professional tennis including player's coaching decisions. Such involvement is demonstrated in the following post,

If Tomic had the work ethic of Halep...Saw him pass Nole with a slice last year...don't remember if it was Beijing or Shanghai. Enormously talented but not enough heart...I remember commentators criticizing his attitude in a match against Ferrer where he looked disinterested from the start and unsurprisingly lost.²

This discussion sheds some light on the site itself and those who post on it. The focus is on performance within the sport and the posters' dedication to this enterprise is obvious.

Competitive Tennis Talk Discussion Sub-Forums and Their Threads

This study mainly focuses on two sub-categories of the competitive tennis talk category in Talk Tennis including 1) Pro Match Results and 2) General Pro Player Discussion. The focus is on threads from the period of December 14th, 2015 until January 31st, 2016. More on these two sub-forums and their insight into trending topics is discussed below.

Sub-Forum 1: Pro Match Results

Pro Match Results is a discussion forum within competitive tennis talk category of Talk Tennis. A warning on the index page of Talk Tennis alerts posters and visitors not to enter this forum if they do not want to see match results (<http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php>). Instead, they are encouraged to use Pro Match Results exclusively when placing spoiler threads, discussing professional tournaments, matches, and more importantly, results.

Pro Match Results' oldest thread dates back to January 23, 2006, showing a total of 20,277 threads as of September 8, 2016. The forum consisted of 242 threads during the data collection period out of which only 6 were developed in the second half of December (14- 31). This is expected due to its focus on match results. The month of December 2015 is considered the "off-season" as no professional tournaments take place at that time (Tennis.com, 2016; WTA, 2015).

Although there are many, the most popular topics in Pro Match Results during the month of January 2016 were on the specific matchups, such as head-to-head in various rounds of a tournament. These threads generally seemed to encourage conversation, at times resulting in more than 3,000 posts over a short period (see "Australian Open 2016 SF- [1] Djoković vs. [3]

Federer”³). Figure 3 depicts a map outlining the topics of discussion and patterns within Pro Match Results and its 58 threads under this study.

Sub-Forum 2: General Pro Player Discussion

General Pro Player Discussion, a forum within competitive tennis talk category of Talk Tennis, is for “talk about anything pro, except match results!” (<https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?forums/general-pro-player-discussion.13/>). Spoiler threads posted within this forum are deleted (<https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/attention-if-posting-match-results-please-use-match-results-forum.17764/>).

This forum is large with a total of 80,659 threads as of September 9, 2016, with its oldest thread dating back to 2004. A total of 1,005 threads were developed during the data collection period of December 14th, 2015 until January 31st, 2016 (<http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?forums/general-pro-player-discussion.13/>). During that time, popular threads dealt with player rebuttals, such as those between Tomić and Federer, tournaments including the draw and performance, and storylines like that of Murray winning in Melbourne. Discussion on the 2016 Australian Open Draw alone generated over 375 posts in one day.⁴ Figure 4 depicts a map outlining the topics of discussion and patterns observed within General Pro Player Discussion and its 21 threads under this study.

In Talk Tennis, most of the discussion occurs on the day a discussion thread is developed. Posters may, however, return to the thread at a later time. Twenty-two days after the thread was created one poster commented, “Well, Murray was right I guess? Looked like the world nr2 lost the match before he even stepped on the court.”⁵ Thirty-five days after the original post, another poster reflected, “Nobody hit more winners than Nadal's opponent. Nadal-Verdasco was a much higher quality than Djokovic-Simon and Djokovic-Murray.”⁴

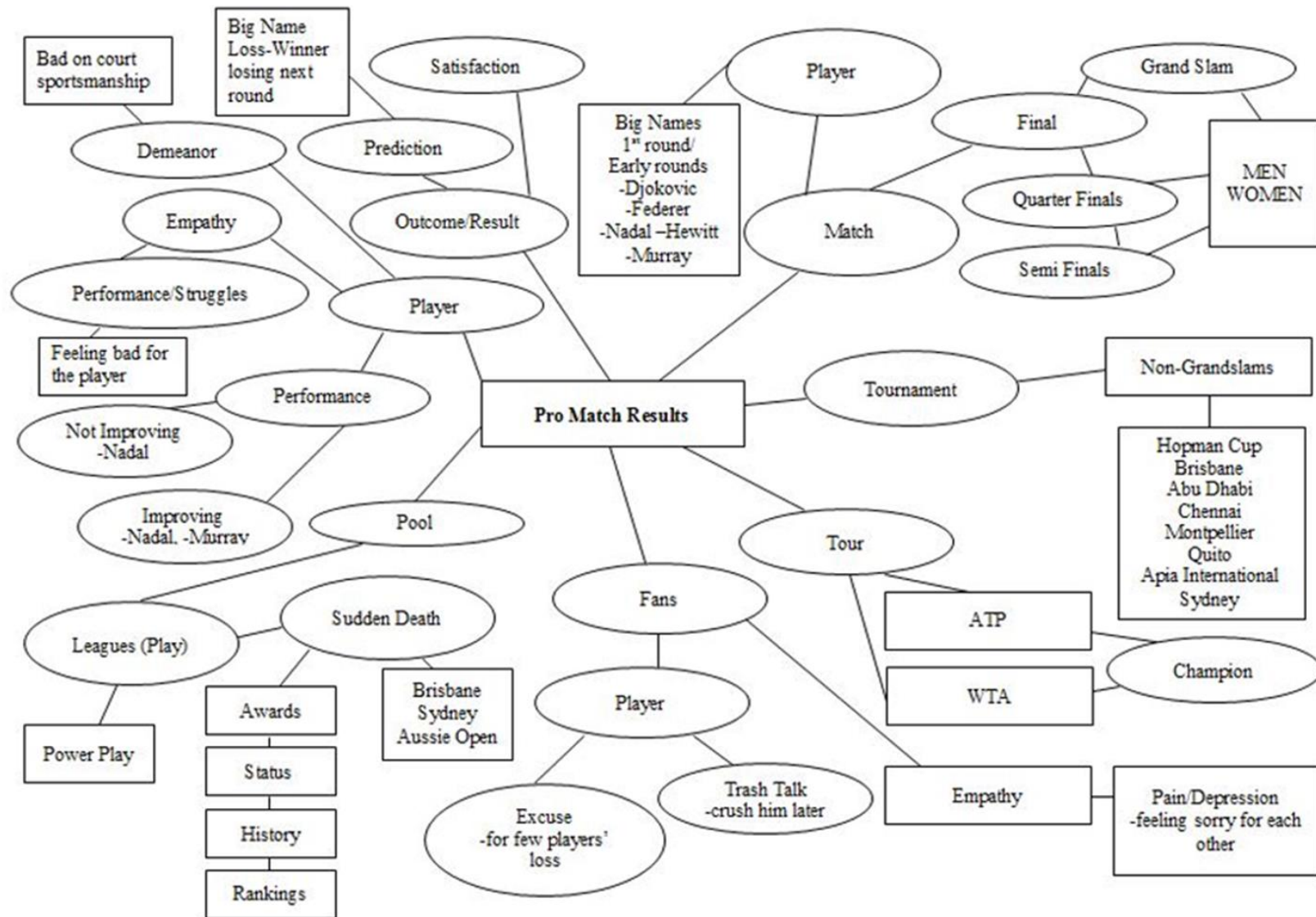


Figure 3. Thread Topics within Pro Match Results

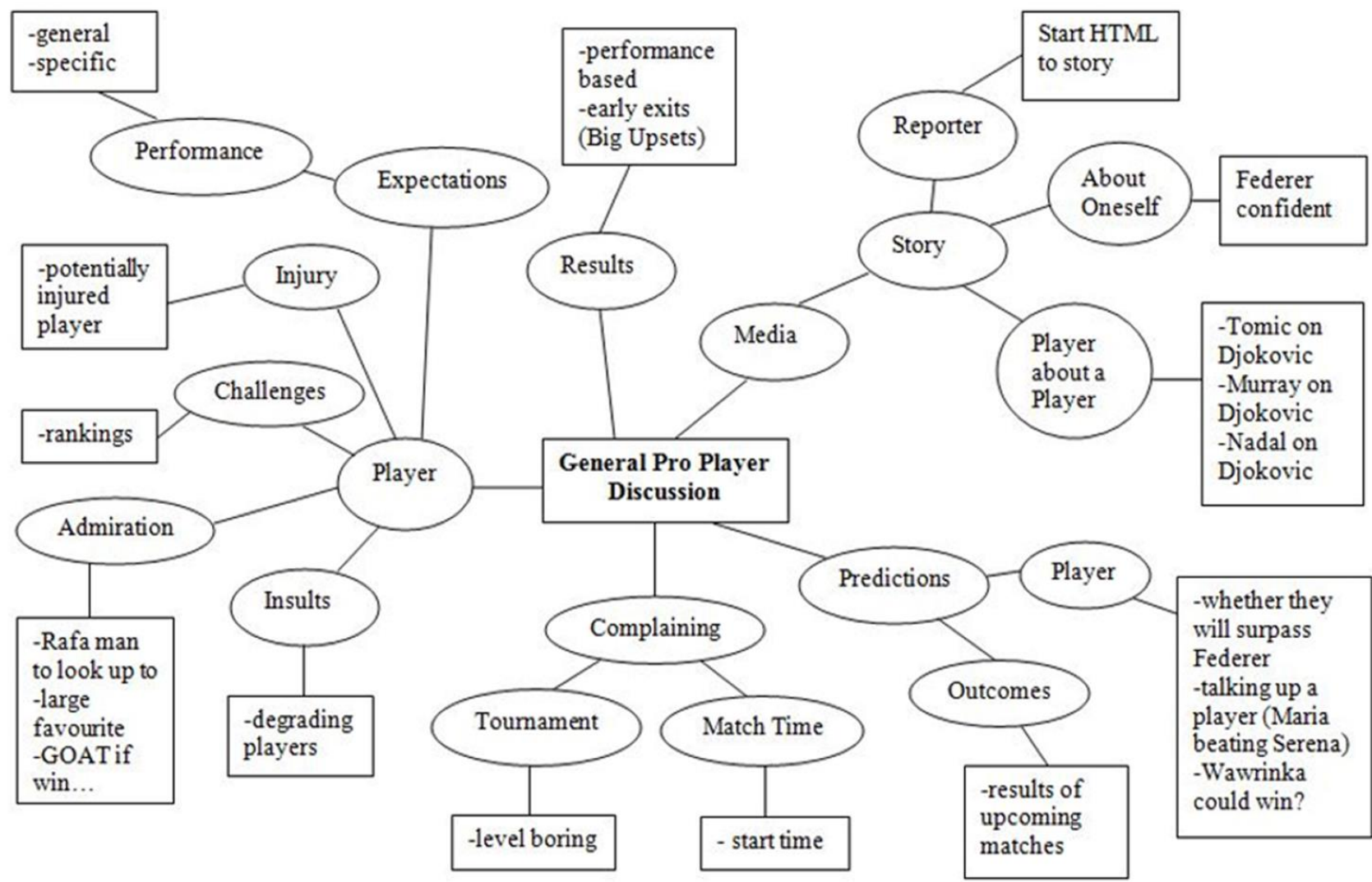


Figure 4. Thread Topics within General Pro Player Discussion

This suggests that many posters are, in effect, keeping track. They recall earlier conversations and the site enables them to do so. Like old friends, the site enables posters to return to old discussions. In this way, memories and perhaps even traditions may emerge.

Not every thread within the two sub-forums discussed here sparked and encouraged conversation. Naturally, some threads were more popular than others. Most threads in Talk Tennis have more views than posts (see “Nadal Returning to form and Liking it!”⁶). This trend can be expected as only members can post and reply to posts, while others can view and read the posts, indicating that lurkers are present. It is common that the thread’s title alone can be of initial interest but not the content. As a result, a thread may never materialize around a discussion point.

Exploring Trends in the Community Dynamic

This section identifies basic trends found within the data. While specific research questions will be answered later, this material highlights the nature and extent of discussions within Talk Tennis. The Talk Tennis environment seems to possess many traditional communal elements of shared space, in this case virtual, membership, influence, needs fulfillment and shared connections. All are consistent with more traditional community characteristics (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Indeed, this community has many characteristics of both relational and territorial communities. It is territorial in that it offers shared space, which serves as a virtual hangout place for tennis enthusiasts during professional events and when in need of advice. Interactions are rich, concerning various facets of the sport among thousands of geographically dispersed posters.

Use of Various Mediums

Posters in this community often use a variety of communication tools, such as language, image, and video. Their use of these various communication tools offered considerable richness, with explicit language, video, images, website URL, and streaming sites. All add substance to the dialogue. For example, posters can be explicit of their emotion through language, “I am not a big fan” or “makes me want to vomit”.³² They can demonstrate how players’ etiquette impressed them by sharing pictures. One poster did just that by posting three pictures of Kerber and Williams smiling, hugging, and holding their trophies along with a comment, “I’m sorry for the spam, but the pictures of them are just lovely *smiley face*”.⁸

In this community, posters often use YouTube videos in their posts to express emotions and share information. To express happiness with Angelique Kerber’s win at the Australian Open, one poster shared a music video, “Angie” by Rolling Stones. Another shared a video link of the full match coverage (e.g., “Serena Williams vs Angelique Kerber FINAL FULL MATCH HD Australian Open 2016”).⁸ Videos may be used not only to express sentiment but also to simply share the experience. As one poster posted, “Anyway, here are the highlights @SpinToWin. I know you will love this. *winking face*”.⁸ These videos then can be accepted through member likes and expressed appreciation, “Thanks for posting” or “Thanks a ton!”⁸

YouTube may be a popular choice due to content availability, such as match coverage and highlights. The way posters may use video in this community suggests the existence of a collective community. In the above examples, posters shared video clips knowing that others would both understand and appreciate their significance. More than that, the act of posting suggests thoughtfulness and consideration, “I know you will love this”.⁸ It can also suggest a bond between the two posters. More on this in later sections of this chapter.

Posters also used website URLs as a way of providing additional insight. For example, a thread, “2016 Australian Open R16 Stanislas Wawrinka vs. Milos Raonic”³², sparked a conversation about Miloš’ reasoning for a mouth guard. There, posters discussed the equipment choice found in an article, “Canada’s Milos Raonic has found a novel way to help alleviate the tension that inevitability surrounds a grand slam tennis tournament, he has taken to wearing a mouth guard.”³²

Website URLs are used not only to spark debate but also to assess and comment. For example, a poster may share an URL of the radio coverage on announcer’s opinion to start a conversation. As one poster put, “*website URL*, Jeff Salzenstein thinks Serena lost because she has Poor low volley technique and she either missed the volley or was constantly popping it up. Do you guys agree?”⁸ Asking input on announcer’s opinion can result in disagreements, “No. I don't agree.” or, “I thought the forehand volleys were more of an issue. She barely hit backhand volleys.”⁸

It was clear that posters used a wide variety of ways to connect with fellow community members. In addition to YouTube and URL’s, posters often shared links to streaming sites and channels. Doing so was typically in order to help each other stay connected. When dealing with technical difficulties, such as a streaming site not working during a match, an exchange between posters can look like this,

Poster 1: “My stream right now = vlc.exe has stopped working”.

Poster 2: “Well VLC crashed in the stream... Thankfully I've also got a Bet365 account and they offer streaming.”

Poster 3: “Anyone find a working stream?”

Poster 4: “This is torture. *sad face* I wish I could see something...The AO website's live scores aren't even working...And the stream remains dead.”

Poster 5: “ESPN3.com if you are in the US”.

Poster 1: “<http://www.flashscore.com/tennis/> Use this, much better...if you click the individual matches it gives you stats. Great website for scores”.

Poster 4: “Thank you.”³²

Through complaining and sharing of experiences, posters used streaming sites to solve viewership challenges. In this case, posters worked together by sharing choices. Here, five different posters created a support community through collective efforts to help.

The online environment offers community members a boundless opportunity to engage, share, and enjoy the sport of tennis. Technology can deepen and expand the material that is available to everyone who visits the site. Unlike typical face-to-face communities, they can gain access to any variety of information sources at the touch of a button. I was interested in how some of these elements interact within the Talk Tennis forum. This is very much a competitive tennis community. Many of the dynamics that play out seem to be a function of the tennis “sensitivity”. Notions of fair play, sportsmanship, performance, and so on tend to guide and direct community members’ interactions. Interactions are closely related to the traditions and components of the sport itself in how they seem to be perceived and reorganized by the posters.

In this community, posters can become fervid over issues they believe important. Indeed, much of the back and forth debate found in the discussion threads seemed largely emotional in nature. The debate was often triggered by posts, events, or news surrounding the sport. I will refer here to these emotional triggers as “sparks”. Sparks can deal with topics, such as match outcomes; timing, such as anticipation; and tirades, such as criticism, and accusations. Whatever

the circumstance, the emotions expressed seemed both genuine and salient to the posters. I offer examples below.

Emotions Can Drive Interactions

Overall, this material suggests that Talk Tennis represents a fascinating online community. It has characteristics of a traditional community with shared interests, common understandings, and emotional connections. This emotion can lead to disagreements, disruptions, and efforts to mend things back together. In that sense, posters in Talk Tennis can get along.

Earlier, in Chapter Two, I have outlined that online communities are similar to traditional offline communities in that both share values, goals, and offer opportunities for social bonding (Warburton & Hatzipanagos, 2013; Wood & Smith, 2005). In Talk Tennis, posters may share values, goals, and socially bond with others.

Talk Tennis can serve as a support system. There, posters can receive assistance and consideration from their fellow posters. They can be very supportive and polite. For example, posters may interact in a respectful manner by being polite. They may express appreciation, “Thanks Liam, and contributors, for a charming civilised thread - a worthy reflection on Konta herself. cheers guys.”¹⁴ Here, posters’ appreciation is a simple thank you and celebration.

In this community, posters may show support toward the thread, or a particular post. As one poster put, “Great, nuanced post.”¹ Posters may also express consideration toward those reading, “Edit: dude, the run-on sentences must suck to read, my apologies, I’m very sleep deprived *laughing face*.”¹ Here, posters convey appreciation by complimenting, and display care for others’ feelings, such as the potential frustration, by apologizing in advance.

Posters could express thanks to others for their posts. “What amazing news to wake up to *smiley face*. And I really enjoyed reading all your comments. This is my favourite thread of

the year thus far. Brilliant. *three smiley faces*.”¹⁴ All this suggests that cooperation and goodwill can also exist among posters in this community.

Even emotional chats can be amicable. Often, posters would discuss, agree, and cooperatively handle the situation. For example, “Yes you are right for some reason I was thinking Kyrgios as 16th rank.”⁹ This suggests cooperation that may exist among posters who share a favourite player. Example below depicts this well,

You're right. Federer cannot afford a bad day or sub-par performance with his draw. It's mentally draining (and physically too), because of the players he has to face. I compared the distance covered in his two matches, and it is evident he did a lot more running against Dolgoplov. No breather, nothing. I hope he can still win a few more rounds and gain some points.⁹

Here, the poster not only agrees, but also offers additional input based on own observations, experiences, and future expectations.

Through discussion and cooperation, as seen in examples above, posters in this community can bond with others. There, posters may constantly update each other on their actions and daily errands, displaying a relationship through personalized attention. For example, posters can stay online until the moment their fellow poster needs to go and do something else. They may comment, “I approach school now. Have to go now. Might be on at like 9:45 until then goodbye good luck jo lets do it!!!”¹⁴ To which others may like the post and comment back, “Thanks for the thread. *a smiley face*”¹⁴ All this positive bonding may be due to the approval, appreciation, and supportive responses between posters.

Positive relationships then can surface through ongoing appreciation. For example, posters can recognize the thread value. They may acknowledge, “Heck yeah I'm in for this, as I'll

be in Australia in the next 24ish hours! Thanks Seff, for making the thread!” and volunteer, “Welcome back seff, i could try to help out here and there if needed” with glee, “YOU'RE BACK!!!!!! *three smiley faces* I'm in.”¹⁵ Here, positive interactions indicate appreciation, genuine happiness for other’s presence, and willingness to take part in ongoing interactions.

Being close to each other, at times, seems to be important to posters in Talk Tennis. While watching the match, for example, posters may express the need to be close to others, seeking personal contact, as in physical touch. Except, within this community, they express the need to be close in a virtual sense. As one poster put, “Let's cosmically link hands and PRAY!”¹⁴ In this community, posters seem to be connected to the point of needing to inform others of their absence, “I'm off to watch highlights\eat”¹⁴, and their return, “Guys I can't watch live but eurosport 6:15 til 8 have extended highlights in the morning so catch up with you about 7ish.”¹⁴

Overall, in this community posters may consider others and their feelings. For example, posters may think of a fellow poster when unfavourable results occur. When this happens, posters may include that individual in their comment. As one poster put, “@JohnnyMac Fan! Boy, has this thread come back to bite you! Lol. You've probably had your fill of crow. (I say this as a Rafa fan. It's just funny, is all). Hang in there, brother.”⁶

The poster dynamic in Talk Tennis can be related to a bar scene (Krotoski, 2013). There, they cheer, “3rd SP, get it this time!”, “Finish the job” or “and another come ONNNNNNN”, are excited, “Yes, she's done it! Absolutely wonderful! *a smiley face*” or “Yeeeeessssssssss. Well done”, frustrated, “aaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh” or in disbelief, “O.M.G!!! I honestly can't believe this is happening right now! Absolutely brilliant.”¹⁴ Here, posters indicate shouting or screaming by using capitals, additional letters and stretching out the words. Some may even explicitly state so,

“I’m screaming externally! Amazing. Just amazing.”¹⁴ Others can show a shared identity, “we won!”¹⁴ consistent with the traditional fan community.

The bar-like scene in Talk Tennis can be ongoing through discussions and observations. As one poster put, “Look at how embarrassing that crowd shot is.”¹⁴ Posters’ commenting on current happenings as they watch together tends to be present in this community. As one poster pointed out, “That wasn’t a good service game” another one replied, “agreed, she needs to steady herself”.¹⁴ With the ongoing conversations, excitement, such as virtual screaming and proclaimed shared victory (“we won!”) posters seem tremendously immersed in watching tennis.

All this suggests that Talk Tennis can serve as a virtual pub scene (Krotoski, 2013) for its posters. They gather together during an event to socialize, commiserate, update, and post their innermost thoughts and feelings as the match continues. As they inform, “...just checked both sites and she’s listed. Acapulco starts 22/2 and Monterrey the week after...”¹⁴ and clarify, “No TB in the third babe! *winking face*...USO is the only major that does that”¹⁴, posters seem to be on the same mission in retaining the viewership interest. Instead of an actual bar with a television set, in Talk Tennis, posters watch using their own respective outlets, such as streaming channels on mobile technology, PC, or cable. At times, posters would seek guidance on such coverage, “Any tv coverage for those 2 other than tennistv which i cancelled as it was a too expensive and b poor coverage.”¹⁴

Resulting Hostile Environment

Negative emotions can run high resulting in rioting behaviours characteristic of a traditional sporting community, such as an event. Throwing of cushions, water bottles, and garbage onto the court has been present in tennis stands (Agassi & Moehringer, 2009). Instead of throwing, breaking objects, and getting into physical fights (see crowd disturbances in

Hodgkinson, 2009), Talk Tennis posters can verbally insult, “Congratulations, you're a clown!”¹¹ With the help of images, such as a person throwing up, or Hulk smashing a person, these posters can then express displeasure and aggression.

As with any community, interpersonal dynamic in this community can have different perspectives, including the negative. Posters can bring negative aspects of a traditional fan community into their online space. They can show intense emotions, carry out personal interactions that are confrontational and argumentative in nature. They can throw “virtual punches” at rivals. A hostile and firm exchange of negative emotions may look like this,

Poster 1: “Don't reply to me again. I wouldn't want you to burst a blood vessel.”

Poster 2: “Don't say you wouldn't want me to burst a blood vessel, speak for yourself in that department...”⁹

The dynamics between posters in this community can be, and often are emotional in character. Depending on the debate, these emotions can be positive, but also very negative and argumentative in nature. The argumentative nature of Talk Tennis is often best characterized as “serial arguments” comprised of “argumentative episodes that focus on a particular issue” (Johnson & Roloff, 1998, p. 329). They may occur over time with no resolution (Bevan, Tidgewell, Bardull, Cusanelli, Hartsern, Holbesk, et al., 2007). Posters may never come to a consensus on an issue. Instead, they may continue to argue. Their disagreements can prevail over days and even months.

Posters may direct their emotional reactions at different parties. Often, they direct their frustrations toward a player. The nature of the discussion can be critical: “Lazy. Move your feet, smash it, volley it, anything else, jesus”⁷, or mean-spirited: “...looked awful. Old and awful.”⁸ While this venom may simply be directed at players, it can also target other posters. This is often

done, for example, by belittling a poster's favourite player: "Imao @ Safin better than Djokovic...Djokovic would chop that coked out alcoholic into dog food."⁹

Given the dedication of the posters and the emotional nature of the sport, frustration can be directed far and wide. Even coaches are not immune to criticism:

Every new match, I hope that something new will happen for the sake of competitiveness and the evolution of the rivalry and every time I'm left with the same impression: Rafa really doesn't know what to do against Novak. He doesn't have any strategic clue and he doesn't look like he's working on it either (very different from: having the right game plan but lacking in execution). I agree with that guy in the crowd. Strategy would be Toni's responsibility. What is he doing? May be deep down, Rafa agrees as well. Otherwise, he wouldn't have overreacted to that guy's remark the way he did. (To the point of bringing it up in the post match interview. You know what they say: truth hurts).⁶

Finally, posters may simply argue among themselves. The issue is not performance or a player; it is simply an argument over behaviour, beliefs or boundaries: "...you accused me of bringing Djokovic into our discussion, when in fact it was you who mentioned Djokovic first. I didn't even allude to him - expressly or implicitly - before your post (quoted below). You, on the other hand, explicitly mentioned Djokovic here."¹⁰ Posters emotions can heighten as they argue, and debate, resulting in insults like, "Classic Federer fan...Can you not read, at all?"¹¹, "let me put it in terms you will understand..."⁹, "Why? Your brain can't keep up with actual facts and logic?"⁹ and "Are you really this dense?"⁵

Insults can be aimed toward one's intellect and fan identity. As one poster confronted, "Why do you have the urge to constantly talk about something, you clearly know very little

about? You have the nerve to disregard one of the best players of this sport opinion, as if it was some meaningless babble, and all that just because you are Federer fanboy?!”¹

When emotional, argumentative, and annoyed, posters can devolve into the vulgar. For example, they can be tasteless if they do not like the opposing views. Such interaction may look like this,

Poster 1: “So Nadal giving huge credit to Djokovic is discrediting Federer? How about **you** get off Fed's dick?”

Poster 2: “If anyone's on a dick it's you. You've got something far up your ass, that's for sure.”

Poster 1: “Wow what a persuasive and insightful argument that was. Proving what a fkin c0cksucker and dick you are.”

Poster 2: “Hey, you're the arsehole who for some reason brought name calling/referencing dick ****ing into the equation so I retaliated. Next time learn to argue without being a total ass first. Who starts off and posts saying I'm on Feds dick, like are you a 15 year old boy? Very disappointed.”

Poster 1: “you're the arsehole who has no argument whatsoever and no excuse whatsoever for giving Nadal **** when all he did was compliment Djokovic. FFS, how far are you up Fed's arse, honestly?”

Poster 2: “Yeah you're really not defending yourself well at all by targeting me and saying I'm riding fed and up his ass. Mature up a bit, I understand you didn't like what I was saying but bringing gay sex stuff into it was stupid and unnecessary.”

Poster 3: “Is this how Aussies speak to each other usually?”

Poster 4: “The fight on this page though *surprised face*.” (Post liked by two others.)

Poster 1: “Defending myself? No, you are the one that needs to justify yourself for the pathetic Djokovic hatred, unfair judgement of Nadal and your Fed c0cksucking. Trying to pussyfoot your way of it by acting hurt just sjows how pathetic you are.”

Poster 3: “Yep, probably Aussie talk. Might as well get RAFA to practice some of this language before his winning speech on 31st January.”¹

Here, posters argue and insult each other, while others try to use humour to minimize the effect of their disagreements on the entire community.

These “cyber fist fights”, as seen in the example above, can become disruptive when they start to deviate from the thread focus, bringing in additional problems, such as sexism, “No man should ever be coached by a woman. EVER. It's not in our mentality to be led by a female.”⁵

When this happens, other posters may aggressively intervene, “I somehow doubt that”, “You should go back to your cave, it's getting dark.”, or “You should consider seeing a therapist.”⁵

This intervention then attempts to bring order to the community.

These online disagreements can be lengthy, spanning over pages. And although posters confront each other and argue, they can also shake hands. In this sense, posters direct their emotions to outcomes or resolutions, which may look like this,

Poster 1: “Anyway, a minor argument never hurt anybody. All good?”

Poster 2: “Yeah I'm good. I have no problem with you.”¹¹

Given this potentially volatile setting, it is not surprising that some posters seek to diminish the rhetoric, as also seen in the example above. They may criticize fellow posters by denouncing them, “God, this guy is an awful poster. Jeez, why aren't you banned already?”¹¹, minimizing them, “Some people can't help it. Childhood trauma and such factors compounded, that is.”¹¹, or characterizing them, “He comes across as a frustrated keyboard warrior tbh...”⁵

Posters' reactions to peacemaking efforts can be mixed. Sides are often taken and the debate continues: As one poster commented,

I don't need you tell me about him - or his antics. My question was and remains: What has he said **on this thread** to deserve that? ...it seems to me like you're courting his attention - looking for trouble. He didn't say anything that could be remotely interpreted as obnoxious (prior to your post). So, as far as this thread is concerned, you're "flaming".¹¹

Naturally, not all judgments are dismissed. Indeed, posters in this community may sometimes identify someone's actions as flaming. When they do, the poster can be disciplined. This creates an interesting dynamic in that posters can appeal to a higher authority in order to discipline or silence a disruptive fellow member. For example, policy forbids "flaming", "...personal attacks or insults directed at another poster, bullying. We can make fun of players, but things that are really offensive (racist, misogynist, homophobic, etc.) aren't supposed to happen."¹²

Given the emotional nature of many of these discussions, some posters may seek to censure others because they perceive an opposing view to be inherently flaming. If someone accuses a fellow member of such an offense it can sometimes trigger accusations from others as well. Such exchange may look like this,

Poster 1: "**The thing I'm concerned about is Djokovic losing the semi to Berdych on purpose if he senses this is about to be another 2013.** Djokovic probably can see RAFA's forehand is back, and is having nightmares about 2013 US Summer."

Poster 2: "OK, now you are trolling. Or disilluional."

Poster 1: “There is no mystery. If Nadal is back, he will win the Grand Slam and the Golden Masters without dropping a set. Even one dropped set in those 75 matches proves that he is still injured and probably past his peak.”

Poster 2: “What?”

Poster 3: “He’s trolling.”

Poster 2: “Yes he is.”⁶

Here, posters’ inaccurate classification of their fellow poster’s act as trolling might create a dynamic consistent with a mob mentality. “I say he’s flaming. Who’s with me?” Violators can suffer as a result of such accusations. Their threads may be deleted and they could be banned from posting.

This desire to blame and to encourage others to support that practice can play out in a variety of ways. They may seek to find reasons to blame perceived violators. In one case, the posters were debating a violator’s pedigree (as far as it can be established on their profile). Note how the poster begins with the observation that the poster does not play tennis so that the posts are therefore suspect:

The logic fails and that's because you don't play this sport, much like the clown that liked your post...he's clearly the most obnoxious poster.... states his opinion like as if it's fact...comes up with ridiculous excuses like radar guns, not being accurate, Federer choking his matches against Nadal.⁹

The poster responding wondering about the importance of such variables:

...we don't have to start this argument again...I am wondering a bit why my post count, my location and the fact that I don't play tennis was such a big deal. Last I checked, that

wasn't a prerequisite to join this forum, but I'll chalk it up to boiling emotions at the time.¹¹

Sometimes one's pedigree is established using their avatar. As one poster ranted, "Just looking at your avatar you are so biased that you probably agree with every decision that Murray made in his career."⁵ This suggests one of the challenges faced by online community members. They have little tangible evidence available to them as they assess the comments of fellow posters. In this case, they are using virtually any piece of information available to them to make judgements about the poster and the poster's judgement.

All these examples suggest the emotional element in the fan, online community. Although, most of the examples introduced above show aggression, hostility, and negativity, emotions expressed in Talk Tennis are not always negative. For example, posters may show empathy toward a player, "I feel terrible for him", or "I do feel bad for him."¹³ Posters can also be civil. They can remain composed, presenting their opposing views without joining in the heated arguments. Such interaction may look like this,

Poster 1: "Pathetic, tiresome excuse now. **Especially given an inferior player like Wawrinka was able to fulfill his potential and take wins of Djokovic.** Murray only got himself to blame. Worst slam final ratio in open era history."

Poster 2: "Sorry but this is not fair. Murray would have remained Slamless if he had to deal with Wawrinka's slam draws..."¹³

Posters may also exhibit civil behaviour seen in the above example when searching for clues to better understand the culture and the intended meaning of the post. As one poster sought, "Just out of curiosity, is it normal for Brits to call anonymous people "babe"? I don't know who the hell is male or female on here, but most Americans sure wouldn't do it."¹⁴ Another offered,

“Yes and no. It's a term of endearment that some people use - others may use 'love' even 'duck' 'pet'. It can also be regional. I personally don't use any of the above, but others will.”¹⁴

As seen above, in this community, posters' emotions and actions can vary. Negative and hostile comments can arise as the frustration with the outcome or others increases. Based on all this, sports, whether discussed virtually or in person, seem to provide a perfect opportunity and justification for fans to act out emotionally in a public space.

Finding Consensus – Both Good and Bad

While some posters focus on their own reactions, others actively seek to link their views with others. As one poster put, “Sadly, I agree with you. However, talent speaks for itself, congrats to Djoker. He's an amazing player and worthy successor.”¹⁹ While such consensus is often considered laudable, it can also be profoundly negative. For instance, posters may collectively dislike a player, in this case, Kyrgios and Tomić. Both are often criticized for their conduct, lack of sportsmanship and demeanour, winning them the dubious titles of the least favourite players. As a result, posters may express beliefs of intentional losses, nicknaming the player, “Tomić, the tank”, for example. They even create threads on polls for ranking the player's worst loss. The players whose behaviour deviates from the norm (often relating to sports etiquette) may then be shunned by the community. As one poster put, “I only have to watch them for 5 mins to reassure me that I am right. They are both hideous, entitled brats without an ounce of integrity or honour.”²

Ongoing rejection of the disliked players can extend beyond players' on-court performance. For example, posters in this community may comment and criticize players' gear, suggesting an overall dislike. A thread designated for joking about the player's outfit, such as “Lol @ Kyrgios' outfit for AO 2016. Just lol”²⁰ can appear. Comments like these may emerge in

response, “Kids, cover your eyes”, “It’s a joke no?”, “Geez. Wonder what he's wearing for shorts? Knitted leggings perhaps”, “is he playing in zoolander 2?”, “He is a clown so it is fitting that he dress the part. Disgrace to the game.”, or “Let's hope he doesn't win AO in it, or he'll think it's his lucky outfit and carry around a miniature version as a keychain *confused face*.”²⁰ Such comments represent the dark side of consensus. Disgruntled posters are searching for others with whom to share their negative views. Perhaps this is an exercise in venting or perhaps they are seeking corroboration to support their own position.

It is interesting that both “directions” were evident in the posts. Both admirers and denigrators could find others to share their views and assessments. This speaks to a fundamental quality of any community. Members can find others to share their views regardless of the nature of those views. This may be even more likely in online settings as a result of the great reach afforded by the online setting.

Research Question One: Exploring How Online Community Develops within Talk Tennis

The first research question asks: “how does an online community develop around the sport of tennis?” As stated in Chapter Two, online communities are “any virtual space where people come together to converse, exchange information or other resources, learn, play, or just be with each other” (Resnick & Kraut, 2011, p. 1). Online communities rest on a platform, serving as a support system for people sharing sport-related experiences. The platform is supported by various policies and human resources to ensure that posters act in ways consistent with the smooth functioning of the site. This section offers themes and their respective subthemes that emerge from the data. Figure 5 depicts the observed themes on how an online community seems to develop within Talk Tennis. They suggest how community continues to evolve in Talk Tennis.

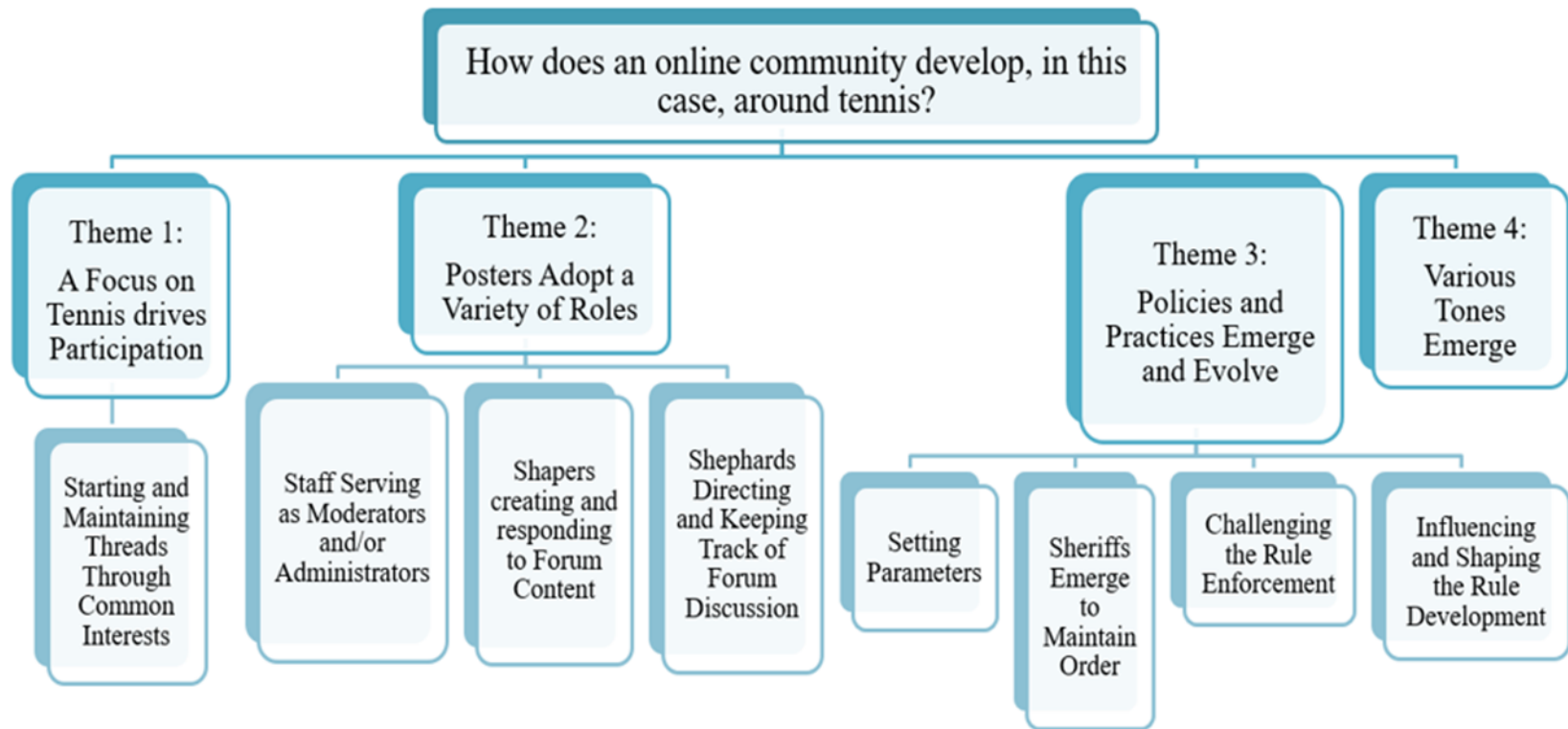


Figure 5. Observed Community Trends within Talk Tennis

Theme 1: A Focus on Tennis Drives Participation

As outlined earlier, online community's sustainability is based on its ability to attract posters who contribute to its content (e.g., Preece, 2000; Resnick & Kraut, 2011). These posters, in turn, seek to engage with the like-minded individuals (e.g., Chayko, 2008; Krotoski, 2013). Through the shared interest in tennis, posters then can help create and maintain the community. The shared interests are expressed from a variety of perspectives.

Starting and Maintaining Threads through Common Interests

Talk Tennis is a large community with a number of categories and subcategories organized into topics of interests, such as professional or college tennis, racquets, instructional, and apparel sales. There, common interests are revealed through thread development and ongoing discussions of events surrounding the topic. Discussion threads can emerge daily and are often developed and initiated by a poster interested in the topic. Figure 6 depicts an observed procedural example of thread development in this community. For example, a Nadal and/or Federer fan may start a thread out of interest in what others have to say about player's decline in the rankings and performance. As one poster started out, "Hey Fedal fans, can you pinpoint the moment when you realized your respective favourite was done?"²²

Once a thread is formed around shared interest, such as a favourite player, those reacting and commenting on the topic help create more content; maintaining that fan-based community. Their reaction can consist of answering the question posed, "When Rafa had his appendix surgery, I had a feeling he wasn't going to be as dominant.", or "2009 AO final."²² Posters may also offer opinions, "There aren't too many players that look promising, but why do we have to rely solely on them?" They can agree, "I agree that the Fedal monopoly ended in 2007.", or disagree, "I just can't say fed is done. He just can't beat one guy."²²

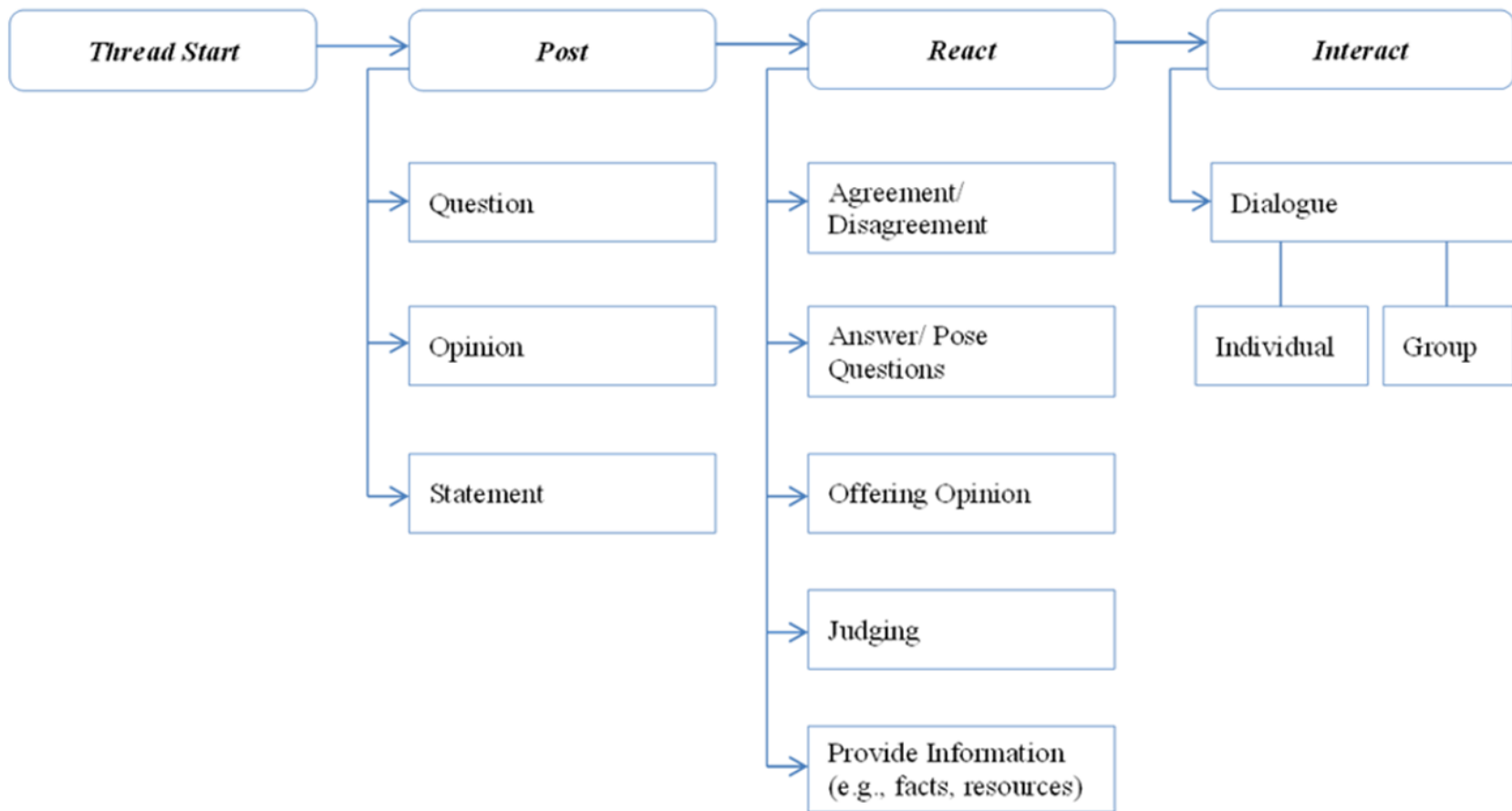


Figure 6. Online Community Development around Tennis Events Procedure

When posters react, they may enhance and encourage further discussion; helping maintain the fan community through dialogue. This dialogue can be group-based. It is group-based when the initial post is started by an individual poster addressing the community as a whole; gaining exposure to millions of potential readers. The dialogue can also be individual-based when occurring between individual posters. The example below suggests a more intimate dialogue in the thread.

Poster 1: “Where did Nadal say he's the goat? He just said Djoko is the best **of this era**. But better than Nadal himself was in his prime.”

Poster 2: “...He said Djokovic is the best he has **ever** seen (that means he thinks Djokovic >>>>> Federer).”¹

It is this ongoing debate and dialogue that seems so appealing to many of these posters. While they all agree on the appeal of the sport, their preferences and positions can be very different as they interact. This seems a very important part of the dynamic between many posters. They often seek to state their views and perhaps to convince others of their veracity. As one poster commented,

Well, preach that gospel to those Murray fans who act like it's an insult to even compare Wawrinka to Murray. It's not that he lost; no shame in losing to Ultron. But he didn't even turn up for the first set and the third set score looks flattering because Nole stepped off the gas and took it easy. That's disappointing.¹³

As suggested earlier, the emotional component of fandom suggests that agreement is heartfelt but disagreement can be acrimonious and unsettling. When a poster agrees, it may be by commenting, “Yes, I fully agree.”, or “consistency wise I agree.”¹³ However, when a poster disagrees, the statements and comments may sound condescending like, “don’t get delusional”,

or “...maybe you should get in tune with your facts rather than feelings.”¹³ As a result, within this community, the tennis debate can be spirited and contentious.

Theme 2: Posters Adopt a Variety of Roles

In order to support the smooth functioning of Talk Tennis, a variety of roles have been assigned to or adopted by community members. The most prescribed roles were those of staff members such as administrators and/or moderators. As staff, they represent a support system. In these roles, they typically seek to support the online community, but may also act to control poster behaviour. For example, staff may delete offensive comments, threads, and even ban posters.

Staff Serving as Moderator and/or Administrator

Talk Tennis has staff with assigned roles of administrator, moderator, and/or adjunct moderator. These roles are assigned in order to offer user support. When posters wonder about their account and posting capabilities they may post in the policy discussion thread, such as frequently asked questions. As one poster stated, “I've posted on this forum for more than a year and a half. I have more than 500 posts...and yet, I still don't get editing capabilities...”¹² A moderator was quick to respond to the poster’s plea for help indicating that, “You should see an Edit button at the top of each post you make just to the right of your username and time of posting in light gray.”¹²

Together, posters and staff can improve community’s overall quality, such as its design and usability. For example, on June 24, 2015, Talk Tennis administrator announced changes to the new site by stating,

Welcome to the new message board! After listening to all of our users' feedback, we are ready to launch the new site. Please take some time to look around and explore the new

message board. We tried to make it as similar as we could to the previous message board but it could take a couple days for you to fully adjust. If you scroll to the bottom of the site, you will have the option to choose 2 different styles “default” and “classic.” If you are looking for something less white, the “classic” style will be your best option. If you have any questions about where something is located, please feel free to ask it in this thread and we will be happy to help out.

Thanks again for everyone’s feedback!

TW Staff²³

Such transparency and responsiveness speak to the larger culture on the site. Clear and open communication is expected from the staff to ease any potential confusion among community members. In this case, posters are being informed of changes made to the message board, while supporting the new features. This encourages open communication, suggesting a supporting space to exist for members of this community. There is a willingness to support the forum that begins with those who administer the site. Posters often acknowledge this willingness and its positive consequences, “Dynamite message board! Love it!!! It's fast, easy to use and I can finally use a larger resolution avatar!”²³

Other roles emerged more organically from within the membership. This is not surprising. Such a message board relies entirely on the input of members. It seems natural that they would seek to do those things that ensure a healthy and helpful forum. These roles bring life and order to the discussions. For example, a poster may be expected, or accept, to act as support staff or an expert. Posters often offer help to fellow posters. As one poster asked, “How do I get to the last post in a thread. There used to be an option for that but I can’t find it. Best I can do is get to the last page but not the last post On the page.”²³ Another one responded, “Click the time

of the last posting, below the name of the last poster in the "last message" column."²³ The ongoing interaction between staff and members continues to suggest a cooperative and supportive community with technical support readily available. The sections below suggest other necessary roles undertaken by posters. All serve to maintain and develop the community.

The roles might be characterized as:

Shapers – those who direct the discussions by offering topics of debate as they suggest new threads;

Shepherds – those who seek to keep the discussion on track and avoid its wandering off;

Sharers – those who seek to share their emotions, feelings, and reactions with other community members;

Shoppers/seekers – those who seek to gather information; and

Sheriffs – those who seek to ensure that rules and accepted proprieties are observed.

Shapers Creating and Responding to Forum Content

As outlined in Chapter Two, a successful community is the one with the ability to attract and sustain those willing to participate (see Resnick & Kraut, 2011). Ultimately, any member posting in Talk Tennis is a shaper of content. Without posters, this community cannot exist. Posters in Talk Tennis are shapers of the content, directing forum discussion through suggestions of new threads and topics for debate. These shapers help maintain this community and determine its long-term success. As shapers, a community member can take on the role of a thread starter, creating topics and discussions; an informant, and/or a discussion participant.

As a topic creator, a poster may pose a question, “What’s your comments on Nadal’s loss to Verdasco?”¹⁶, offer an opinion, “Be prepared Serena fans: Maria could beat Serena”²⁵, make a statement, “Federer: I am here to drink the winning champagne”²⁶ that may or may not be

misleading in nature, ““Bernie” decides he doesn't want to play anymore.”² Starting a thread may not include a straightforward statement. Instead, a poster can combine a number of statements.

Below is one such example:

Stan Wawrinka to win Australian open? [Thread title]. I think he can pull off the upset and take Novak out... Betting odds are at 14/1, he has definitely been the money at the slams for the past two years, only issue is his inconsistency but he has not been beaten before the semis since 2014 ...²⁷

As mentioned earlier, this community consists of hundreds of thousands of threads and messages. Within these threads, posters can share personal experiences and as such may serve a role of an informant to others. Posters can inform and clarify through own observations. For example, a poster may draw attention by outlining facts, such as wins, in support of a player. As one poster clarified,

People call him a mental midget for losing so many slam finals. Everyone of those finals were against Federer or Djokovic The 2 he actually won were also against Djokovic. He's not a mental midget just not as good as the all time greats he's been up against.¹³

Others then engage by following up on those observations, “I am satisfied. It could have been much worse”²⁸, by asking, “Maybe it finally is the racquet?”³⁰, and/or by sharing opinions, “Rafa is near the end.”¹⁶ This, in turn, creates more opportunity for debate, “Tread lightly when saying that Rafa is done. Here's a guy who has come back from injury and fought for every match he has played thus far”¹⁶, and objection, “I would not have clicked this thread if it clearly stated he had retired from a match. The title was click-bait!”²

As posters engage with other community members, the discussion tends to be detailed and meaningful containing facts and technical information. This information may be new to

some but always encouraging members to engage and challenge each other. As seen in the above examples, forum members can expect information consistency (“The title was click-bait!”²), suggesting that a level of respect and professionalism for the sport and other members is expected. All this suggests that Talk Tennis can often be a learning community containing professional information about players and tennis in general.

Shepherds Directing and Keeping Track of Forum Discussion

As various perspectives emerge, posters can act as shepherds, seeking to keep the discussion and those involved on track. A response to a select few posters discussing men’s final in the thread on women’s final looked like this, “Guys, can we leave Fed, Nole and weak eras out of this thread, please?”⁸ This one sentence reminder post was liked by 9 others suggesting a buy-in from posters on what is acceptable for discussion in a given thread.

Shepherds in this community may try to organize and guide the dynamics among arguing posters through efforts to keep it all together; threads from being deleted, and/or users from being banned. For example, shepherds may try to organize and direct the dynamic by keeping the conversation alive and light, “Maybe it's a mind game. Sounds fishy.”³⁰ As others try to take the thread apart through personal attacks, “Bingo! You nailed it. Thanks for psychoanalysing me ...read post #6 you idiot”²⁸, shepherds can work hard on balancing the acts of others by asking posters to get back on the topic, “Enough of this chitterchatter. KAMAN ALREADY, GET ON WITH THE DRAW.”⁴ Shepherds then can refocus the conversation by redirecting and reminding others of the initial purpose of the thread.

The role of a shepherd may be difficult to carry out in a highly emotional community, such as Talk Tennis. Being a poster first, shepherds may not always be able to smooth things out between fellow posters. Instead, shepherds, although having good intentions, may lose control

and interfere with the same amount of hostility and personal attacks toward those arguing. The scenario below depicts this.

Poster 1: “Blah blah blah. Keep crying, man...Get over it you big baby.”

Poster 2: “I can tell you're a moron just by looking at your location - theshire. I can tell you don't play tennis judging by how many posts you make, I hope I can play you at tennis one day and absolutely kill you. Sh1t I could probably beat you with my laces tied and my eyes blindfolded.”

Poster 3 (shepherd): “Did someone ***** in your wheaties this morning or do you naturally have the logical sense of a coked up chimp?”

Poster 2: “This conversation is between me and Steve. It doesn't concern you. If I wanted your expert analysis on whether I overrate Safin I would have given you a call!”¹¹

The shepherd, initially trying to redirect the discussion, became part of the argument; making them more of a disruption rather than a solution. In this case, it gets complicated as the poster trying to act as a shepherd by attacking poster 2 appeared as a friend in defense to poster 1.

A shared interest can exist and even though Preece (2000) suggested certain cohesion to be present in online communities, it is not always obvious. Beyond an interest in the sport of tennis, views and opinions can vary widely. This study's data suggest that a more complex dynamic exists where a number of conflicting roles may emerge. Posters can extensively work on organizing the dynamic in order to balance the conversation, contributing to the success of a particular thread, preventing it from being deleted. As one poster commented, “I almost want to report you for this.”¹⁶ Here, the poster warns others of their policing plans, suggesting that the behaviour displayed is on the margin of acceptance.

Theme 3: Policies and Practices Emerge and Evolve

As outlined earlier, online communities are built around a set of shared understandings (Preece, 2000). These understandings may be codified in the policy established by the organization, may be expressed through rituals developed, enforced, and challenged by users, but be in a constant state of flux. In effect, the understandings continue to evolve and are continually developed, challenged, and defended again. Let's begin with existing policy.

Setting Parameters

The forum provider, in this case, the Tennis Warehouse, sets policies that are thought to be consistent with good governance in this tennis community. For example, Talk Tennis is not responsible for the content of messages, reserves the right to remove users and delete comments that violate its policies, such as obscene language, personal attacks, trolling/flaming of admin, etc. All reflect the effort to keep order within the community of posters. Policies are intended to guide the online behaviour and social interaction within the acceptable parameters, as well as create an expectation of the forum for the poster.

The dynamics that play out around these rules are of particular interest. For the most part, these posters tend to follow and obey rules set by the provider, Tennis Warehouse. Failure to follow them can result in penalties ranging from having posts removed to an outright ban. The line demarcating acceptable from unacceptable behaviour is not always clear. But the desire to stay "clean" seems constant. One poster's comment, "Ooh hang on is it possible i get banned for that link as it leads straight to sky, bt, espn etc."¹⁴ suggested that uncertainty and concern over failing to meet the formal guidelines. Another poster leapt in to assist the troubled poster by advising, "Just edit it out shortly, no one will report it on this thread."¹⁴

This shows multiple roles played by the posters. They can both encourage and discourage the actions of others. In this case, the poster was trying to help a fellow poster from being censured. They were helping the poster avoid the gaze of message board moderators. In other cases, the posters are the enforcers themselves, especially when a netiquette line has been crossed. More on this below.

Of greater interest in this study, is the less formal guidelines that posters were expected to follow. Indeed, a great many “rules” have emerged on this site relating to interpersonal dynamics, such as social interaction in proving one’s point, the selection of topics for debate by posters, and the standards expected of favourite players. For example, posters can disagree with each other in a polite manner, “Liked everything you said except the last bit.”¹³ Often when in disagreement, they would intervene in a more direct manner by commenting,

If you need an outlet for your prejudice, there are lots to choose from. You know nothing about competing in the men's game either and yet you have fashioned opinions of variable quality.¹³

Similarly, when in disagreement with topic discussion, posters can be encouraging, “Best poast of the thread right there”¹³, or reacting without a concern by calling deletion of the thread into action, “Well when u put it like that ... Nor do I. Delete thread.”¹³ Regardless of the parameters being set, a standard of some sort is expected, and enforcement of some sort is being implemented either formally through forum staff, such as administrators, or informally through self-policing. This standard is not only expected of the fellow posters but also of the players. As one poster explained, “...he deserves the bashing, he's got no one to blame but himself. Whine

whine and whine, it used to be fun. But not anymore. It's time to man up dude.”¹³ More on these types of enforcements to follow.

Sheriffs Emerge to Maintain Order

Whereas many communities are unified in their approach to or appreciation of a topic this community suggests that unity can only extend so far. Brand communities come to mind.

Membership in a brand community indicates an admiration for a brand. Here, one could think of a pyramid, starting with an admiration for an automobile, a specific make, such as an SUV and eventually a specific brand like the JEEP Cherokee.

Members of a brand community all have a shared admiration for a specific offering; whereas in a sports community, the shared component seems to operate at a higher level. There, we may all love the sport, we may like professional tennis, but the uniformity then falls away as we develop player preferences. As a result, posters' views may be both tight-knit and disparate. When the views become favourite player specific, posters tend to cheer and support their player while discrediting their rivals' performance abilities. As one poster put, “Stanimal is a freak. At his best he beats anyone. Murray at his best still needs Novak or to an extent Roger to have an off day.”¹³ Others may simply express who is better, “yes, Djokovic is just better than him.” or “simple. Wawrinka has Power to hit thru Novak and Murray doesn't.”¹³

Posters in this community seem to go to great lengths to support their views and the views of those supporting the same player. Here, posters may combine support for their favourite player by continuing to discredit the rival. As one poster commented, “I agree with Atilla's other thread. Murray is an overachiever. It's actually Wawrinka who is the mercurial one, blowing hot and cold. I do think Murray would run Nole closer...”¹³ Some would address the entire community outlining problems in views of the situation. The following post depicts this well,

Oh, people are going to remain stubborn for quite a while BECAUSE they have already painted themselves in a corner with an unambiguous position on something that is still unfolding. The correct time to judge this would be AFTER they are both retired. But 'tis the age of insta gratification so we no like to wait.¹³

Posters of Talk Tennis are less tolerant, though, of the tone used by some when making their point. There seems to be an understanding that contrary views are acceptable, but how they are offered is of considerable importance. It is agreed that posters are to argue in a respectful manner. When this basic rule is violated, posters can take on the role of sheriffs as they step in to remind and even punish the perpetrator. Censure is common. As one sheriff commented, “Don't be an ass0le. You can disagree with people without being an ass0le. Assh0le.”¹¹ These efforts, to ensure that standards are both understood and followed, are noteworthy. Posters serving as sheriffs were often quick to make clear, then enforce rules they feel important to the smooth functioning of the community.

There was also a tendency to maintain goodwill in an inherently emotional and divisive environment. At times, the warring factions would try to find common ground. Recall the exchange between two posters:

Poster 1: “Anyway, a minor argument never hurt anybody. All good?”

Poster 2: “Yeah I'm good. I have no problem with you.”¹¹

The values made explicit through threads focus on good character and honour as much as on performance and results. These values extend, not only to posters but to the behaviours of pro players. Indeed, the debate over-laudatory actions, or those worthy of condemnation, fueled considerable debate among posters. One poster commented on a player's personality, “I'm not a big fan of Raonic's game but he seems like a nice guy...”³² A second poster followed up a video

link of the cheating point between delPotro and Raonic, and a complaint about the player's ethics, "Makes me want to vomit...Cheating in your home country against one of the nicest players on tour? Fk you Raonic."³² Note that neither comment referred to athletic performance. Instead, they focused on character. Themes of character, respect, and honour resonated throughout the community's message board.

All this suggests that not only do posters follow the community's rules, they also enforce them. It is common for posters, in this case, sheriffs, to remind each other of the rules they are all to follow.

In addition, posters who act as sheriffs may confirm correct policy enforcement by reminding those questioning how a thread may have violated the forum's regulations. Here, sheriffs can show how seriously they take such policies by expressing annoyance when a thread appears in the wrong section of the forum. As one poster commented,

The instruction section should be about learning and improving, not childish boast-feasts. While there is some minor instruction in that thread, it is primarily filled with social miscellaneous talk. It should have been moved a long time ago. *If* Rickson is going to cut out just because his thread, which was posted in the wrong section to begin with, was moved then he needs to emotionally invest himself in more important things in life.¹²

The tightly controlled atmosphere of the professional tennis court is somewhat replicated in this community. It is observed that when sheriffs believe that posts are inappropriate and offensive, they typically call for rule enforcement. This enforcement may not come from moderators or staff, but instead, can be solved by the posters themselves. When a poster included a racial comment, "Gorilla set down! Vamos", another poster looked for enforcement

immediately, “Why do the mods refuse to ban racists like this?”⁸ This prompted action from others, resulting in fourteen likes.

An explanation offered, “Well, to be fair, gorillas are a species, not an ethnic race. There is nothing racist about that” was quickly shut down with statements like, “speaking of unevolved”, or “You know that is not true. Many of us love dogs, but calling someone a dog is in most cases insulting.”⁸ Here, sheriffs policed the behaviour they believed to be unacceptable. There were no further posts of this nature. Self-policing solved the problem.

Challenging the Rule Enforcement

Sometimes posters may feel that the rules have been inappropriately enforced and that their behaviour did not violate, undeserving of censure. Though rules may be shared, accepted, and enforced by posters themselves, they are not always accepted by all. A poster, who feels wronged, can put the blame of rule enforcement on those who complained. They may express that the complaint filed against them was on the emotional premises only rather than the actual rule breaking. As one poster commented,

Yes well, multiple cry-babies on this forum must of reported me for it. Got a message from the Admins. So I am not allowed to do so anymore. Pathetic, isn't it? People get offended by anything these days...²⁹

This post was liked by four others suggesting that rules are not uniformly accepted in this community. Instead, this suggests that at times, posters can perceive too great an emphasis on netiquette.

Influencing and Shaping the Rule Development

Even though posters follow and sheriffs enforce the rules, it has been observed that these same rules can be shaped by the posters themselves. As one poster pointed out to the moderator,

“Perhaps you should amend the guidelines to reflect that all threads must adhere to a hypersensitive PC standard. It's annoying to waste time on a thread that vanishes with no explanation.”¹² Suggestions made by posters are then taken into consideration as moderator responded, “I checked with TW Staff on your question. They will consider updating their policies but some of this stuff falls into the "trolling" category...”¹² The interaction between the two parties, in this case of the different power structure, shows cooperation in rule shaping. The staff listens, following up on the input given, suggesting the posters’ ability to influence the rules.

Theme 4: Various Tones Emerge

Talk Tennis can be a very hostile community when dealing with players and performances. There, posters can be malicious toward fellow posters and pro players. It is not to say that posters in this community are always negative and hostile; they indeed can be supportive in all situations of the forum discussion. They can care, “Don't be hard on yourself”, encourage, “Your serve looks smooth”, and compliment, “Nice points, nice play.”³⁷

Posters in this community may use a variety of tones when discussing. For example, the neutral tone seems to be associated with the equipment. Posters can be very nice and helpful posting comments like, “Thanks for the confirmation Peter!”²¹ and “that is true, i never said you weren't good enough to use a prince frame either, im not sure if you took it like that as i hope not.”³¹ Here, posters appreciate the input and ensure that their comments are not misinterpreted. In this case, they are explicit, reassuring that the poster is liked; caring and considering of others’ feelings.

However, the tone can change as the discussion topics shift. The negative tone seems to persist when the focus of discussion is performance-based. For example, posters can be as short-

tempered with another poster's performance as they would be with that of a pro player. In such cases, posters can be mean and harsh, seeming to show little regard for other posters' feelings. As seen earlier, with pro players' performances the anger can be directed toward other posters, "what a fkin c0cksucker and dick you are"¹ and players, "looked awful. Old and awful."⁸ In analysis based discussion directed toward another poster's performance, harsh comments can be exchanged, "This guy would not win a 4.5 tournament", or "I call him left handed one testicle Johnny."³⁷

When it comes to performances, even in the event of a recreational player seeking input on their strokes and gameplay, other posters can get upset. For example, posters can express annoyance, rip another poster's skills apart, when performance standard has been violated. As one poster commented,

You need tennis lessons. You are hitting nothing but buggy whipped forehands AND backhands...that is why you lose easily to this old man...Because you don't have ANY ball that is DRIVEN, with the OVERHYPE of TOPSPIN, each and every ball you hit, just SITS THERE, DYING TO BE PUMMELLED! By who? by anyone who can handle and hit a waist high SITTER. Your depth and accuracy is also not good because you need to develop NORMAL DRIVING FOREHAND AND BACKHANDS. This is why this dude is "taking it easy on you", "hardly moving", "standing still in the center of the court" ... haha Sorry to laugh but man U need a TON of work to undo everything you THINK you see on TV...³⁷

Here, the poster shows a lack of tolerance for inferior on-court abilities. In this case, s/he seems annoyed with the poster; going into great detail to provide negative feedback on all the wrong things the poster is doing. S/he goes on indicating that the poster needs lessons and is losing to

an “old man”. Here, the poster seems to punish poor performance without considering poster’s feelings; offering no encouragement. This poster uses capital letters to indicate shouting at the poster who shared own performance video. They go so far as to laugh at the poster, concluding that “a TON of work” is needed.

The focus of performance can also be lighthearted, however. Consider the Talk Tennis “Wooden Spoon Award”. Its existence unfolded in a thread entitled, “Nadal on his way to a Wooden Spoon (AO’16).”³⁶ The wooden spoon “is a joke prize for the worst performing team/individual. In talktennis myth it’s the player who loses in the first round, who loses in the next round, whose conqueror loses in the next round and so on.”³⁶ This ritual has been well documented with a rundown of all Wooden Spoon winners of Grand Slams since the year 2000, suggesting an ongoing participation in the made-up joke event.

This community specific tradition of Wooden Spoon suggests that posters in Talk Tennis can have fun and use humour to deal with their favourite player’s loss. They can go on to photoshopping pro player images to display the wooden spoon championship (replacing Nadal’s racket with a wooden spoon). As they engage in this fun and community-specific tradition, they may complement each other on photo creativity and observations.

Although Talk Tennis has the fundamental elements of any community, such as social roles, shared interests, traditions, and rituals; at times, the lack of unity and divisiveness among posters seems to be more profound. This may be the result of the emotional nature of the sports fan community. Posters may indeed want to satisfy their own needs first before seeking communal uniformity as posts like these may emerge,

You are right. If he can somehow get Fed and Nadal in his half and the cyborg in the other. I think if he can beat fedal he will have alot of mental confidence going up against

the Borg. Djokovic fans will kill me but I will like to see Murray win the French Open now. What a consolidation prize that would be after all these beatings. However I want Djokovic to beat Andy at Wimbledon.¹³

In this case, the poster, aware of other fans present in the community (Djoković fans), braves discussing own preferences (what they want to happen on tour). But they do so carefully, almost in trepidation of others' responses. Perhaps, by acknowledging their presence, the poster hopes to receive less criticism and lash back in return.

In concluding this section, it is meaningful that posters create their own community from bottom up. They individually create content and collectively maintain each thread's dynamic. Posters' shared interest in the sport (generally speaking) seems to drive their initial participation. This initial participation can result in supportive and not so supportive reactions, helping cultivate the threads (how they start and how they evolve). Their active roles in shaping the forum (through policies and practices) suggest a sense of community and ownership.

Research Question Two: Exploring How Tennis Enthusiasts Use Talk Tennis

The second research question asks: "how do tennis enthusiasts use an online community?" While this entire dissertation deals with how posters use Talk Tennis, this section focuses primarily on the ways in which these posters engage. What sorts of things are they doing as they engage other posters? We know that people may use websites, blogs, and forums to fulfill a variety of tasks. These may include seeking: guidance, others' experiences, and product information (Kotler et al., 2005). They may also use them to express: concerns, beliefs, and preferences (Nielsen, 2012). In the case of Talk Tennis, three themes emerged. Figure 7 depicts the observed themes. Specifically, these individuals posted on the message board in order to express self, to seek answers (I call this to "seek utility"), and to help others.

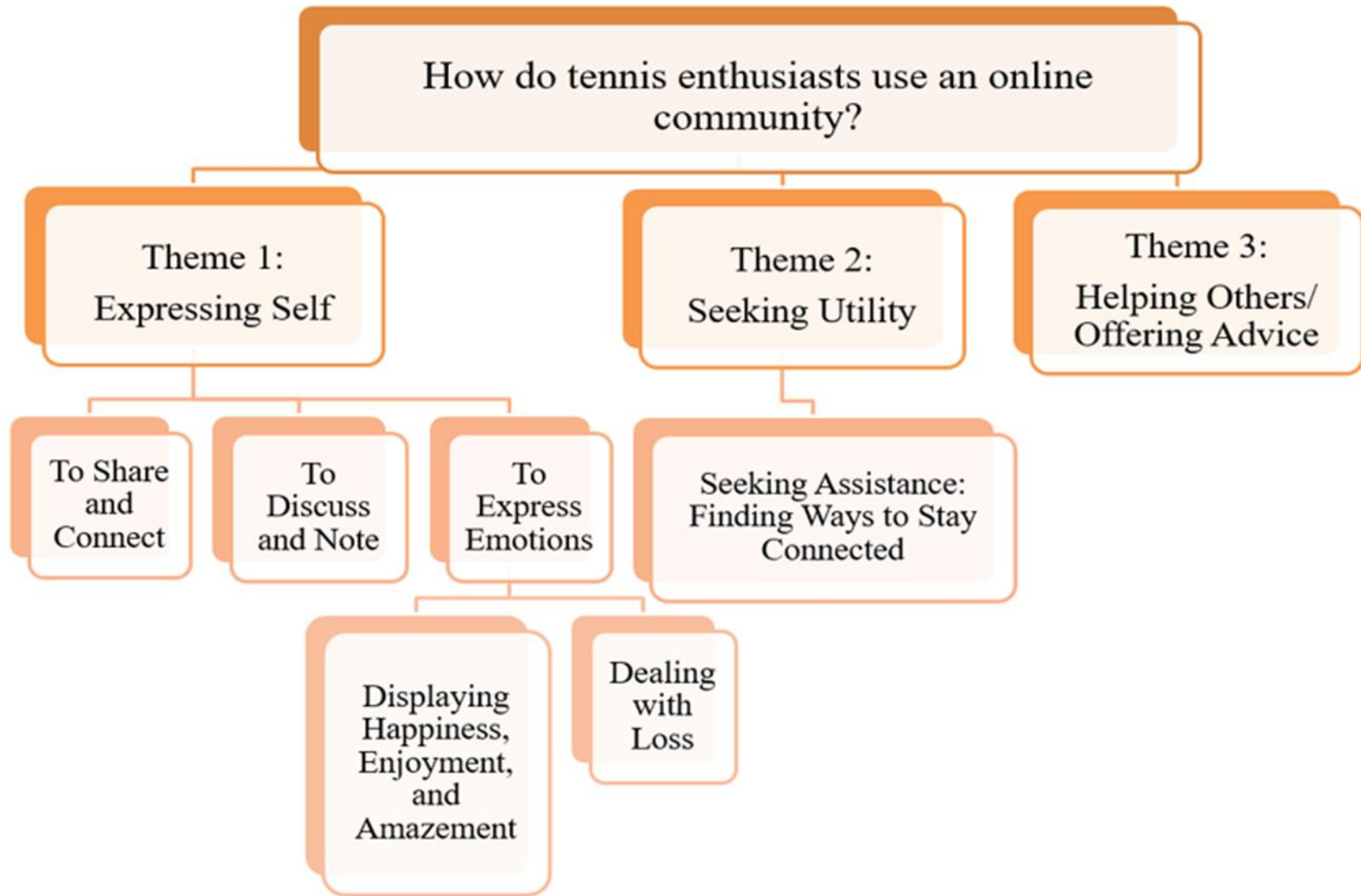


Figure 7. Observed Use of Talk Tennis

Theme 1: Expressing Self

The posters seem to use this message board as a means for self-expression. Posters are then sharers who seek to share their feelings and reactions with other forum members. Here, they may show their personalities through sharing and connecting, discussing and noting, and expressing of emotions.

Recall in Chapter Two, I outlined how posters may share for a variety of reasons. They may seek to aid, to challenge, to simply comment or to query. In all cases, their identities emerge for others to observe and assess. For example, they can show their sensitive and understanding nature through verbal cues, such as “*sniffs”, “happy”, or “my heart is a puddle”. Using emojis, such as happy, angry, or sad face can help present their views, opinions, and beliefs. Often, sharers use avatars to display player favouritism. All of this can be done during a conversation or some social exchange. (See Appendix C for a sample of avatar images used).

This self-presentation can be linked to role-playing. In everyday life, people can adopt a number of roles, which can be based on gender, age, race, etc. (see Wood & Smith, 2005). As seen earlier, posters in this community can adopt roles of an administrator, sheriff, shaper or a thread starter, etc. However many roles they play, sharers can have greater control over how they are perceived by others in choosing what personal information or identifiers to disclose. For example, sharers can display avatars, nicknames and other information, such as location, and status. (See Appendix D for examples of membership cards). All such posts may represent efforts “to document and archive, to preserve and promote identity” (Krotoski, 2013, p. 10). Sharers do so through self-expression, creating and the sharing of stories (Chayko, 2008). In effect, they are engaging in some form of self-expression. Some sharers just relate to emotion, to

tell people who they are, to contribute in ways they think are important. Through this sharing, their identities can emerge. Some expressions, hinting at identities, may be accidental while others can be intentional. In all cases, sharers are presenting some sense of self to other community members. As Goffman (1959) suggests, the context, in this case, an online forum can be viewed as a stage where posters may present themselves and solicit the applause of their audience. Given the artificial setting offered by the online environment, such efforts can be quite effective.

While common methods (like avatars and member profiles) offer only limited information, language offers the most important means of constructing online identity and understanding the identities of others. The written word has limitations, however. The online format is necessarily onerous in that sharers must type out their comments. This is time-consuming and they know that they have only a limited amount of time to gain the attention of others and to make their respective points. In many cases, they resort to tricks to overcome these limitations. For example, sharers may use labels or sweeping characterizations to get their points across. As one poster commented, “On this site people find excuses to bash Murray mainly from Feddites and Nadalians.”⁵ Here, the sharer blames the practice of “bashing” on Federer and Nadal fans. While this practice is present in all societies and settings, the online environment may encourage its application. The use of “shorthand” to make a point may be encouraged by the limitations inherent in the online environment.

Another limitation is that of context. Sharers have very little background information on those with whom they interact. When such information is lacking, they may go to extraordinary lengths to “make sense” of the other posters. Recall the case where a poster used another’s location and the number of posts they made to find fault:

I can tell you're a moron just by looking at your location - theshire. I can tell you don't play tennis judging by how many posts you make, I hope I can play you at tennis one day and absolutely kill you. Sh1t I could probably beat you with my laces tied and my eyes blindfolded.¹¹

Here, the poster uses one of the only pieces of background information available on the fellow poster (in this case, the location the poster has listed -The shire- from the fictional “the Hobbit” by Tolkien). The fellow poster uses this bit of whimsy to discredit their colleague calling them a “moron”. The poster then infers skill and ability from whatever evidence they found within this individual’s comments and status information like a number of posts (“I can tell you don’t play tennis”¹¹). This is one of the ironies of an online community like this one. Members have so few cues they can use to understand their fellow community members; they will use anything to make sense of their respective interactions. In this case, the original poster’s efforts to control the information to which other posters had access (referring to location as “the shire” rather than an actual location) helped alienate another poster. Such expressions of self within the relative vacuum of such forums can be fraught with complexity. Here, even playful posts can be regarded with disdain. Interactions like this one can result.

To Share and Connect

As outlined in Chapter Two, online communities are “virtual pubs” that can facilitate “post-game” conversations, debriefs, debates, and chats (see Krotoski, 2013). Talk Tennis, as seen earlier, can facilitate chats and debates during the match in which posters may count the points, “0-30, 2 points away” and cheer on the player, “Come on!”. Online, posters may undergo intimate exchanges of support and/or acceptance during which friendships/relationships may

develop (see Bishop, 2013). These relationships or “companionships” then rest with people of similar interests with “non-geographically bound” points of views (see Nimrod, 2014).

In this community, posters may seek companionship prior or in anticipation to, during, and post-match. They may wish to share regarding players, matches or the sport in general.

While this sharing is sometimes general in nature, it can also be very personal. They may even address each other directly, “here are the highlights [@SpinToWin](#).”⁸ Such posts can suggest that relationships emerge even in this potentially sterile and distant setting. They may also form small groups in order to support valued entities. For example, they may form a thread asking others to predict a match outcome and in doing so they can mention another poster. In this case, the shaper starting the thread can be thinking about other poster’s feelings regarding the match predictions.

An exchange in a thread entitled, “Predict the exact result of Djokovic-Murray final :)” may look like this,

Poster 1 (shaper or starter of the thread): “I'll start with Novak winning 7-5 4-6 6-4 6-3 *grinning face* i will give prize if someone gets exact score even though its my birthday *smiley face*”

Poster 2: “63 62 60. Djokovic in 3.”

Poster 3: “tennis_pro will be mad”

Poster 2: “No he won't - he'll at least be glad it finished quickly.”³⁹

Note that posters tend to talk about their own interest by developing a thread around it. As they develop their thread they may want a particular poster’s input, such as tennis_pro’s. Here, posters can show preference in companions by inviting a poster to join in the conversation. In this case, they may talk about them, suggesting that they are thinking about them because they are a Murray fan. This seems the new sort of “phone call” wherein the poster is calling on a perhaps distant (and anonymous) friend to engage and become involved in a valued initiative.

Often, sharers are explicit in their desire to share their tennis experience. Many posters use Talk Tennis as the vehicle to share experiences in real-time, such as during a match, or on past events. There, they can comment and reflect on own actions. As one poster put,

Just watched it again.....what a great match. Angie played great and Serena fought as hard as she could till the very end, you cant ask for a better slam final. Looking back at last year and all the three set matches Serena won makes Angie's win that much more special in my opinion.⁸

Here, the poster talks about watching the match; offers a perspective by reflecting on previous events.

This suggests that Talk Tennis offers a gathering place with posters frequently checking in to talk and share while watching an event. Discussing match occurrences is common. As one sharer commented, “Just started watching. What's the story? Is Serena drunk or just tired? Or is Kerber choking?”⁸ Fellow posters are quick to offer their own views as a recap for the poster, “Serena was a bit off in the first set, but found her serve in the second set”, or “Serena has not been at her best. Kerber has been playing very well.”⁸ Here, posters share their viewership experience; simultaneously bringing the fellow poster up-to-date on the match happenings. In this case, they outline players’ performances leading up to the point when the latecomer joined the conversation.

As posters gather and watch the game together, they often cheer and comment. This sense of togetherness can be an enjoyable experience for them. Posters would often update and carry on a conversation as the points are played, “She breaks!” They may also count the points, “3 points away...”, “Phew,,,,, it could have been double MP right now. 30 all.”, “0-30, 2 points away”, reminding of the reoccurrence, “Two points away again.”⁸

How and when posters comment can vary. Their commentary can be a simple, “Come on!” or “Finish her!”⁸ It can also reflect the match status, “Deuce. Come on SW!!!”⁸ While a future section discusses the emotional content of some posts, it is important to note here that many of these comments can be offered with considerable enthusiasm ranging from contentment (“What a point by both. Serena!”, “yesss,,,,,,,,,,,,,”⁸) to anger (“Damn - got burned at the net again.”⁸).

Posters’ commentary often analyzes players and match situations, “Kerber took this match on in a big way and made Serena play for the vast majority of rallies. She didn't lose patience and play overly aggressive tennis; she made Serena work for all she got.”⁸ There is an immediacy to the commentary during the matches as sharers comment on the play as it takes place. Likewise, there is also timelessness as sharers reflect on past, present, and future events and trends. They may even continue to comment well after the match has completed, “She had game point at 4-5 in that third set, after breaking back. All she needed to do was win one point. Just ONE POINT!”⁸

While watching the match as a group, posters can become fully immersed in the events surrounding it. While cheering, posters may show approval of the play, “kerber deserves to break here”, and express praise, “Held like a boss! Well played Angie!!!”⁸ They also appreciate a great shot “Oh look, a slice dropper.”⁸ This simple detail can be picked up by others in the forum offering their own appraisals, approvals, and compliments, “Well disguised dropper”, “goat drop shot right there - me likes it!” or “Wow, fantastic dropper there!”⁸ Here, posters can agree with each other on what good performance may look like by calling the play “smart”, “That was smart by Kerber.”⁸

In their excitement, posters may even turn to higher powers “Pls hold. Pls hold. I’m in my aching knees and praying”⁸ as they share with others in their community. Apparently, they believe that everyone is watching the match! Whatever the case, sharers reveal an “edge of their seat” excitement in their posts, “oooh close...”⁸ The sharing seems an important part of the experience. They may even draw in the other community members hoping to share every bit of the experience. Some sharers suggest nervousness for everyone watching, “Everyone sweating bullets right now” while others may question the reality of it, “Oh my god. Is this real life?”⁸

Throughout the experience, posters’ connection to their favourite players is pervasive. As one poster offered,

I could feel the pressure lifting off of her as Serena's shot went long. That little moment as Angie laid on the court, quivering, crying, her whole career and tennis life flashing past in her mind; she knew her struggle had finally come to fruition. All the hard work paid off. Alles gute, Angelique!⁸

Here, the poster suggests feeling the pressure that the player themselves must have. In this case, they empathize with the player, sharing their burden, and also joining them in celebration. So, while the community is very much about performance, it is also deeply human in many ways. It focuses not only on the result but also on the participants and on the process. For example, posters often express heartfelt support for their favourite players. They may show this by expressing their ongoing belief in the player’s abilities, “Come on. I believe in you.” Both sides of supporters then offer advice to their favourite player that can look like this,

Poster 1: “Chill Angie, come on...”

Poster 2: “Keep your cool Angie and stay focussed.”

Poster 3: “Now would be a good time to find some aces ReRe...”

Poster 4: “Just keep the ball in, Serena. Don't paint the lines.”⁸

This commentary makes clear the ongoing regard and caring for both the sport and the players. But even within this supportive atmosphere, the talk inevitably returns to outcomes. These outcomes may have occurred in the past, they may be imminent (as in a current match, “If she holds here I think she wins.”⁸) or in the future, “The way Kerber is playing and her style, she should go far in the draw in the FO I would think!”⁸

To Discuss and Note

The values within the community come through the commentary in a number of ways. In terms of matches, posters seem to be uninterested in lopsided matches. While they dislike uncertainty, they are even less impressed with matches that are one-sided. This seems to violate the importance of competition within the sport. As a result, posters may lose interest in watching when competitive forces are absent,

I myself wasn't interested in watching the final. This morning, assuming the final was already done, I went to flashscore to see if there was a breadstick or a bagel. When discovering that a 3rd set is being played right in that moment, I had no intention of skipping the rest.⁸

Here, the poster expected a one-sided match, with the end result of 6:1 or 6:0. When the match seemed more competitive, the poster's intentions to watch changed with it. In this case, they did not want to miss the rest of the match. A close matchup can be exciting, and with the case of this particular match, it was further enhanced with the reality of history-making, “How fitting that a German stopped Serena from getting Steffi's record.”⁸

Within this forum, the debate seems a constant. With so many variables and so much uncertainty, conversations often weigh the pros and cons, opportunities and misses, strengths and

weaknesses. The discussions may extend far beyond an individual match. Past and future events are often debated. For example, posters may offer views on players' future prospects. One poster may be hopeful, "now I'm hoping Kerber can go on a streak here and become the new WTA no. 1" while another may be less optimistic, "Isn't it going to take a minor miracle for a new no.1?"⁸

The common pattern in all these discussions is the focus on performance. The discussion may wander through the many component parts of performance (smart play, fitness level, sportsmanship and competitive effort), but the goal is always one of excellence as determined by community members.

To Express Emotions

Talk Tennis is ultimately a sports community, emotional in nature, dealing with the topics that its members find meaningful. Posters can express considerable passion, "Kicking myself for skipping this one."⁸ Their emotions and feelings can be overwhelming, "Damn, this is nice. Emotional too", "Awwwwwww. I love these speeches", "how painful it would be if shee goes on to lose" or "I don't want to watch this anymore!"⁸ Posters' feelings may range from low to high emotion, "IM SHAKING...", "My poor heart", or "Ugh, emotions, taking over me..."¹⁴

As posters become emotional and immersed in the match, they can experience physical reactions, such as discomfort to the outcomes that unfolded. As one poster admitted, "I sweat, I shiver, I shake, I tremble."⁸ They may even warn others of their impending meltdown, "Oh God I can't take it, 6-5. I'm in a lecture so have to be quiet but I need to freak out!"¹⁴ Posters may even make hints at needing a remedy to calm them down, "It's 11:29 in the morning here in Germany and I feel the urge to fetch a drink to calm my nerves."⁸

It is interesting that posters of Talk Tennis seek to explore and express their own emotional responses with the larger community. They very much desire to bring others into their emotional world. As one poster admitted,

Well, I've been taken off life support and been cleared to post again. Last night I had to stand up and pace in disgust a few times and my wife had to remind me that I like Serena and to quit yelling mean things at her lol. I was initially upset that she didn't go to plan B or C. Normally she will adapt to her opponent's game or her own deficiencies. Ultimately I now realize she couldn't have if she wanted to last night. I was so mad that she kept going to the net when clearly her volleys were not working. Then I remembered that all her groundies were flying long (and toward the end she adjusted and started dumping them into the net), so it's not like the baseline was doing much for her. She wasn't cracking winners off the weak serves, her own serve was not great, a mess. So, really, she did what she could do and it just wasn't good enough last night.⁸

Here, the poster is working through their own frustration with fellow posters. They vacillated between emotions linked to caring, frustration, and even physical discomfort. Their post depicts the emotional roller coaster that a sports fan can experience in a match with the player they care about. This roller coaster is well documented elsewhere (Simons, 2013). What is interesting here is the desire to tell an unknown number of anonymous people of that roller coaster ride. This suggests that these posters regard fellow posters as friends and even confidants. It has been well documented that online environments can foster and enhance friendships between those already known and unknown to each other (Krotoski, 2013). For example, one poster commented, "That drop shot up 5-2 30-40 in the RG 2011 final still haunts me."⁴⁰ This desire to share their

innermost feelings and reactions seems heartfelt and genuine. Their emotional state is something they wish to share even in a virtual setting.

The emotions observed in the posts ranged from happiness, disbelief, frustration, and/or disappointment. The following discussion explores these emotions and how they are expressed within this message board.

Displaying Happiness, Enjoyment, and Amazement

It was interesting to follow the types of emotional displays that appeared on the forum. Expressions of happiness were common among the displays. Understandably, posters expressed happiness when their expectations of the player, performance, and match outcome were met. Their response is usually positive, “Yes! Those two drop shots. such a fight! awesome!” or “Now that's... that's what dreams are made of! Congrats Kerber! Made me so happy to see that.”⁸ Such contentment is mild compared to other posts expressing affection and even love, “SHE DID IT. I LOVE HER.”⁸

Posters seem to enjoy watching tennis, expressing pleasure about the match. Comments like, “Good match, gripping 3 setter and a surprise winner!” and “There are quite a few top WTA players who still have not won GS! It is awesome to see a new member get in the GS tennis winner category!”⁸ may emerge. Here, posters can enjoy cheering the underdog, expressing joy with the unexpected, such as having a new champion. It was interesting that they were also ready to share everything from speculation to recommendation as they expressed their satisfaction. As one poster commented, “Hope Porsche gives Angi a nice new ride after the air time she gave them in the final.”⁸ Here, posters’ support extends to player recognition and subsequently, the need for adequate compensation including some form of financial gain through increased

sponsorship perks, such as a new ride. Such idle chatter was common as posters reveled in the positive feelings that winning could bring.

It was perhaps a testament to the commitment the posters felt for the sport that they could express joy at virtually any aspect of it. Some posts noted satisfaction with speeches after a match (“<3 the speeches”, “This is what the ATP needs”⁸), over historical precedent (“First player to beat Serena in a slam final deciding set? Amazing.”⁸), or to the sport in general (“This is incredible. Sport never ceases to amaze.”⁸).

Dealing with Loss

As with any sport, tennis enthusiasts must deal with the unhappy outcomes. Disappointment has many sources on the site ranging from player behaviour, match outcomes, event schedules, and even trends in equipment. Though elation that emerged from success could be powerful and genuine, it seemed transitory. Disappointment, on the other hand, seemed to generate more detailed commentary. It seemed as if the forum served to act as a good friend helping posters work through the emotional turmoil generated through disappointment.

This turmoil was expressed in many forms. It was common on this forum, for example, for posters to express disbelief and confusion. This was especially the case during events. Commentary increased as mistakes were made and as outcomes turned gloomy. When a match took an unexpected turn, posters might show disbelief (“Damn, just cannot believe this!!!”; “Wow. Serena could actually lose this one!”; “3rd double fault in last 5 or 6 serve points from Rena?”; “this is crazy... i still cant belive it”⁸). Some pleaded with the player hoping to change outcomes (“pls prove me wrong *sad face*”⁸).

There were also efforts to soften the emotional blow by reflecting on the appropriateness of an unhappy outcome. It was common, for instance, that in the face of loss (winning is a

priority on this forum) posters often shifted focus to another priority (typically sportsmanlike behaviour). As one poster reflected, “Serena showed lots of grace and sportsmanship tonight in defeat.”⁸ This “priority shift” seemed very acceptable to other posters as they sought to find behaviours that could be applauded. They praised sportsmanship during the trophy ceremony, “Lovely hug at the end serena is a gracious loser.”⁸ or even commented on the photos emerging from a ceremony (“The pictures from the ceremony have just been delightful!”⁸).

It is informative that, for many, the emphasis on sportsmanlike behaviour seemed to transcend even the competitive spirit on the message board. As one poster commented,

I've never been a Serena fan but I was quite impressed with her post-match behavior. She had to be disappointed in her own performance and the opportunity to equal Graf's slam count. However, she appeared to be very gracious and genuinely happy for Kerber. She seems to be maturing. Perhaps sister Venus is starting to rub off on her. Serena is still not my favorite Williams sister but I gained a new found respect for her.⁸

These comments suggest the ongoing and dynamic debate as to what is noteworthy in their sport. Posters' reactions could be heartfelt (“a lot of it was downright cringeworthy”⁸) and even amusing (“It's like they replaced her with a bodysnatcher”⁸), but all sought to reach out to share with community members. Posters understood that fellow forum members both understood and appreciated their perspectives. This seemed to soften the blow created by unwanted events.

Theme 2: Seeking Utility

Posters sought utility as they asked for and received assistance from fellow posters. Recall that in Chapter Two, I suggested that online communities offer considerable reach. Posters can receive support from anyone (Preece, 2000; Resnick & Kraut, 2011) at any time (Chayko, 2008). There is always someone there who is potentially caring and understanding,

who is ready to listen; and as such, is able to offer aid. There were many examples of such aid. Posters offer guidance on everything from fixing ill-advised posts (“Just edit it out shortly, no one will report it”¹⁴), netiquette (“You can disagree with people without being an assh0le”¹¹), to offering context around online debates (“she took out two former champs so that no one can diss her over some easy draw BS”⁸).

Earlier I noted that a great deal of discussion on the message board is emotional in nature. While sharers are no doubt seeking to express themselves, it is also clear that other benefits are available. For example, posters may receive emotional as well as practical support. When one poster complained that “So sad I have to work during this. I can't even sneak peeks at it *sad emoticon*”⁴¹, he received immediate social support. A fellow poster asked, “Can't you record it and watch it later?”⁴¹ It was followed up with advice and a bit of humour (“My advice: check the scores and if Serena wins, watch it when you get home. If she loses, delete it from your planner and forget the whole thing ever happened!”⁴¹). The blend of utility and emotional support seems compelling to many posters in this community. What is perhaps most striking is that posters did not have to justify their questions or the importance of these issues in their lives. It is an indication of community when posters do not have to justify their questions or concerns. There is never an effort to explain “why” they want to watch tennis. Community members already understand. The focus is on finding solutions to problems they all understand and appreciate. Others seem very willing to take on some responsibility in ensuring that concerns are addressed and problems solved.

Seeking Assistance: Finding Ways to Stay Connected

It was clear that posters could take tennis, players, tournaments, draw, matches, and other sport-related issues very seriously. As noted above, the importance they assigned to tennis and

related issues was evident in their emotional and often extensive and detailed posts. This section deals with their efforts to seek utility through their posts. For example, shoppers/seekers often sought advice and assistance on how to watch tennis and stay connected, “Is it a reliable service? I don't have cable TV anymore, only internet, so I've been wondering what to do about watching slams. I have TennisTV⁴² for the rest.”⁸ Such posts invariably garnered detailed and often technical responses:

Poster 1: “Any tv coverage for those 2 other than tennistv which i cancelled as it was a too expensive and b poor coverage.”

Poster 2: “I think WTA is shown on BT sport⁵⁰ which I don't have so I have to use streaming sites. And I'm not sure if they show all the events or just above a certain level (like how sky sports only show 500s and above for ATP).”

Poster 1: “Im the other wsy round i have bt but stream sky. A tip though is download on your phone/tablet wss apk then mx player for all uk and us sports channels in hd. If you have chromecast or similair thing cast screen and its on your tv.”

Poster 2: “Ah great does that work on Android?”

Poster 1: “Yes it does only on android i'll link you it... downloads but slso get mx player.”⁸

In this case, the two posters collaborate, each gaining some benefit from the exchange.

It was striking that posters could seek information on virtually any facet of tennis. Others responded with information, advice, and even emotional support. This response to a question about a missed match offers a case in point: (“Usually hate watching matches on tape....but this ONE I make exception for.....LOL, will watch it later. Was this a HIGH quality match?”⁸ To which others responded, “It was good especially 3 set watch the 6th game of the 3 set it was great tennis about 15 minutes” or “easily one of the best women's final ever. The WTA final is

usually a blowout and that's what was expected.”⁸ As the dialogue continued, shoppers/seekers may ask for specifics, “So it wasn't a choke fest by Serena like against Vinci... lol”, which can be met with assurance, “It was a thriller. You'll be entertained.”⁸).

It seems that no issue is too small to escape the interest of these posters. This suggests a level of interest but also a willingness to help other posters. This creates a setting ideal for information gathering and decision-making. By doing so, the forum also helps build a sense of companionship and emotional support. This, in turn, generates more willingness to offer aid and so the pattern continues.

Theme 3: Helping Others/Offering Advice

As suggested above, Talk Tennis offered a setting that very much supported the search for assistance. Posters had faith that fellow members understood and appreciated the concerns of other posters. Faith in fellow community members is well-founded in this community. Posters seemed willing to offer all manner of assistance to fellow posters. It seems the only common thread is that the advice is going to help others with the enjoyment of the sport. As one poster put,

Lately, they've [Sling TV⁴³] been offering a 14 day trial. Use that for the French Open. If you like the service then you might go ahead and try it for 3 months for US Open and Wimbledon and get discount on device [Roku⁴⁵]. Tennis Channel plus⁴⁴ is very nice the first weekend of the French Open, but you don't get the men's semi that is exclusive to tennis channel (sign up for a month and get some grass warmups too). I love Tennis TV!⁸

Here, the poster offers advice on the potential services, their pricing including the 14-day trial. The poster also warns against non-coverage of semi-finals and offers possible solutions should

this occur. While the message is for a specific poster, everyone else visiting the forum can consider it, potentially making it very effective and influential.

In concluding this section, it is noteworthy that posters engage online in sharing the experience of spectating and all that goes with it. They seek to share in the plays, the players and the drama that can accompany any professional sport. Feelings are heightened by a commitment to the sport itself (its values, its characteristics and its inherent uncertainty) but also to favourite players. In this community, the discussion is heavily performance-based. The comments on the performance can be both harsh and supportive. But these reflective, observational, emotive, and utilitarian comments are not necessarily intended to alter other posters. They seem more internally focused as posters seek to express and collect. The final research question is more behavioural in its perspective. Can posters change, alter other posters' behaviours? The goal was to shift away from a focus on the professional player/performance and to the tennis life of the posters. The third and final research question focuses on how the many comments, observations, posts, and interpersonal dynamics influence posters' subsequent behaviour patterns.

Research Question Three: Exploring How Tennis Enthusiasts Influence Each Other in Talk Tennis

The third research question asks: "how does online community participation influence related behaviour?" The findings from the first two research questions are drawn from the two sub-forums of the competitive Talk Tennis category, General Pro Player Discussion, and Pro Match Results from mid-December 2015 until the end of January 2016. For the third research question, data are drawn from additional five sub-forums within Talk Tennis: 1) Pro's Racquets and Gear, 2) Racquets, 3) Strings, 4) Stringing Techniques/Stringing Machines, and 5) Tennis Tips/Instruction. Observations of these forums occurred from mid-October 2016 until mid-

November 2016. Final analysis of these five sub-forums included a total of 2,519 message posts within 11 discussion threads.

Understanding Online Influences

Posters in this community often communicated on the forum to either be influenced or to influence others. It was clear that many communication-related goals were being pursued. For example, posters often provided information that they thought would be useful (either informative or persuasive) to other community members. As one poster offered:

There are those who argue that a final not featuring Serena would somehow be preferable as it would be more of a contest. I put it to those people that that is horse ****. Here's why; look at the scores of all the female grand slam finals not featuring Serena in the last four years (provides a match list), only two three-setters; three two-setters featuring bagels, and only two three-setters. Now, let's compare with the scoreline of grand slam finals featuring Serena since 2012 (provides a match list). Do you see it? Serena has been in 8 grand slam finals since 2012. Four - i.e., half - have been three-setters. None have featured bagels. And those that have been two-setters have been quite close - and therefore competitive. So, I think I just debunked that notion that grand slam finals in which Serena is not featured are more competitive.¹⁸

Here, the poster tries to offer a context or frame that helps others focus on what the poster believes are key “facts”. By doing so, the poster seems hopeful that others will change their views of a given player. This was a common exercise on the forum. Another poster encouraged others to reassess a player whom some considered arrogant, “Can't believe people say he's got a big ego without meeting him, such a nice guy in comparison to so many others on tour. Just plain ludicrous”.¹ Here, the poster points out that others’ perceptions and player judgment may be

premature. The poster offers a bit of context (people are making this assessment “without meeting him”). In this case, the poster attempts to change negative perceptions by offering an opposing view, referring to the player as “a nice guy”.

This pattern is noted here because it suggests a desire for amicability within the sport or at least toward favoured players. Posters seek to build personal support for “friends” within the community (in this case the friends are typically professional players). This mirrors face-to-face community activities where community members seek to build friendships within social circles. What makes this example noteworthy is that these posters are attempting to build support for someone (a pro player) they may never meet or may never even be aware of the poster’s existence.

In other cases, the focus is less personal and more technical. For example, when one poster admitted, “I still aint convinced. Is his form better than last year at this time?”⁶ another responded with,

Obviously it is but that's not the hard question to answer. The difficult one is: is his form better than it was in the fall of 2015? Some people claim it is. Personally, I'd say same: he beat Ferrer in 3 in AD just like WTF. He beat Raonic in straights in AD just like Shanghai. He lost sets in early rounds in Doha like he did in Basel and got demolished by Djoko as usual. I think the upgrade in form was between USO and Beijing. Since then, it sort of stayed the course.⁶

Here, while one poster wonders about the player’s long-term improvements; another offers an explanation, suggesting that an entirely different question needs to be posed. These types of debates suggest the ongoing interest in performance within the posts. The following section reports themes discovered on the message board as posters sought to inform and perhaps

influence fellow community members. Figure 8 depicts the observed themes on the influences. The common thread in all these interactions is the desire to connect with other members. As the data suggest, this played out in two fundamental ways. Both are expressed as themes below.

Theme 1: Discussion and Debate

Discussion and debate comprised much of the content on this site. Posters seemed happy to engage in detailed and iterative discussions. This example offers only a small sampling of the debate that surrounded a new racquet.

Poster 1: “I honestly am looking forward to this racquet. It ticks a lot of boxes for me *smiley face*. I just hope it delivers, because I can seriously see myself switching to this.”

Poster 2 (expert): “Here are a few photos of Grigor Dimitrov's rackets taken recently: [followed up three photos of Dimitrov’s racquet they strung], Hope these can be of help, ProStringing.”
[Post liked by 5].

Poster 1: “[@ProStringing](#) Thanks mate! Is it just me or does the beam seem more boxy than the newer Pro Staffs? It certainly is not a purebred box beam racquet, but from your pictures it seems to be fairly close, particularly in the throat... Any truth to that?”

Poster 3: “BOX BEAM IS BACK! *smiley face* I think this is a narrower box beam design compared to traditional Pro Staffs, but I'm seeing relatively sharp 90degree corners. Also, holy PWS! It's covering 5 crosses, and these are even more spread out crosses due to Wilson's "Spin" design.”

Poster 1: “The anticipation is killing me.... This frame is so promising”²¹

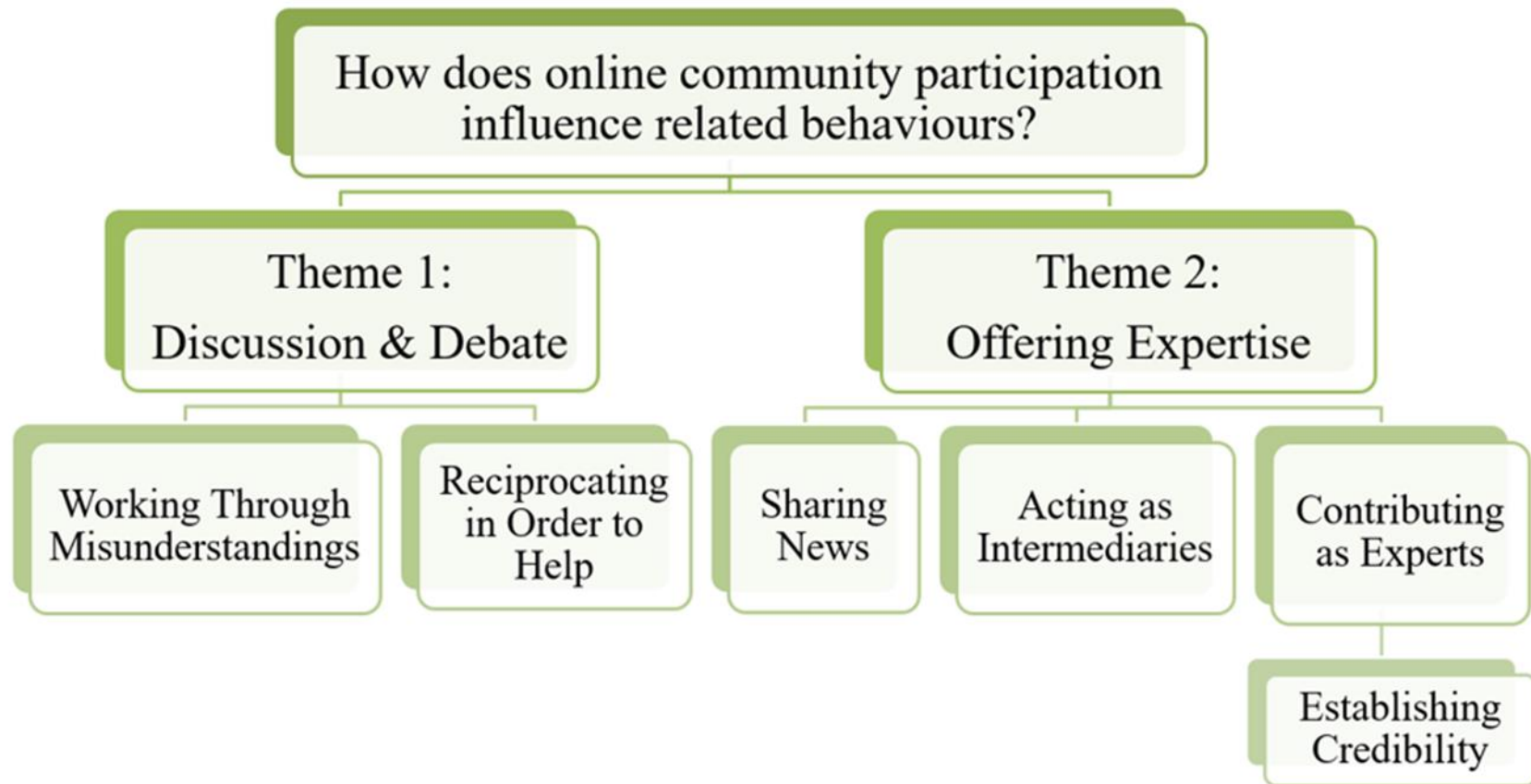


Figure 8. Observed Poster Influences in Talk Tennis

The level of cooperation that exists among posters suggests that the action of seeking advice and taking feedback is a dynamic process. Interestingly, in this community, those offering support may actively participate in the feedback-seeking. More specifically, these experts may also ask for input on the advice they give. Understanding the benefit of own advice can be important in this community. For example, while many posters can become engaged in the analysis and feedback giving, they can also ask for the outcome of the feedback received. Below is one such example,

Poster 1: “Did you try the hip and shoulder turn during practice today? How did it turn out?”

Poster 2: “Yes I did try turning more and keeping my left hand on the racket longer. It seemed to work okay, will have to see if I can practice it more to get it engrained.”

Poster 1: “Good luck changing ingrained timing can be very tough, but I think in the long run it will male your game more dynamic.”

Poster 2: “Ya your right I am at least trying to get more shoulder turn and hold onto the racket longer with left hand.”⁴⁷

Here, a feedback loop seems to exist. Posters take the feedback given, try it out, and report back, letting everyone know how it all played out. In this case, the poster suggests that the direction taken worked but that further practice is required for a better outcome. The community provides ongoing support as others encourage and reassure the poster. In this way, attitudes are influenced and behaviour is altered.

A given exchange between two people can have an effect on a much larger group. As the expert and poster cooperate, the information exchanged can receive a buy-in from the rest of the community, encouraging further requests. More members can benefit from such discussion by making it fit their own personal situation. As one poster asked, “Theyre much softer options

right? my sister feels like shes cheating with an ai, both touch and power.”³⁸ To this, the expert offered more information, receiving additional likes, “Yonex rackets do have a very sophisticated cushion system Babolat has a new cushion system for 2 new rackets of this year replacing aero drive and pure drive The new rackets have new,a bit different names As I have said before transition to yonex should be easy.”³⁸

Two insights emerge from this discussion. First, the reach of this online vehicle expands the resources available to any poster. A single post may gather interest from any number of skilled and knowledgeable community members eager to offer their own expertise to address the given problem. A large number of posters can take part in ongoing conversations as they simultaneously read and comment on a post.

More than that, the iterative nature of the online forum seems much richer than other online outlets, such as blogs, where interaction can be limited or restricted to comments not occurring in real time. In this sense, a message board, such as Talk Tennis, allows for the interaction to replicate that of face-to-face between friends, family, and co-workers.

The content can become richer in this online community, as other posters jump in to offer their own insights regarding product use. For example, posters can accept the details provided, sharing their own course of action. A discussion on stretching the string depicts this very well, Poster 1: “You could string higher and wait, but it would be even better to string higher, play a few hours and then restring using the same strings.”
Poster 2: “As an experiment and just for fun, I am going to try and restring the racquet with the same strings and see what happens.....it will probably end up as a 16x15 pattern instead of 18x16
laughing face.”

Poster 3: “what I do (prestretch) at about 75 lbs with the Kevlar, I just triple pull the ZX crosses...”

Poster 2: “I am stringing now (see above...reusing the strings just for yucks.....) and just pulled to 75 on the Kev mains (and left it there).”

Poster 1: “Betting you get a 16x16. What is the stock pattern on the blade?”

Poster 2: “Unfortunately, I was only able to get a 16 x 15. The stock pattern is 18 x 16.”

Poster 1: “Well let us know how it goes. I hope the frame is OK.”

Poster 2: “It all went fine, but honestly I think I might like the tension even little bit tighter.”⁴⁶

Here, the poster uses the information provided and reports their progress. In this case, the poster did what was suggested and informed others about the outcome, such as lost string pattern and effect on play. The feedback on the newly adopted tactic suggests a buy-in and intention of continued implementation in the future.

These processes suggest that fellow posters can influence their colleagues through reassurance as much as information. Posters have a natural desire to collect and assess the views of others who display similar interests. Here, their choices and actions can be confirmed by others. Such confirmation then offers reassurance thus aiding in decision-making. In such ways, influence is exercised and decisions are made accordingly (in this case, “not purchasing the type of string”).

One technique often employed is that of active questioning. Posters ask for clarification thereby assisting with understanding, “Could you please explain in more details about the high launch angle? Very interesting. Also “higher launch angle” means more spin, right? So the balls should land more in rather than long?”³⁸ They can also give more information, “she lacks spin, especially on the forehand...size wise she is 5.6”, normal build, pretty strong, skill wise her

current level is utr 7...she practices about 2 hours a day 4-5 days a week.”³⁸ This helps them better assess the original advice. More than that, those responding can then adjust their message with greater clarity and understanding (“this is too much tension on the poly for a pre 16 girl, i agree with the gut tension though, up the gut but keep rpm at 49-51lbs to keep her arm safe from injury.”³⁸).

These simple exchanges are part of a greater dynamic that pervades Talk Tennis. This dynamic revolves around the flow of relevant and timely information. Information is actively sought from other posters. This community thrives on such information. This suggests, though, that processes must be in place to protect the quality of this information flow. In this case, the data suggest that a great deal of effort is devoted to a) assessing the quality of information provided, b) separating good from bad information, and c) ensuring the flow of accurate information. Specifically, the data suggest that community members sought to protect the integrity of the advice. Several mechanisms have emerged to protect this advice giving process. As is described below, the community seemed anxious to conserve advice as a valuable resource (the example I provide shows how a member chastised another member for “wasting” good advice), to keep information accurate, and to work through misunderstandings. All such efforts seem dedicated to keeping the information exchange process working as intended. Posters seek to ensure that information exchange offers clear and helpful guidance that focuses on fun and performance.

Assessing Information Quality - Any online post is likely to be reviewed by fellow posters. And this online community is no exception. Those giving advice may or may not fully agree with others providing support on the same issue. In a way, the discussion among experts serves as a filter of all advice, helping the poster assess that which is being offered. Technical advice, in

particular, can be put under a great deal of scrutiny to ensure quality. Here, the system of giving feedback can balance itself out with the many experts debating on what the best course of action may be. In the process, additional advice may be offered. Take for instance this example. One poster commented, “BTW - you should probably take that ball on the rise. It's bouncing near the service line and yet you are way back behind the baseline and off balance.”⁴⁷ To which another added, “I believe that would be very difficult since his lack hip and shoulder turn on the forward swing cause an upcutting motion. He needs to be able to drive through the ball in order to take the ball on the rise otherwise he'll serve up a creampuff sitter.”⁴⁷

Note how the first poster focused on tactics where the second poster was concerned with mechanics (which then influenced tactics). The second poster assessed the first poster's advice and found it problematic. Their intent, then, was to correct the error in the first poster's advice. They did so by outlining missing components and potential issues with the proposed approach by the first poster.

Separating Good From Bad Information - Given the anonymity present on this forum, there is an ongoing interest in separating good from bad advice. In one case, the poster dismissed all the previous posts questioning the legitimacy of anyone but the player's coach (“Her coach should have the most to say, not posters here”³⁸). Having said that he could not resist then offering his own advice while trying to establish his own credibility (“Using poly, even in the hybrid, is a mistake You may Google my name if you want Julian Mielniczuk”³⁸). This seems an ongoing challenge within the online community. There is no shortage of posters willing to offer advice. Those seeking advice must then navigate the many and often contradictory messages.

As the discussion grows, posters can work out the unknowns and assumptions. In this case, the poster engages the community of supporters who made themselves available by keeping

the dialogue alive and open. His ongoing provision of additional information seems to entice others in refining their responses, offering a more meaningful feedback, high in quality.

Ensuring the Flow of Information - This message board relies entirely upon posters' willingness to engage with and, in many cases, help fellow posters. Members were anxious to ensure that this willingness was acknowledged and supported. In some cases, they sought to chastise those who seemed to be wasting the precious resource of expertise. Below is one such example:

Poster 1: "But I would love to get a chance to get into a discussion with them (but I doubt they would be interested *winking face*)." ³¹

Poster 2: "The 'them' in the context of this quote are stringers from a pro room. Perhaps you don't realize it, but more than one tour stringer has responded to your posts on these message boards (for clarity: I am definitely not one of them!). You have pretty much alienated every one of them by not listening to what they try to tell you. From an outsider's perspective, it's been a little bit like watching a current top ten player come and offer their advice on how to play tennis, only to be met with 'yeah, not sure about your forehand though mate...'" ³¹

Here, the poster points out the lost opportunity for learning. More than that, the poster seems intent on protecting the precious resource that expert advice represents on this forum. In this incident, disregard for advice was viewed as disrespectful for those offering it.

This seems an exercise in altering a pattern. The poster who ignored advice from highly trained experts may be discouraging them from offering further advice. In that case, everyone suffers. Perhaps this string of comments was intended to both correct the behaviour of the perpetrator and to encourage experts to continue helping. In community terms, this is an effort to ensure that social capital continues to be present within this community.

Working through Misunderstandings

As in any community, confrontations and disagreements sometimes arise in Talk Tennis. When it occurs, the dynamics typically take the form of an opening post, a confrontational response, and then an explanation by the original (offending) poster. It is, perhaps, easy to imagine that confrontational responses are followed by equally abrasive follow-ups. This pattern was not as common as might be assumed. Indeed, it may speak to the information gathering dynamic within this section of Talk Tennis, but in many cases, responses tended to be helpful rather than confrontational. Whereas debates in other sections regarding professional tennis including pros' performance and even recreational performance of community members could be unabashedly biased and unforgiving, this section's focus on information exchange often moderated the tone of the discussion. The focus was more on continuing the discussion and clearing up any misunderstandings. As one poster put, "I am here to learn, so I love to hear facts/data/experiences that show I am right or I am wrong."³¹

Reciprocating in Order to Help

In some cases, as the posters gathered information, they sought to use that newfound knowledge to help others in turn. In the case of this message board, posters' capacity may start to grow as they listen, experiment then succeed. In one case, a poster started a thread asking a technical question. The thread garnered approximately 103 posts over the next week. As others responded to this question, the original poster began to sort through and learn from these responses. As the thread concluded, this original poster was, in turn, offering advice he had gathered from community members.

In this sense, posters who once sought help may emerge as helpers in turn. As posters learn they may gain the confidence to start sharing input on their own. Here, participation in

lengthy discussions and listening to others' comments and suggestions can contribute to one's knowledge base. In this case, talking about a dilemma and discovering what might work helped a poster become informed regarding the original topic. Once the poster gained this additional information, he became confident enough to offer advice to those facing similar dilemmas. In this way, he could contribute back to the community that had been so helpful.

Theme 2: Offering Expertise

Given the importance of performance to many of these posters, there was an ongoing interest in "best practice". Posters in Talk Tennis often engage the community network in pursuit of information. Here, they may share news, act as intermediaries, contribute as experts, and establish credibility by reshaping input.

Sharing News

It was common for posters to talk about emerging news relating to many aspects of the sport. For example, it was common for them to express interest in the newest pro player equipment. They seemed to be seeking input from those who may share the same interest and amount of appreciation for that particular frame. Such discussion may look like this,

Poster 1: "Any idea when it will be released?"

Poster 2: "September from what I hear."

Poster 3: "No new action or news on this frame???"

Poster 4: "Not that I've seen, dimitrov is using the paintjob, racquet is coming in October (too far away!), and everyone debated the merits of obscure string patterns."

Poster 5: "Any info on where and how much weight Dimitrov is adding to his rackets?"

Poster 6: "330g - he adds 20g of weight to the stock frame."

Poster 3: “We know how much weight, but I think a more specific answer of where would be better. We know its probably mostly in the handle, but depending on how deep into the handle the weight is put it can affect the balance differently. Any thoughts?”

Poster 6: “Without someone having access to one of his frames and looking in the handle I doubt we'll know exactly. I'd guess it's all down the bottom half of the grip.”

Poster 7: “Watching Dimitrov vs Dolgoplov right now. Dolgoplov's boxy Pro Staff 95S is the one everyone wants.”

Poster 8: “look at the plow-through of Dimi's new racket, certainly amazing.”

Poster 9: “It's actually a Wilson Prostaff 6.0 95 mold with the PS 95S paintjob.”

Poster 10: “Super stoked for this frame! Hopefully Wilson will have a couple for sale at flushing meadows as they did with the RF97 last year.”

Poster 4: “What do guys think? Will they sell it at the US Open?”

Poster 3: “Yes. Yes they will....”

Poster: 6: “Seems like a missed opportunity if it isn't released for the US open. I can't wait to try it out.”

Poster 11: “Checked the wilson store at the US Open today. They had the PS 97S in stock.”

Poster 4: “That's cool. Depending on my money situation I might pick one up.”²¹

Here, a variety of posters discuss the release date, availability, specs, aesthetics, and player customization. In this case, posters admire the frame; are excited about it, and make plans to try it. There is an indication of its release at the US Open. Posters then investigate its availability at a later time, in this case, Poster 11, offering new information of its location, such as the Wilson store. With the newly gained information, posters share intentions to get the racquet (Poster 4).

With this, posters seek the available information on newly released products; relying on pros to set the gear trends.

Relying on acknowledged experts, such as the pro players, these posters are using a type of cognitive shortcut. They seem to be assuming that if the pro players are using the product, and those players focus on performance, then they too will benefit from using equipment adopted by the pros. While they may not always adopt the actual equipment used by the pro, the professional choice offers a starting point for discussion and debate.

It was clear too, though, that the professional ranks could not provide all the answers required by these posters. In many cases, posters were hoping for simple advice on form, tactics or some other aspect of the game that could not be readily gleaned from pros. In these cases, they posted open questions to their fellow community members. In doing so, other types of experts emerged.

Acting as Intermediaries

Posters in this community seem willing to offer support whenever and however they can. This support takes many forms. In some cases, they refer colleagues back to professional techniques, “I looked up Nadal swings and compared them to yours. I think in order for the shoulder turn to be successful you will need to turn your hips more too.”⁴⁷ This approach is noteworthy because, even though the poster feels that s/he lacks the expertise to comment, they offer help by finding a better source of information for the original poster. This willingness to help seems extraordinary given that these posters do not know each other and know that they will likely never meet.

Other trends relied more directly on the expertise of the poster. For example, in the Nadal comparison offered above, another poster followed up with a published article in

Tennisplayer.net⁴⁸ In this instance, John Yandell, poster and the author of the article, who serves as a videographer of modern professional tennis for the same magazine, compared posters' strokes to Nadal's.⁴⁹ Yandell, like the previous poster, relied upon the expertise of the professional to offer insight to the poster seeking guidance. The difference was that Yandell used video to make the point. This example offers additional insight into the richness of the online community. Those with questions about technique would be able to analyze the images in order to learn and improve. This "borrowing and building" technique was common on the message board. It opens up a world of insight for the posters with questions. The poster Yandell used own professional video skills to build on the tips offered by a fellow poster. In turn, the poster cooperation and expert advice are used to provide individualized help, resulting in the common good of the community and its members.

In other cases, the posters actively attempt to identify and draw in the experts they know are following the thread,

Poster 1: "Looks like this racket's a serious pro stock for people who know how to customize rackets by injecting silicone and stuff. Not for the casual customizer who slaps a few grams of lead here and there till it feels right (like me *smiley face*)."

Poster 2: "Correct. Geoff will convert these to Excalibur(s) 😎👍"

Poster 3 (expert, Geoff): "TW has a good section on injecting silicone which I would guess you have seen. With silicone I try to add a little, weigh, add a little, weigh, etc. For those that have not <http://www.tennis-warehouse.com/LC/customize.html>. Careful measuring of initial specs and material to add weight will make the customization process much easier. I find working in metric units allows me to be more accurate with the Racquet Customization Tools on TW."

Poster 2: "And Geoff's results are world class!"

Poster 1: “I absolutely agree *Poster 2 nickname*, I read Geoff’s posts and I have seen his results via your posts... he definitely knows what he’s talking about.”

Poster 1: “Correct Geoff, I’m just a little on the lazier side ;-) and don’t have the motivation to implement it yet. Back in the day I never modified my rackets but have lately started fooling around with leather grips, a little lead here and there. Who knows, one day I’ll completely switch to the dark side and start dabbling with silicone too *smiley face*²¹

Here, an expert gives assistance when called upon. In this case, posters helped with decisions by bringing an expert into the discussion. Posters then can use the pro player or other experts as the foundation for their feedback. The comments above suggest that expert advice exists in Talk Tennis, making it a resourceful and valuable outlet for tennis enthusiasts.

Contributing as Experts

While the borrowing and building technique was common on the message board, there were many times in which those who responded possessed expertise in their own right. In the exchange below, note the iterative dynamic that seems common on the site. Those seeking help are able to gather one-on-one advice from those who are willing and able to assist:

Poster 1: “Here are a couple of forehands I hit during point play. As far as technique goes is one better than the other? What would be some mistakes in my mechanics that stand out?” [Followed up own video].

Poster 2: “I think your hitting elbow is a little too close to your side during your take-back, your left arm is never really involved (as in pulling it back to start your initial shoulder turn), so I would hold the racquet longer with your left hand during take-back and then use that left arm for momentum so that your core is involved more, I think that may help with your off balanced form after contact (where your torso and body are leaning off to the left side and back). HTH.”

Poster 1: “I am going out today to practice I will try to hold the racket longer with my left hand. I think some of my problem is late set up, because I have tried to hold the racket longer while hitting in the past and it did seem to help. But that was on easy rally shots where I had time, once it speeds up some I feel like I am late if I hold with left hand to long.”

Poster 3: “Maybe a tad better than the past. But you shoulders and body are still so disconnected from you stroke. You can see this in your backswing. At the end of your backswing your left shoulder and arm are moving forward while your right shoulder arm are moving back. You must have a strong right arm because it dominates the stroke. You could gain so much more easy consistent power if you used your body more.”

Poster 4: “Left hip and therefore shoulder open up too early for me, I'd like to see you load with more "tension" in that left side before driving the right side through. Your shoulders should turn past the line of your hips to create a greater separation angle.”

Poster 2: “Maybe try and keep it(left hand) on the throat of the racquet until it passes in front of the chest and release it when it's in front of your right shoulder. Which is why everyone says you look stiff, because your whole torso moves as one big unit and then your arm becomes the only thing left to move freely that can generate energy.”

Poster 1: “Okay I will try to turn the shoulder more and try and not open up as early.”

Poster 5: “You mentioned "late setup" as a potential problem. Focus on adjusting your setup timing to the ball you're dealing with.”⁴⁷

This iterative process could be both detailed and learner-centered. For example, while experts typically simply offered advice, there were times when they sought to better understand the poster before they offered insight. It was very much a learner-centered environment. Such exchange may look like this,

Poster 1: “Hi tlm, since you agree you are off balance, may I ask why you think this is happening? I have an idea, but want to hear your thoughts first. I think it would go a long way to helping you achieve that easy power v and balance that would help your game.”

Poster 2: “I noticed that I am off balance on the follow through and I think it is because I pull up and across to the left so much that my weight shifts to the left side so I lose balance. Plus I hit off the back foot a lot which then I end up landing a lot of weight on my left foot.”

Poster 1: “I think there is a reason why you pull up and across. Let me know what you think, but I think the problem starts before your forward swing. Your swing sort of reminds me of the reverse pivot in golf. At the beginning of the swing, the golfer, mostly by not turning, hasn't shifted his weight back. He is forced to move backwards during the downswing in order to clear a path that lets the upper body swing at the ball. This causes all sorts of problems including loss of easy power. Because you don't have a full shoulder backswing and you restrict your hips from turning back as well, in order to make any move into the ball your hips must clear awkwardly (back and to the left). I think this is why you are always on your back foot. Your initial move away from the ball is so restricted you have nowhere else to go. To fix this more than anything, you're going to have to start getting your hips turned a lot more in the backswing. I believe if you fix this first then everything after will be easier. Thoughts?”⁴⁷

Here, expert and poster cooperate to identify the desirable solution. The cooperation between them is ongoing. In this case, the expert makes recommendations based on own analysis and continues to engage the poster by asking for their thoughts. Instead of the conversation being one-sided, such as expert-driven, the exchange is characteristic of a partnership with shared understandings. Both parties are treated as partners without the power structure that can exist between coach and the athlete (e.g., Philippe, Sagar, Huguet, Paquet, & Jowett, 2011).

Within these many posts, the challenge for the poster is to establish the actual expertise of the poster. How does one come to trust the advice offered by an anonymous poster? In traditional word-of-mouth settings, we know those who are offering the advice. This personal knowledge helps offer context as we decide to follow or ignore the advice. In this online community, both those seeking and offering advice seemed keenly aware that credibility was an issue. More on this below.

Establishing Credibility

As suggested above, advice on this forum, while plentiful, may not always have been credible. While many fellow posters were happy to offer advice, the question those seeking support may face is how to separate the good advice from the bad and/or average advice? Several pervasive techniques emerged as posters attempted to separate the good from the bad.

First, they may simply have provided sources that were above reproach. As noted above, the posters might look to the pro ranks (using video analysis) to help fellow posters. Pro techniques were considered above suspicion so credibility was assured. Second, those posting advice often sought to establish their own credibility. In some cases they simply self-identified. As one poster offered, “Everyone seems to be focusing on the hips and shoulder turn. In my opinion (I'm a coach by the way) it's his arm that is the problem.”⁴⁷ The goal of the poster, in such cases, is to establish personal pedigree within an environment of anonymity.

Third, posters often help out by noting the expertise of another poster. It was common for posters to confirm another's credibility. Recall the conversation introduced earlier on stringing where two posters reestablished another poster's credibility without their presence in the forum at the time of the discussion. One poster commented, “Geoff's results are world class!” and

another one, shortly after, confirmed, “I absolutely agree *Poster 2 nickname*, I read Geoff’s posts and I have seen his results via your posts... he definitely knows what he’s talking about.”²¹

Here, the various community members worked together to establish the credibility of the source and information provided. In this sense, posters in this community can help with complex decision-making. As posters wonder about something, a variety of sources seem willing to offer assistance as one poster suggested, “for the sake of understanding and clarity.”⁴⁹ All these techniques are used to overcome the inherent limitations of the online format. In these ways, questions can still be asked and insight can still be gathered.

Throughout this dissertation, I have outlined that posters can be polite and appreciative of advice; showing respect and gratitude. Often posters say thanks. They suggest listening to each other, providing updates on equipment demoing, and engaging in ongoing dialogue, such as question probing, confirmation, and explanations. Understandably, the most influential piece of advice in this community is the one taken. Future intentions, (“Thanks, that’s exactly how I will do.” or “My next move will be to gradually increase the tension and registering the results, as @julian suggested”³⁸) help ensure this. Actual behaviour, “PS bought 2 more DR98 to make it 3 pcs. ready for the tournament this weekend”³⁸ confirms that advice given in this community can also be taken. All this suggests that posters, along with established experts, can work together on improving individual performance, pursuing success that can extend to the community wellbeing as a whole.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This final chapter addresses the findings and discusses their relevance in terms of past and future research. It outlines how the findings enhance our current understanding of online community behaviour, offering insight into practical implications and recommendations for future research. The discussion is organized around the three research questions. Each question and its respective results are discussed in order. In each case, the primary insights are provided, and then implications for practice and/or research are offered. Let me begin this discussion with the insights gained from the study's results. They relate primarily to community roles, etiquette, emotion, performance, and effects.

Developing Community

In conclusion, Talk Tennis is noteworthy in many ways. It is the oldest message board of its kind, consisting of approximately 39,848 voluntary members with more than 10.01 million posts. Its topic based sub-categories cover a wide area of tennis interests, helping direct and organize poster discussion. Its international focus offers a culturally diverse environment. With a support system in place consisting of staff and policies, it helps support, mediate, and facilitate interaction among its many members.

The first research question deals with online community development around tennis. Observations reveal four themes suggesting an online community characterized by shared sports interests, specific roles, practices, and varying tones of discussion. The insights observed from these four themes are organized into five issues that suggest how this particular online community is developed and sustained. These issues relate to a) focus on tennis driving participation, b) adopting various roles, c) mirroring the sport's policies, d) expressing various tones, and e) sportsmanship before performance.

Focusing on Tennis Drives Participation

Threads within Talk Tennis seem to start with an inherent interest in the sport with much of discussion emerging from different topical sparks. As these sparks are taken on by the community members, the performance-based discussion seems to be the focus of those on the site. It is this commitment that builds the forum and, in turn, the community. The message board relies entirely on the insight and input from its members. This is different from a face-to-face community. For instance, when one goes to a store, the merchant tends to populate everything found in that store. This forum, on the other hand, is developed by people. Whether it is the questions asked or responses provided on this forum, they are driven entirely by the users. Talk Tennis staff, such as administrators and moderators have a small role, which can only be triggered if the content created by members exist. Some time ago, Preece (2000) outlined that online communities need to have a vehicle or “usability”, such as a space that is easy to use. The forum provides a nice, comfortable store but the store is empty. In this sense, an online community is a comfortable “virtual market” where people can bring own merchandise. Sometimes this merchandise is good, but sometimes not. With much diversity, various tones tend to emerge as a result, discussed later in this section.

Since Talk Tennis relies entirely on its members, as seen above, patterns have emerged to ensure a vibrant, stable community. These patterns deal with an adaptation of various roles and policies discussed next:

Adopting Various Roles

The role types adopted by members were exercised largely in an anonymous community. Would these roles play out in the same way in face-to-face communities? According to some researchers (e.g., Chayko, 2008), the answer would be a simple “no” because people are believed

to express themselves more freely online. However, the other question we must ask is, does the reach of the online environment facilitate the emergence of these roles? Consider the role of the shaper. Shapers offer topics of debate to the community. Similarly, shepherds direct the content discussion. Would these roles be acceptable in typical small groups? There is a limited capacity in the small group, but with the reach capacity of an online community, there is someone there to listen and buy into the topic. One might be unsure of finding someone interested in the same thing in the small group but can do it with more confidence as the group numbers expand.

With an adaptation of various roles, there appears to be an ongoing effort between members to get along. Some create discussions (shapers) and some direct conversations (shepherds). The evolution of roles present is insightful and online community specific. In the smaller group, there may be more instances where no one would rise to the debate. In this sense, a lot of the dynamics that are common in face-to-face communities emerge here but how they play out differ. What makes this community succeed is that its members can leave the discussion alone. Ignoring negative comments in the instructional section of this forum (“haha Sorry to laugh but man U need a TON of work to undo everything you THINK you see on TV...”³⁷) can be easily done. Interesting, the person commenting could well be one’s neighbour but because of the proximity and anonymity conditions, the community members can easily ignore each other.

Mirroring the Sport

In Talk Tennis posters’ sentiments and approaches seemed to mirror the sport itself. The sport very much relies upon the intervention of the officials who insist on the strict observation of rules and policies. Such rules guide and direct the efforts of players, thus ensuring fair and compelling competition. In many cases, I observed posters taking the roles of officials in order to maintain that same spirit of open and fair interaction. Individually and collectively they

intervened when participants deviated from accepted norms and procedures. As Dawson (2004) suggests, these posters may be seeking to sustain participation in the message board by enforcing rules and norms consistent with the spirit of the sport itself. In that sense, members in this community seem to expect and appreciate the same sport dynamic on the forum. This pattern seemed to be necessary only in the rough and tumble section of the message board.

Expressing Various Tones

This community's focus on winning encourages performance-based analyses. Just with any sport, high-level performance is recognized and rewarded in tennis. In Talk Tennis, these performance-based opinions were expressed from every perspective. The heavy emphasis on performance in pros translated into a lot of criticism and debate. This debate played out in one of two ways. In the amateur dominated discussions, posters could show a great deal of levity. They often displayed humour, even sometimes in the face of disappointment. However, many of the performance-based discussions tended toward more serious tones. Critiquing demeanour, losses, technique, and overall performances were common. Even weekend players who posted their own efforts online could be criticized in harsh and unforgiving ways ("I call him left handed one testicle Johnny."³⁷). Posters' engagement in the sport was evident in the sincerity with which they discussed often cherished topics. In such discussions, words like fun, joy, entertainment, and pleasure were typically absent.

The debate in this community could be agreeable or argumentative in turn. It could be supportive or hostile. In particular, discussion on performances would often stir up confrontational reactions, during which posters exhibited high levels of player attachment. In all cases, though, this dialogue contributed to the overall success of the community.

Sportsmanship before Performance

What seems intriguing in Talk Tennis is the level of commitment posters display toward etiquette and sportsmanship. While performance is important and essential to keep the discussion alive in this community, sportsmanship seems to be equally and often even more important than the performance alone. They may even resist forgiving players whose behaviour deviated from the expected norm on a single occasion, such as Raonic's cheating scandal. This seems to reflect the importance of etiquette in the sport of tennis. It is perhaps not surprising that those who are committed to the sport are also committed to its component parts, such as etiquette, fair play, and performance.

Much of the focus is on success on the tennis court. Even the thread discussion tone seems to mirror the tennis court. Tennis is often perceived as a gentlemen's sport with high regard to manners and good etiquette. The dialogue and behaviour in Talk Tennis are organized around this sportsmanship, suggesting a sport-related forum netiquette. Posters challenge the suitability of the informal dialogue ("You can disagree with people without being an asshole"¹¹), extending the same pro player expectations to community members. Allocation of appropriate amount of respect in the form of civil interaction is expected and demanded.

Implications for Practice

The online community can have an incredible reach. Not only does the content reach others, but community members can put a lot of detail on the forum that would be limiting in face-to-face interactions. In this sense, the online community is timeless with no limit on how much content is posted. While online communities can offer timely feedback, face-to-face interactions tend to be more immediate. This immediacy of talking in dyads or small groups can be limiting in how much detail is exchanged and remembered. Even with the use of smartphones,

face-to-face interactions have the time limitation placed on the content exchanged. The online community, however, lends itself to data gathering and reflection. Trends will re-emerge months later. It has a memory. The community is a continuum, immediate response, reflective, logical, and detailed. With such communities, somebody will read the content posted. The community members bring various mediums into their messaging including links and videos that are not always accessible with face-to-face communications. In face-to-face meetings the luxury of time may be compromised; in addition, members may not always be willing or able to acquire additional information. The content posted in an online community can be well rehearsed and well researched. Members can ponder, seek out additional information, watch or listen repeatedly and can even observe how many others either support or dislike the original message. The capacity of this medium is astounding.

Discussions within Talk Tennis are primarily sport, player, and performance driven. The discussion surrounding events, such as tournament venues is limited and in most cases, absent. This can be problematic for tennis event organizers trying to attract spectators to their venue through aesthetics and on-site attractions including some form of entertainment, such as games and shopping. Taking into account the reach of Talk Tennis as discussed above can help event organizers encourage open communication with the fan base about tournament venue components including dates, local attractions, and scores.

In addition, discussions on the forum can heavily revolve around favourite players. If favourite player's participation is more important than the event venue itself, the ability to attract and retain the same players at the event over the years can be essential. Event organizers can make efforts to minimize the negative effects of players' early exits, such as losses and injury withdrawals. This could be achieved through prolonged coverage of player's development,

match statistics, personal journey, historical performances at the event, and future expectations. Creating a story and encouraging an ongoing conversation long after a player's exit could promote more engagement to the online forum and positive perceptions of the event, such as electronic word-of-mouth.

Future Research

The attachment to tennis that was so obvious on this forum may be a combination of identity-based and bonds-based commitment (see Ren et al., 2011). It seems that tennis and its values are very much aligned with those of many posters. There was considerable support for imperatives surrounding issues like performance and winning. But tennis also prizes virtuous activities like sportsmanship. Indeed, in this community, there have been numerous instances of discussion where sportsmanship seemed more important than the performance imperative. A player may signal and reverse calls or advise against a challenge in opponent's favour on the big stage, such as the case of Jack Sock against Richard Gasquet at BNP Paribas International, Paris (ATP World Tour, 2016).

The importance of sportsmanship and "netiquette" was pervasive on the site. Both seemed tied to notions of tradition and core values within the sport. It would be interesting to explore what happens when these sorts of sports imperatives collide. For example, what happens when a player shows sportsmanlike behaviour at the cost of performance? How do fans and opponents react?

The importance of decorum extends to posters on the forum. Talk Tennis is a message board and by nature, it tends to follow very strict policies on poster behaviours. Those who engaged in trolling, spamming and other unacceptable behaviour outlined by the forum were banned and their comments were deleted. This leads to certain homogeneity in response patterns.

Lesser degree felonies of hostility (demeaning comments and character judgments) toward rivals (other player fans) and those holding opposing opinions were tolerated by the forum staff and often self-policed by community members. The policing seems to reinforce the community rules put in place by the service provider (Tennis Warehouse). But one must wonder, whether such buy-in and active role of rule enforcers would emerge in other sports communities where no benchmark of strict policies on manners exists?

More research is also needed to explore the importance of norms and values like sportsmanship and how they may play out in other online community environments (such as football, cycling, and so on). More than that, how would posters go about balancing and molding the conversation to reflect their preferences and beliefs (sport norms) on these sites? It would be interesting to explore sites that are less restrictive in their policies in order to monitor the more free-for-all atmosphere that can characterize online environments. Observations of these comments could provide additional insight on in-group dynamics; interactions, reactions, and efforts to minimize or even maximize troll-like comments.

Thinking Beyond

As suggested above, Talk Tennis possesses some strong communal elements. There is a certain level of commitment among members, in general. They show commitment to the sport and more importantly, the forum through frequent posting and engagement. Most forum posters are helpful; adapting and adjusting the roles they play as they feel is necessary. At various times, they are willing to take part as moderators, shapers/creators of content, or as shepherds and sheriffs. In this way, the members ensured the smooth functioning of an online environment that is their community.

However, it is difficult to ignore some of the anti-communal elements present in this community. For example, I found verbal assaults intended to cause hurt and harm. Recall postings that were condescending in nature, informally targeting intellect and other character attributes (“Classic Federer fan...Can you not read, at all?”¹¹, “let me put it in terms you will understand...”⁹, “Your brain can't keep up with actual facts and logic?”⁹, and “Are you really this dense?”⁵). In this way, Talk Tennis can be very unpredictable, like the game of tennis itself. But unlike the game of tennis that is based on good etiquette and sportsmanship displayed between players and the crowd most of the time, the forum often serves as an outlet for bashing the rival and the rival’s followers. In this sense, the tennis community that may exist in Talk Tennis can be very unstable and dysfunctional, perhaps even “schizophrenic”. Sandvoss (2005) tried to pinpoint and characterize such behaviour in a model of fandom, suggesting that the object of discussion, whether it is a player or the game of tennis, in this case, can be closely linked with one’s sense of self and who the posters would like to be. He argued that the self-reflection of superimposing beliefs, very much present in online environments, can be found on narcissism. In this sense, tennis enthusiasts may be displaying an analogy between themselves and their object of fascination, such as tennis, player, equipment, personal performances, etc.

More importantly, though, there is nothing supportive or therapeutic about some of the abusive outbursts and insulting comments displayed in Talk Tennis posts. On the contrary, such negative and hostile “thrashing” of the posters can have adverse effects. Just because the likeminded, in this case, tennis enthusiasts, collectively meet and share experiences on everything tennis, does not make it a “supportive network” for all.

This study points to this complexity of any community. As with any grouping, it may consist of members with whom you get along and those you don’t. In Talk Tennis, members are

tied together by the common interest in the sport, but beyond that, they develop and display a number of conflicting preferences relating to professional players, personal preferences about equipment, playing styles, etc. very much like the family members do. Once the discussion goes beyond tennis in general, which happens very often, members of Talk Tennis debate. This debate and discussion can be in a constant flux; they may bully, degrade, impose own beliefs. It seems legitimate to ask, “Why do tennis enthusiasts stay?” We might wonder, “Does belonging to a larger community outweighs its negatives?” Just like the family members, not entirely abandoning their family units, members of Talk Tennis seem to tolerate the ups and downs that come with that community.

They may remain for interpersonal reasons (as seen in Cantor & Pingree, 1983; Hay, Grossberg, & Wartella, 1996). The activities of fandom, whether it is the soap opera or sports, in this case, tennis, can be used as the means for social interaction where fans can “think” and “talk” with others (see Cantor & Pingree, 1983). Not only can such communities serve as interaction based pieces, but posters can become interconnected to some extent through valued conversations with others in the forum. Some researchers even argue that people will start watching an activity, like soaps or in the case of this study, tennis, in order to participate in the online communities (see Brown, 1994; Hobson, 1989). I would like to explore this pattern in the future as it can add an important insight into motives and outcomes of online participation over the long run. Online, posters creating discussion threads can receive immediate feedback on how the forum audience including other members and lurkers perceive their topics through posts, likes, and viewership statistics. “Do these indicators of popularity and acceptance of the forum discussion threads influence future participation?”, “How can forum and its interested audiences influence one’s involvement with the online community as a whole?”, and “What role do the

forum and its audiences play in fan's viewership participation online and offline?" More importantly, perhaps, in this context, is important to note the fluidity of such experiences and keep the complexity and diversity of these everyday occurrences in mind.

Participating In Community

The second research question deals with the ways posters use an online community. Observations reveal three themes suggesting that an online community can be used as a means for self-expression, as a way to seek advantage or utility, and to help others (offer advice). Self-expression in this community plays out as sharing and connecting, discussing and noting, and expressing of emotions, while seeking utility deals with searching assistance, and getting support. Helping others relates to problem-solving efforts.

Self-Expression

Self-expression in this community is often player focused. Posters express their player allegiance through interaction, such as bashing of the rival, using nicknames like "Rafa the King" and avatars displaying pro player images. They often use self-presentation cues of avatars, nicknames, and location to make sense of others' views and actions, for discussing and debating. In an online environment, these may be the only contextual cues other posters have of the original poster (see Social Information Processing Theory by Walther, 1992). The data suggest that in times of disagreement such cues take on greater importance as posters seek to better understand their "opponents". Recall how a poster used "the shire" to describe their location and another poster referred to this as "moronic". The second poster then concluded that the "shire resident" could not play tennis because of the nature of their comments. In these situations, posters may assign more meaning to the available cues than they otherwise might. This represents a type of stereotyping where people are judged based on sparse and seemingly

irrelevant information (“judging by how many posts you make, I hope I can play you at tennis one day and absolutely kill you”¹¹). Chayko (2008) had assumed that such behaviour would be minimized online because criteria typically used to stereotype are missing from the online environment. She argued that such judgments would be absent in an online community, allowing for the focus to be on what is said rather than who said it (see also Ling, 2004; McKenna et al., 2002). Her hopes seem unfulfilled in this instance.

The particular “shire” incident was also consistent with notions of bullying (“I can tell you're a moron just by looking at your location”¹¹). The anonymity in the online community may exacerbate posters’ willingness to be critical of others. Members do not know other posters and they themselves are protected behind the veil of anonymity. They can be harsh and unforgiving as a result. This seems to be an inherent danger of online forums like Talk Tennis where others’ feelings can easily be disregarded. The effects of this anonymity can never be truly known unless specified by those offended. In face-to-face gatherings, visual cues (sadness) can give away the negative effects (hurt feelings) of an interaction. This is limited in an online community, which may allow for prolonged, targeted discussions of negative tone toward a single member or a small group of members. The effects of such discussions are worthy of greater study.

Comments, intended to be hurtful, were present on this forum even though it is very much governed by a code of civility. This suggests the difficulty in maintaining respectful debate in an online environment. On this site, the “help” sections tended to be more respectful and less adversarial than the sections devoted to professional tennis. This suggests that topics may attract certain types of posters. Also, the topics may lend themselves to different tones and resulting behaviour patterns. Posters who seek help or seek to help may be less likely to be unkind in their comments. Those who seek debate, those who value winning, and those who identify with

success and reject alternative outcomes may be less charitable in their posts. It would be interesting to monitor tone and approach across various sites and topics. Helpful and conciliatory tones may be more prevalent with some sports or forums than others.

A Sense of Community

In Talk Tennis, posters may share and connect with many others as they seek contact with those who fancy tennis. A sense of togetherness is possible as posters gather to watch, cheer, and comment on the game in progress. Sharing can be intimate, supportive, and accepting. Literature suggests that people may develop friendships through online interactions (Bishop, 2013; Krotoski, 2013). Indeed, in this community, posters may become personally known to each other. They may even express a liking for another; however, their company preference seems to be based on the sport components. For instance, posters in this forum can have company preferences. They may invite specific individuals to join in the conversation, forming a connection of supporters based on their enthusiasm for the sport, and/or sharing of a favourite player. This seems to echo the actions of face-to-face communities in which people can crave companionship with select individuals, those of immediate family or friends; people of trust. Familiar faces of friends, family, and close acquaintances can provide comfort and a safe environment for an open discussion. Familiarity can make an online discussion more robust and perhaps less threatening as the feeling of closeness and support is readily available in a friend. This too may alter tone and behaviour.

When the tone in the forum was supportive, posters were able to exchange and benefit from the information provided on the site. Indeed, Talk Tennis is inherently a mechanism used for sharing and gathering information. Most of the posts tend to be comprised of posters either seeking or offering support. Those seeking support seem open to influence. They are actively

seeking guidance. They know that Talk Tennis opens up the tennis world, giving them access to perhaps thousands of experts on a given topic. They may gain access to a plethora of expert advice, normally unavailable in a traditional face-to-face community.

This further reinforces the astonishing reach of the online community. It suggests that the online community is a gathering place with discussions attractive to members of many different backgrounds and knowledge. The presence of such variety of perspectives, that otherwise would be limited to the traditional offline community, makes the online world a vibrant and enticing place full of free resources. These resources, most of the time, are available free of judgment. Sports enthusiasts, although, often faced in heated disagreements on the forum, are also exercising their freedom of expression, speech, and opinions. Sharing in these discussions allows members the control over the information they share and the advice they consider. Being able to access free and very often, high-quality advice (tested product information) from community members can be a very rewarding experience. In this sense, the online community is a learning community.

Advice Capacity

In Talk Tennis, posters can seek input on many different issues. Generally, they may seek advice on match airtime and streaming sites to more personal advice affecting own performance and preference. Whatever the issue, they tend to receive immediate assistance. The help available in this community can come from various sources and perspectives. The feedback can be harsh but also genuine and supportive. Whatever the tone, it is often detailed, suggesting care for the sport.

It would be interesting to explore notions of incidental learning on the site. Posters are continually suggesting new discussion threads in order to gather up the collective wisdom of the

group. In this way, expertise is harnessed and the information is distributed. While it seems obvious that posters may learn as they comment and receive feedback, it seems clear that even casual readers may be learning as they read over the comments of others. In the online community, information is available to everyone visiting the forum, whether they are a member or not. Even the most casual reader may stumble upon and benefit from the many posts that occur within any 24-hour period.

This capacity is present in the face-to-face world but is very much enhanced in the virtual world. Discussion threads literally appear at the readers' fingertips. A bit of curiosity could result in new knowledge that the reader happened to stumble upon. Further, the reach possible on this message board is not possible in the face-to-face community. It would be interesting to explore incidental learning on the site to establish how it might affect attitudes and behaviours of readers.

Posters in this community engaged in often lengthy analyses of performances and players; considering the best-case scenarios, discussing consequences and outcomes. All this suggests that a strong sense of community and social support exist in Talk Tennis. Online support giving or "service" to others (Nimrod, 2014) is not new but the underlying willingness to share experiences, information, and knowledge seems noteworthy. The format of the online community seems to permit and perhaps even encourage such behaviour. Posters used their own ideas as well as images, videos, and links to convey meaning to others in this community. Whereas face-to-face communications may lack access to these various mediums, this online format gives the poster time to do research, to prepare, to provide video, links, and anything they need to support their message. This offers an opportunity for clarity that is typically lacking in face-to-face encounters. It would be interesting to explore how the richness of these various mediums influences community members' views and behaviours over time. Do new threads that

begin with a video, for example, garner more attention than “leaner” messages? Are readers more likely to read and be influenced by richer message formats?

Future Research

Being an internationally recognized community, Talk Tennis can meet a number of enthusiasts’ needs. Its ability to sustain posters’ interests over time is fascinating. With its long-term existence, the community contains a detailed longitudinal data that lends itself to further analysis of the social processes existing in the online tennis world. This data can offer insight into the identified roles and how they may play out over time; whether they fluctuate or evolve. I plan on pursuing such data in the future. I plan on identifying and observing a select few members taking the leadership role in confrontational situations to keep communal order. Some of the questions I would explore are: Do these members only speak up and seek to control the situation that deviates from their own moral perspectives? When and why do they tend to engage? What moral codes are being violated when they do? Is it in discriminatory situations? What seems to trigger their responses and what strategies do they use to control the dynamic? Paying attention to these patterns will help understand the dynamics that shape and guide communication patterns on the site.

Observations repeatedly reveal a commitment to the sport, player, and the community itself. It would be interesting to explore the participation patterns among long-term members. Exploring the relationship between membership length, engagement, and community satisfaction might be undertaken. Future research using a stratified sampling focusing on the most active posters and their time of contribution could provide insight into enduring involvement.

Often, more guests than members were present in the forum. It remains unclear why some choose to actively view the threads without registering. Understanding lurkers; those

enthusiasts who may visit the forum and read the material without posting anything was not possible in this study. It would be interesting to follow up by interviewing or surveying lurkers to gain greater insight into their motives, use patterns, and the benefits they seek from the site.

Thinking Beyond

As data suggest, Talk Tennis can serve as a venue for tennis enthusiasts to express interests, share experiences, seek utility, and offer a helping hand if desired. The rich content and attention to detail often evident in the Talk Tennis posts can be enough reason for someone to remain a contributing member over the years. This is often the case with many members, whose membership goes back to 2004. This suggests that Talk Tennis offers benefits for long-term involvement. The help received online can indeed offset the energy a poster puts into helping others (see Rheingold, 1998). For a community to sustain over time, these benefits must continuously outweigh the cost of participation. Over the years, Talk Tennis has shown sustainability, suggesting a place for posters to be and those curious to visit.

Social exchange theory, as outlined by Blumer (1969), suggests that for people to leave a community, such as a sports club there needs to be a comparable level of alternatives available to its frequenters. Talk Tennis, being one of the oldest and most popular message board of its kind makes it difficult for tennis enthusiasts to ignore. Switching behaviour would be unlikely with limited alternatives of similar caliber.

This might change in the future with similar caliber outlets becoming more available for tennis enthusiasts to explore. For instance, it has recently, through a casual conversation with a close friend, a former Talk Tennis member of five years, come to my attention that *Reddit Tennis Community* (<https://www.reddit.com/r/tennis/>) may have started to gain popularity. From informal chats in my immediate tennis circle, *Reddit Tennis* might even be considered as the

purest form of a sharing community, with members feeling a sense of ownership. In particular, freedom of expression seemed to be emphasized in this community with little censorship being present.

On contrary, the censorship was very much present in Talk Tennis. We must remember that Talk Tennis is owned by Tennis Warehouse, an online tennis shop, and any relevance to competition like other tennis specialty stores, such as Tennis Express, Merchant of Tennis, Racquet Guys, etc. in posts will be auto censored. I am not a member of Talk Tennis and was unaware of some of these frustrations that can be one of the reasons why some members want to leave the forum. It would be necessary to further explore the issue of censorship as a deterrent to community participation. When does restriction simply become too much for the forum member to endure? How often do members leave due to the control exercised by the owner? Are these members less committed from the beginning? Do they deviate from the norm as they do not buy into the community's values at large? In this sense, it could be that the forum is not providing what the members seek, and if enough members are affected by the rules and forum practices such as, auto-censorship, changes may be needed to better serve its members if ongoing success is to be continued. Often, it is too difficult to gain insight into those who discontinue an activity. In this way, talking to and exploring the reasons for disengagement becomes invaluable. In the future, I plan to pursue to explore this disengagement and switching behaviour in more detail through in-depth interviewing with the affected parties.

For now, there is no argument that the sheer volume, quality content, and availability of expert advice very much present in Talk Tennis can outweigh the limitations imposed on posters through policies. The daily forum visits consisting of more guests than members continue to suggest an ongoing curiosity about the forum and what is discussed there. In other words, even

non-members may actively read and learn from the content. All this suggests that Talk Tennis, for now, still remains a popular choice among tennis enthusiasts in general.

Influencing Behaviour of Community Members

The third research question deals with the ways online community participation influenced related behaviours. Two themes emerged suggesting that an online community can be very much influenced by utilitarianism and reciprocity. In this community, as posters seek, receive, and give support, they focus on success, rely on expert advice, and cooperate to establish credibility.

Observations repeatedly suggest that posters in Talk Tennis are typically willing to listen to the advice given. Posters tend to be especially interested in the sport success that can translate into court and equipment performance. The base of their focus on success seems to be player and sport-driven as posters seek to replicate the court etiquette, pros gear, and technique. The progress results are then shared. While expertise is often the source of information, many posts suggested the importance of trial and error among community members.

When dealing with technicalities of stringing and equipment, in particular, there seems to be a willingness to pass along any insight thought to be useful. As noted earlier, the “helping” threads appeared to embrace a stewardship function adopting a much kinder and gentler tone than those in threads devoted to professionals’ performance on the court. The posters’ focus on technicalities seems to be on trying to make things better. Here, posters offering advice can also be seeking advice, in turn, wanting feedback on the utility of their input. As posters engage their network those willing to help may relay the source information to those in need. All this suggests that word-of-mouth, even between strangers, continues as the most powerful persuasive communication tool (Allsop, Bassett, & Hoskins, 2007; Beck, 2007).

There emerged immediacy within these helping threads that replicated what was possible in face-to-face communities. The online community, although consisting of thousands of members, in a given discussion can form a tight-knit group of supporters. These same supporters seem to play a role of a close, caring friend or a family member who puts in a considerable time and effort into teaching and warning of possible mistakes (wasting money on a product). In the online community, what would otherwise be a small group of supporters in the offline environment (family), can expand exponentially, increasing the amount of resources and advice available and their benefits for the individual.

Preservation of Resources

When advice is offered, a certain level of respect is expected to be given to the contributor in return. More respect may be demanded with the higher level of perceived expertise and poster status. This level of respect reinforces the idea of preservation of community resources, going back to the matter of sport etiquette. When this etiquette is threatened, posters often intervene to ensure that community resources, when sought, are utilized. They work hard to keep the community healthy; maintaining its social capital. Without this balancing act, a negative community-wide impact may be possible where limited advice and contribution unwillingness could prevail. If allowed, the whole community could suffer in the end.

Overall, roles that posters play can evolve over time from those seeking advice to becoming a knowledgeable contributor. Observations reveal that posters can gain knowledge through information exchange and community participation. They can share this learned knowledge, contributing back to the same community who helped them. Knowledge accumulation can have a direct effect beyond those actively seeking it. The inactive visitor, the

content reader may have as much benefit from the information as the posters. In that sense, there is more to this community's effects than meets the eye.

Information Processing

What is interesting is not so much what posters seek advice on and why, but how they evaluate the opinions and information shared. Some form of evaluation process seems to go on in determining one's actions, such as racquet shopping. This process can be driven by something meaningful, based on the individual, such as being a parent, and the online environment consisting of posters.

The processing of advice and the feedback exchanged between posters speaks to Assael's (1995) decision-making model. In Talk Tennis, deciding on a tennis racquet for a 14-year-old daughter, for example, can be considered a high involvement purchase. The decision can be complex as it pertains to a daughter's playing image and risk of making a mistake, such as an injury concern. A parent can spend considerable time and energy considering others' input on experiences and brand. The parent, not entirely familiar with the product, may rent out demos for his daughter, basing the decision on two sources, a trial evaluation and the word-of-mouth from online community members.

The online community members, and in the case of Talk Tennis, the non-members have access to almost unlimited materials that can be both static (existing videos, website links) as well as dynamic and iterative. In this sense, the repeated messages, the robust environment, and unlimited materials in form of personal stories and expert advice suggest the persuasive power of the forum. More traditional advertising materials, such as pamphlets may be viewed as boring and static by comparison. The online community though, because of its interactive nature can be more meaningful for the poster. The content is entirely member-driven rather than organization-

driven, which is mostly the case in the traditional advertising campaigns. It is the information that can be perceived as free of hidden agendas, created by passionate sports enthusiasts not looking to gain acknowledgement or any reward in return. The ability to read, in real time, others' struggles, step-by-step actions in completing a task (stretching a string), and solutions on how it all worked out, makes the online community an undeniably powerful resource. Reading how others go about tennis, cannot only help make a decision, but it can also provide an added cultural benefit of learning about approaches from geographically dispersed tennis enthusiasts.

Source Credibility

In this community, posters tend to rely on advice provided to them. This advice can originate from various sources with knowledge based on practice, experiment, and observations. These same posts can hold a great capacity for information that may or may not always be accurate and useful. This then poses the question of credibility of online information and the shared opinions. We must wonder, what makes posters rely on information they gather from total strangers?

The problem but also the benefit associated with online communities may be the assessment of the input quality as much expertise can be present. The existence of these experts, often of limited access in traditional face-to-face communities can be liberating as it can extend an individual's circle of friends. In face-to-face communities, a better sense of the individual is possible. Online, technology can help with the rapport by making the impersonal very personal through videos, images, emojis, and memes (see Appendix F for kinds of responses posters use in Talk Tennis). The volume of posters available can also help deal with the uncertainty of source credibility.

Generally, when we speak of credibility, we seek to find out how believable the information we are reading is (see Wathen & Burkell, 2002). Credibility is believed to deal with trust, reliability, accuracy, fairness, and objectivity (see Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008). Some argue that trustworthiness is the key to understanding credibility (see Rieh, 2010). Trustworthiness can be understood in terms of “perceived goodness and morality of the source” and the information that seems reliable, fair, and unbiased is then trustworthy (see Savolainen, 2011, p. 1244). Overall, information credibility can be defined as “people’s assessment of whether information is trustworthy based on their own expertise and knowledge” (Rieh, 2010, p. 1338).

With the unorganized message structures of Talk Tennis, understanding the source credibility can be useful to posters. Source credibility can be defined as “the attitude toward a source of communication held at a given time by a receiver” (McCroskey & Young, 1981, p. 24). Recognizing cognitive authorities, those perceived as knowledgeable about the topic, who know something that is unknown to the receiver of the message (Wilson, 1983), become important. These individuals can be perceived as believable, influencing others’ thoughts and actions.

Observations suggest some relationship between one’s credibility and their community status. The status referred to here is not the same as the status attained through message posts. Instead, it relates to the knowledge and status assigned by fellow community posters. Whether one is an expert in the field can remain unknown until confirmed by others, “I have seen his results.”²¹ This simple act of acknowledgement can be enough for members to start listening intently, resulting in imminent actions, “Okay I will try.”²¹

In Talk Tennis, there seems to be a group effort in identifying and determining expertise as posters help with the source credibility. Posters can identify experts for others, suggesting why the information is valuable, “Geoff's results are world class!”²¹ Posters may rely on own

experience; as they outline reading on that person's knowledge. By doing this, they confirm the source credibility for the poster seeking advice. Experts in Talk Tennis may also freely offer justification for own credibility through personal introductions, "You may Google my name"³⁸, and background, "I'm a coach by the way."⁴⁷ Posters wanting to help can extend their support to outlining own knowledge base and by doing so, they suggest expertise in their actions, conveying trustworthiness.

The ways in which posters in Talk Tennis identify their own and other's credibility is the contribution to the existing literature. The interaction between posters in this community suggests that evaluating source credibility, such as expertise, can be a group exercise not solely reliable on the perceptions of the individual seeking advice (e.g., online reviews in Lim & Van Der Heide, 2015).

Given that poster anonymity is common in this community, a group effort in the identification of experts can be very important. Posters, including experts themselves, can help the individual decide whether the information is worth using. By getting to know the source, the posters suggest an effort in making the unknown known. The once anonymous source then is evaluated, confirmed, and personalized.

Implications for Practice

A private conversation carried out in a public space can have unrivalled implications for posters and lurkers. The reach of this online community can be tremendous as its content is freely available to anyone visiting the site. Although most posters prefer to remain anonymous, personal identifiers, such as names and professions, in advice giving situations can have positive implications. The known source can be perceived to carry more credibility, and as a result, the advice originating from such sources may be taken more seriously. Providers of online

communities may want to actively protect the wealth of resources, such as expertise and professional advice, through moderating practices.

Discussion on support provision in terms of equipment purchase can have implications for stores. In this community, posters may seek the release of new equipment at tournament venue sites. If this is known, then racquet manufacturing stores, such as Wilson, Babolat, and Head, may want to ensure that the newest equipment release and availability coincide with the major events, such as the US Open.

Posters actively sought support on equipment customization. Their interest in equipment can extend beyond mere maintenance. This information can identify additional needs that service providers can aim to satisfy. Posters, who are also sports participants, may seek top of the line product and customization, equivalent to that of the pros. Stores offering racquet stringing may want to focus on the provision of knowledgeable staff, who can offer support to a well-informed customer.

Future Research

This study sought to understand whether online community participation and intergroup interactions influenced consumption. The data revealed considerable willingness to listen to the advice given. Posters often indicated their intentions, reporting actual behaviour, “bought 2 more DR98.”³⁸ How such influences extend to those who do not report back remains unclear. It also remains unclear how sustainable they are among those who listened. Future research should investigate online community effects on inactive members, such as forum guests.

This study provides insight on advice taking regarding streaming services, technical instruction, and equipment. Whether these influences would extend to other tennis outlets, such as event attendance and instructional program registration is unknown. More research examining

the roles interpersonal dynamics play in the consumption of tennis related activities outside the forum is needed. Conducting an online survey could help gain insight into this relationship.

Throughout this study, it became apparent that posters can engage in various discussion topics extending to prediction pools and gambling discussions. At times, references to characters such as, “didn't train enough like Goku or Vegeta”¹³ were used suggesting that posters can also be gamers. Participation in activities outside of the message board, such as gambling and Dragon Ball Z⁵¹ gaming can provide insight on posters' online involvement. Exploring how and to what extent tennis enthusiasts use online communities to participate in these activities could enhance our understanding of the fan subculture.

On the forum, tennis enthusiasts tend to discuss many different aspects of the sport, ranging from spectating, equipment, to own participation. Indeed, tennis enthusiasts may continue to seek new experiences and how they engage with the sport they appreciate. As a follow-up to this study, we might want to question the online community participation influences on the sports tourism industry. As events can be considered a major part of sport tourism (Getz, 2003), we might want to explore how engagement in discussion threads on professional tennis could open up a dialogue to spark an interest among its community members to travel not only to watch but also to play tennis in various locations.

The data show hints of aggression to be displayed toward “newbies” with few posts, questioning their credibility. As Hebblethwaite (2016) suggested, some of those posting online can hold more power than other posters. As a result, power dynamics can play an important role in understanding supportive and argumentative communication in an online community. Distributive communication (Ohbuchi & Tedeschi, 1997) and avoidance strategy (Canary, Cunningham, & Cody, 1988), although present in this community, were not studied. Future

research should consider influences of power dynamics in the conflict situations of an online sport community, such as Talk Tennis to better understand how input is taken, dismissed, and/or worked through.

It seemed that Talk Tennis acted as a sort of a search engine, but one that was guided by posters with interest and expertise. Whereas typical search engines (Google) rely on algorithms, this community seemed to offer thousands of posters serving as research assistants, constantly passing the information upon request. Referring to the original sources, such as an expert or an article makes this community a very efficient medium. With growing modern technology, this can become a very profound source of information. In Talk Tennis, there seems to be a moral code with people making judgments to answer questions in a way that can be meaningful to those asking. This judgment and moral code can be absent in search engines that rely heavily on the algorithm, such as a number of word searches. Future research should investigate the relative importance of search engines and message boards in individual lives.

Thinking Beyond

As expected with online communities perhaps, Talk Tennis and its online format offered a tremendous opportunity for posters in that they are, to some extent, unencumbered by reality. They could take on any personae, helpful or destructive, they wish as they engage other community members. Posters could very much control not only the variables that other community members observed but also what they discussed, sought input on, when and how help was offered and received in return. Often, posters seemed very intentional when providing identity markers in this forum and in ways they communicated the information. Members chose avatars, names, location, images, videos, hyperlinks, emojis, language, etc. that best expressed the image and message they wish to project to others. As seen earlier, it was not uncommon for

those helping to choose to disclose real names and reveal professional, working background (“I’m a coach by the way.”⁴⁷). Overall, in Talk Tennis, enthusiasts can choose what and how information is disclosed and shared via profile and communication. In this sense, the online context of the Talk Tennis forum allows its posters to retain autonomy of their personal information.

At the same time, this online format insists that both supply and demand exist in the forum. Some members were content to act as instigators by starting threads, offering comments or analyses; others sought to gather information while still others were more focused on providing aid and guidance. When debate became argumentative or belligerent, these same posters acted as monitors, mediators, and sheriffs protecting and preserving the information. The social capital and its relevance to the online sport community, such as Talk Tennis is in need of further exploration. In particular, I am interested in further exploring the norms of reciprocity. I wonder, how access to resources and support offered relate to the social relationships within indirect forms of sport consumption, such as those within an online forum.

As various helping roles played out in Talk Tennis, dynamics around power, credibility, and expertise were ubiquitous. The dynamics around power issues that seem to emerge are of importance here. Tennis enthusiasts would often react aggressively when their views and opinions were threatened. Perhaps, the online community context is at fault here. Talk Tennis members have very little background information on those with whom they interact. As a result, when the discussions get heated forum members go to extraordinary lengths to ‘make sense’ of the other posters’ intentions, looking for control over the disagreements and to establish credibility when seeking, giving, and taking others’ advice.

This obvious existence of power issues in postings between posters, and between posters and the forum format or usability as defined by Preece (2000) may be expected. However, I cannot help but speculate that more could be at play here. For instance, we can question and explore further how power relations between members and the forum administrators are being contested. Although I am interested in exploring this idea in the future, I would also question how power relations between television networks (ESPN) and online audiences, such as tennis enthusiasts are renegotiated through an online environment, such as a tennis forum. In Talk Tennis, members often used broadcasters' and newspaper article authors' comments (e.g., announcer, Jeff Salzenstein) to start a thread, opening an arena for discussion and debate. Often they discuss and criticize the networks like the BBC tennis coverage (<https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/bbc-tennis-coverage.567394/page-2#post-10456491>), complaining about the air times of matches. In this sense, Talk Tennis members can immediately question and challenge the program and its reporters. This can have a powerful impact on the nature of viewership; it can affect the ways in which audiences and programs engage. Television may have and continues to change the sport itself, but to what extent can tennis audience change the ways in which tennis events are produced and mediated to the public? I plan to explore this power relation, very much present in the sport today.

So, What? The Meaning of it All

Before concluding this study, I would like to take a moment to draw your attention, as a reader, to why all this matters in a broader cultural sense. Sports, in general, are believed to carry the many societal norms and values, such as winning and masculinity (see Sage & Eitzen, 2016). More specifically, attitudinal and value changes in the sporting culture about competition, winning/losing, cheating, and similar have been adopted as the cultural norm. We are seeing

these same values being reproduced in the online sport environments, such as Talk Tennis. We have learned the importance of etiquette and how no one is immune to the expectations of the sport itself and the deemed appropriate behaviour for a tennis player or a fan, during the game and outside of the playing field, on and off-the-court, including the online forum. In this sense, the etiquette values of tennis, historically present from the onset of the sport (Adams 1984; Bryant 1994; Davison-Lungley 1979; Johnson & Xanthos 1976), are very much present and honoured in the larger tennis community and the online tennis culture in particular.

The modern society depends on complex networking systems, which include a combination of print and online outlets. Talk Tennis is an international tennis forum, with sub-forums organized into various world regions, such as Europe and Australia. The sub-forum dedicated to Europe is then further divided by language, organized into “Deutsch”, “English”, “Español”, “Italiano”, and “Français”. Although this organization into specific international categories exists within Talk Tennis, the major sub-forums deal with topics, such as competitive tennis, equipment, miscellaneous, and classifieds. In this sense, Talk Tennis members have access to all these sub-forums, allowing them to learn from a wider audience. They can learn versions of culture (European, etc.) by visiting the Talk Tennis International sub-forum and reading about the trends, questions, and discussions there. In this way, Talk Tennis can provide a sense of a “collective experience”. Recall how online interactions and participation can sustain, transforming into enduring relationships (e.g., Chayko, 2008; Krotoski, 2013). These same online outlets, as mentioned earlier, can also be therapeutic in nature, used as a way to escape frustrations and burdens that may bind tennis enthusiasts to their sport. Talk Tennis seems to play the role of a “trustworthy friend or a family member”, always there to listen and offer debate that is sometimes supportive and/or refuting regardless of how small or big the concern.

In this way, Talk Tennis binds its members to tennis reality. The forum appears to have the communal focus where large segments of tennis enthusiasts worldwide can share common norms, values, rituals, and traditions related to the sport they love. Reporting of new ideas, opinions regarding professional and personal tennis events alone can stimulate reinterpretations of the tennis culture. This may, in turn, promote change in many spheres of the sport, such as viewership, sport participation, and equipment consumption.

Viewership statistics and media devoted to sport all hint at its overall importance. For example, the sport-related print media has five times as many readers as any other section (see Sage & Eitzen, 2016). This study on interpersonal dynamics within an online sport community, such as Talk Tennis is important as social media continues to change and transform sport related events (Sanderson, 2011). Increased technology outlets, such as Tapa Talk, iPad, and mobile in general, serve as additional options for sport fans to consume their favourite teams, players, and sports anywhere, at any time. Television remains the leading influencer of how sports are produced and mediated to the audiences (e.g., made for television sports, scheduling, commercial breaks, etc.); having produced revolutionary and irrevocable changes in modern sport (see Sage & Eitzen, 2016). We are still unaware of the potential changes that digital media, such as social networking sites, tournament websites, and online based sports communities like Talk Tennis will have on the sport in question. This study serves as one of the many starting points in providing insight into the online tennis culture, in general. It extends the capacity for not only greater understanding of the sport consumption, but also helps appreciate the interpersonal dynamics between sports enthusiasts, and resulting social influences. Just like television has revised the meaning of sport and the nature of its consumption (how it is played and watched), we are learning that online outlets like Talk Tennis have started to influence and to some extent

enhance the tennis culture. We learn how enthusiasts discuss the sport and the love they feel for it. In this way, this study shines the light onto the meaning of tennis and its many components, as well as the role and broader meaning the online forum and its members play in enthusiasts' lives.

At times, Talk Tennis seems to provide a public platform for the celebration of traditional, masculine ideals in sports and society at large. Recall the discussion on former pro player, Amélie Mauresmo coaching a male professional player, Andy Murray. With this specific discussion, there was one poster, in particular, who angered the rest of the community with his comment, "No man should ever be coached by a woman. EVER. It's not in our mentality to be led by a female."⁵ His comments did not meet many supporters, only one other. Instead, he was met with strong opposition from other posters who did not ignore his comments, but rather engaged and insisted in stopping the behaviour by condemning the posting ("You should go back to your cave, it's getting dark."⁵), which they were successful in doing.

From this particular example, we can see that forums can attract many different opinions, sometimes those that continue to reinforce the gender inequity in sport, in general. This has consequences for both men and women. The debate on gender equity in Talk Tennis suggests the persisting problem of inequality among men and women in sports, ranging from participation to occupation. Women are still very much underrepresented in the administrative roles of sports, such as coaching, journalism, etc. (see Sage & Eitzen, 2016). In that way, Talk Tennis can serve as an open arena where different perspectives can be brought to life, causing members of the community to demand justice and freedom from biases toward one gender, similar to that of the larger society. Talk Tennis members rose to the occasion, just like the activists do in non-violent and violent demonstration rallies for human rights elsewhere. These findings show that offline behaviour seen in the stadiums and cities at large can be reproduced in the online environment,

suggesting how same issues of gender equity and their meanings can be reproduced, debated, and resolved.

Finally, this study is research into what may be a potential and very much influential shift in the mode of the enthusiasts' consumption of their favourite sport, in this case, tennis. We must wonder to what extent the Internet and online forums will change the sport going forward. Maybe it is the commentary and narratives that draw people to such forums. But the potential of the online communities, such as Talk Tennis, to surpass other forms of mass communication as a source of sport information and entertainment is hard to ignore. Technology has already changed how people experience sports (Woods, 2016). Research on online sports communities, such as this one, is too important to miss if we want to understand how technology and its use have and continue to transform sports enthusiasts' experiences. This study does just that, it provides an insight on how tennis enthusiasts experience tennis in an online community. This insight can be invaluable in our understanding of the online sports culture, personal and sport-related influences and transformations, in general.

Conclusion

Social interactions and personal relationships in Talk Tennis can be complex, and sometimes roles and rules exercised can be contradictory. In this tennis community, posters constantly push and pull while staying within a prescribed set of rules. There, the tennis values, such as good sportsmanship and performance are very much alive. Posters can argue, debate, and even punish as they inform, remind, teach, and support each other.

The Talk Tennis community explored here was both cohesive and diverse. We are just now beginning to understand its complexity. The performance was, at times secondary to good form and etiquette. Would we get the same results if we monitored a football or a wrestling

message board? How much does the debate dynamic replicate the values of the sport itself? I will continue to study how rules and roles emerge in this and other sports communities.

While I considered the participation of posters in this study, I am intrigued by lurkers; those who visit and read without posting. Talk Tennis provides daily statistics on members, guests, and robots and their activities. This study was unable to investigate the reasons for becoming a community member and why some choose to actively view the discussion threads without registering. This information could have been gained through the incorporation of other methods within my netnographic study, such as taking on a more participative element as mentioned earlier. In that sense, one of the major limitations of my research might have been the sole observational netnographic approach. This approach, although has offered great insight into the research questions, the social contact with the posters might have provided even more insight into the cultural understanding. Therefore, in the future, I will seek to incorporate the participative element in my research, where I would become a member of the forum and interact with the participants. In this way, I can collect different types of data that further compliment and advance my current research study. In the future, I seek to gain insight on lurkers, their motives and how they may use online communities.

In conclusion, traditional tennis clubs can bring members together to share interests, beliefs, and skills. In general, the clubs foster their connection to the sport. This same tennis club, in a virtual format, can replicate the same roles without members needing to meet face-to-face. The virtual club members may join from around the world. Thousands of these members can simultaneously engage in discussions on various aspects of tennis.

This study's purpose was to monitor group dynamics within an online sport community of Talk Tennis. The evolving nature of word-of-mouth communication, in particular, was

considered as members engage through sharing, debating, helping and supporting fellow members. As the oldest message board of its kind, Talk Tennis consists of approximately 39, 842 members with more than 10.01 million posts. Its international focus offers a culturally diverse setting. With a support system in place consisting of staff and policies, it helps support, mediate, and facilitate interactions between its members.

Interpersonal dynamics were explored within the Talk Tennis message board. Talk Tennis is organized into sub-categories covering a wide range of tennis related interests including professional players and matches, equipment, instruction, miscellaneous, and classified advertisements. The community is organized into region-based categories (Australia and Europe) and language-based forums (<https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php>). To this end, 19,782 readily available messages posted to 54 Talk Tennis discussion threads were analyzed to help understand online dynamics among community members and their frequently discussed topics.

The study considers how online community develops and evolves within Talk Tennis. It observes how tennis enthusiasts use Talk Tennis and it explores how they influence each other. Results hint that posters have a tendency to use the message board to fulfill three basic functions: to express themselves, to seek utility, and to offer help to others. The online dynamics were often elaborate as members worked toward fulfilling their various goals. As a result, community members seemed to adopt a variety of roles to safeguard the steady functioning of Talk Tennis. Throughout, members actively engaged their network while cultivating community success. Members swapped information, experiences, skills, external resources, and collectively helped with decision-making. These insights suggest how traditional dynamics are reproduced and enhanced in the online community.

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Footnotes

¹ Data analysis based on discussion thread entitled “Nadal admits Novak = GOAT peak” especially posts ranging between 28 and 135. To obtain material refer to <https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/nadal-admits-novak-goat-peak.552344>.

² Data analysis based on a total of 216 message posts in discussion thread entitled ““Bernie" decides he doesn't want to play anymore.” To obtain material refer to <https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/bernie-decides-he-doesnt-want-to-play-anymore.552728>.

³ Data analysis based on a total of 3,502 posts in a discussion thread “Australian Open 2016 SF- [1] Djokovic vs. [3] Federer”. To obtain material refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/australian-open-2016-sf-1-djokovic-vs-3-federer.553732/>.

⁴ Data analysis based on a total of 421 message posts in discussion thread entitled, “AO’16 Draw Schmwaw”. To obtain material refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/ao-16-draw-schmwaw.552704/>.

⁵ Data analysis based on discussion thread entitled, “Murray: Djokovic is going to have to drop off if I'm going to win in Melbourne” especially posts ranging between 224 and 297. To obtain material refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/murray-djokovic-is-going-to-have-to-drop-off-if-im-going-to-win-in-melbourne.552446/page-6>.

⁶ Data analysis based on a total of 169 posts within discussion thread “Nadal Returning to form and Liking it!” To obtain material refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/nadal-returning-to-form-and-liking-it.552031/>.

⁷ Data analysis based on a total of 2395 message posts within a discussion thread entitled, “Australian Open 2016 Official Thread WTA”. To obtain material refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/australian-open-2016-official-thread-wta.552436/>.

⁸ Data analysis based on a total of 1,304 message posts within a discussion thread entitled “2016 Australian Open Womens Final - Serena Williams [1] vs Angelique Kerber [7]”. The material discussed refers to an MP3 radio coverage discussing the Australian Open 2016 women’s final. To obtain material from the discussion thread refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/2016-australian-open-womens-final-serena-williams-1-vs-angelique-kerber-7.553983/>. The MP3 audio is post #787 within this discussion board. To obtain this material refer to http://snip.ly/ibOV#https://s3.amazonaws.com/jeffaudios/21_why_serena-lost-to-kerber-aussie_open_2016_01-31-16.mp3.

⁹ Data analysis based on the discussion thread entitled, “I don't there has ever been a larger favorite to win a tournament than Djokovic this AO.” especially posts ranging between 86 and 191. To review materials refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/i-dont-there-has-ever-been-a-larger-favorite-to-win-a-tournament-than-djokovic-this-ao.553174/>.

¹⁰ Data analysis based on a total of 1484 message posts from discussion thread entitled, “2016 Australian Open 1R: [5] Rafael Nadal vs Fernando Verdasco”. To obtain material refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/2016-australian-open-1r-5-rafael-nadal-vs-fernando-verdasco.552832/>.

¹¹ Data analysis based on a total of 187 message posts within a discussion thread entitled, “Rafael Nadal - a man who we should look up to”. To review materials refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/rafael-nadal-a-man-who-we-should-look-up-to.553073/>.

¹² Data analysis based on a total of 92 message posts from discussion thread entitled, “TTW FAQ: READ BEFORE POSTING! (Sigs, Avatars, Pictures, etc!)”. This thread was created by the forum to provide its members with clarification on posting procedures. To review

materials refer to <https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/ttw-faq-read-before-posting-sigs-avatars-pictures-etc.319306/>.

¹³ Data analysis based on discussion thread entitled, “Got to feel for Murray.” especially posts ranging from 4 and 14. To obtain material refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/got-to-feel-for-murray.554334/>.

¹⁴ Data analysis based on discussion thread entitled, “Konta For Glory? Official 2016 Tour Follow Thread” especially posts ranging from 225 and 230. To obtain materials refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/konta-for-glory-official-2016-tour-follow-thread.553474/>.

¹⁵ Data analysis based on discussion thread entitled, “AUSTRALIAN OPEN 2016 PREDICTION LEAGUE (1st in Series, Season 8)” especially posts ranging from 1 and 10. To obtain material refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/australian-open-2016-prediction-league-1st-in-series-season-8.552790/>.

¹⁶ Data analysis based on a total of 128 message posts within discussion thread entitled, “What's your comments on Nadal's lost to Verdasco?” To review materials refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/whats-your-comments-on-nadals-lost-to-verdasco.553077/>.

¹⁷ Data analysis based on discussion thread entitled, “AO 2016 Draw is out” especially posts ranging between 3 and 7. To obtain material refer to <https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/ao-2016-draw-is-out.552732/#post-9938735>.

¹⁸ Data analysis based on a total of 326 message posts from discussion thread entitled, “2016 Australian Open Women's SF- [1] S. Williams v [4] A. Radwanska”. To review materials

refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/2016-australian-open-womens-sf-1-s-williams-v-4-a-radwanska.553880/>.

¹⁹ Data analysis based on a total of 110 message posts from discussion thread entitled, “As a Federer fan I have already accepted Djokovic will pass 17 and become GOAT”. To obtain material refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/as-a-federer-fan-i-have-already-accepted-djokovic-will-pass-17-and-become-goat.554388/>.

²⁰ Data analysis based on a total of 124 message posts within a discussion thread entitled, “Lol @ Kyrgios' outfit for AO 2016. Just lol”. To obtain material refer to <https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/lol-kyrgios-outfit-for-ao-2016-just-lol.551800/>.

²¹ Data analysis based on a total of 1,013 message posts within a discussion thread entitled, “Wilson releasing Pro Staff 97S for Dimitrov (specs. included)”. To review materials refer to <https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/wilson-releasing-pro-staff-97s-for-dimitrov-specs-included.533039/>.

²² Data analysis based on a discussion thread entitled, “Hey Fedal fans, can you pinpoint the moment when you realised your respective favourite was done?” especially message posts ranging from 1 and 33. To obtain material refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/hey-fedal-fans-can-you-pinpoint-the-moment-when-you-realised-your-respective-favourite-was-done.554421/>.

²³ Data analysis based on a total of 183 message posts within a discussion thread entitled, “Welcome to the new Message Board”. To review materials refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/welcome-to-the-new-message-board.536600/>.

²⁴ Information based on and obtained from a discussion thread entitled, “Suspect a double account? Report it.” This thread was developed by the forum to provide clarification to its

members on policies and procedures. To obtain material refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/suspect-a-double-account-report-it.496060/>.

²⁵ Data analysis based on a total of 140 message posts within a discussion thread entitled, “Be prepared Serena fans: Maria could beat Serena”. To review materials refer to <https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/be-prepared-serena-fans-maria-could-beat-serena.553579/>.

²⁶ Data analysis based on a total of 149 message posts within a discussion thread entitled, “Federer: I am here to drink the winning champagne”. To review materials refer to <https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/federer-i-am-here-to-drink-the-winning-champagne.552659/>.

²⁷ Data analysis based on a total of 108 message posts within a discussion thread entitled, “Stan Wawrinka to win Australian open?”. To obtain material refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/stan-wawrinka-to-win-australian-open.552658/>.

²⁸ Data analysis based on a total of 102 message posts within a discussion thread entitled, “Could this be the most boring AO of late?” To obtain material refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/could-this-be-the-most-boring-ao-of-late.553392/>.

²⁹ Data analysis based on a total of 141 message posts within a discussion thread entitled, “Nadal shell-shocked.” To obtain material refer to <https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/nadal-shell-shocked.552317/>.

³⁰ Data analysis based on a total of 151 message posts within a discussion thread entitled, “Federer apparently injured”. To obtain material refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/federer-apparently-injured.552018/>.

³¹ Data analysis based on a total of 132 message posts within a discussion thread entitled, “what is the correct "timing" to clamp the tensioned string on a (e)CP”. This discussion thread is within a sub-category, “Tennis Equipment”. The discussion within this particular thread deals with racquet stringing technique and types of strings used. To obtain material refer to <https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/what-is-the-correct-timing-to-clamp-the-tensioned-string-on-a-e-cp.552763/>.

³² Data analysis based on discussion thread entitled “2016 Australian Open R16 Stanislas Wawrinka vs. Milos Raonic” especially posts ranging between 216 and 273. To review materials refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/2016-australian-open-r16-stanislas-wawrinka-vs-milos-raonic.553458/>.

³³ Data analysis based on a discussion thread entitled, “Kyrgios tells umpire “you are terrible” (poll)” especially posts ranging between 2 and 11. This is a poll based thread inviting forum members to vote on player’s on-court demeanor. To review materials refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/kyrgios-tells-umpire-you-are-terrible-poll.553385/>.

³⁴ Data analysis based on a total of 59 message posts within a discussion thread entitled, “ATP ‘Next Generation’ 2016”. This thread deals with discussion of future of ATP and comparison of older generations with the younger up-and-comer generations on tour. To review materials refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/atp-next-generation-2016.557488/>.

³⁵ Post #51 within a discussion thread entitled, “WADA: Do we really need it?” This thread deals with discussions on doping, testing and overall regulations. To review materials refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/wada-do-we-really-need-it.557467/>.

³⁶ Data analysis based on a total of 126 message posts within a discussion thread entitled, “Nadal on his way to a Wooden Spoon (AO’16)”. To obtain material refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/nadal-on-his-way-to-a-wooden-spoon-ao-16.553503/>.

Wooden Spoon, the forum based consolation prize, tends to be discussed in several discussion threads, concerning major tournaments over time, such as a 15 year period. For more information on Wooden Spoon award discussions within Talk Tennis refer to <https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/wooden-spoons-anti-slams-for-the-big-four.532808/>.

³⁷ Data analysis based on a discussion thread entitled, “Getting Schooled by 4.5 Player Video”, especially message posts between 12 and 27. To obtain material refer to <https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/getting-schooled-by-4-5-player-video.553562/>.

³⁸ Data analysis based on a total of 104 message posts within a discussion thread entitled, “Racquet concerns for the 14 years old junior girl player”. To review materials refer to <https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/racquet-concerns-for-the-14-years-old-junior-girl-player.551769/>.

³⁹ Data analysis based on a discussion thread entitled, “Predict the exact results of Djokovic-Murray final :)”, especially message posts ranging from 1 and 15. To obtain material refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/predict-the-exact-result-of-djokovic-murray-final.554288/>.

⁴⁰ Data analysis based on a total of 105 message posts within a discussion thread entitled, “Fed doesn’t have the athlete’s brain like Novak and Rafa.” To obtain material refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/fed-doesnt-have-the-athletes-brain-like-novak-and-rafa.554062/>.

⁴¹ Data analysis based on a discussion thread entitled “2015 Australian Open Women’s QF-[1] S. Williams v [5] M. Sharapova”, especially posts ranging between 29 and 34. To review materials refer to <http://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/2015-australian-open-womens-qf-1-s-williams-v-5-m-sharapova.553568/>.

⁴² Tennis TV is an official ATP and WTA streaming site with annual, monthly and 24hr membership options. More information on Tennis TV can be obtained from <http://www.tennistv.com/>.

⁴³ Sling TV, available in the US only, is an online service that offers Live TV programming accessible through any device. For more information on Sling TV refer to <https://www.sling.com/>.

⁴⁴ Tennis Channel or Tennis Channel Plus is an online channel with streaming abilities, mostly available in the US and not in Canada. For more information refer to <http://tennischannel.com/>.

⁴⁵ Roku is a box that can be purchased from any major stores such as Best Buy to be used with computers, smartphones or tablets. It allows access to the internet based streaming channels like ESPN3, offering full match coverage at tennis events. For more information on Roku refer to <https://www.roku.com/en-ca/how-it-works>.

⁴⁶ Data analysis based on discussion thread entitled, “POLY vs KEVLAR in Spin Effect rackets”, especially message posts ranging between 22 and 79. To review materials refer to <https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/poly-vs-kevlar-in-spin-effect-rackets.551812/>.

⁴⁷ Data analysis based on discussion thread entitled, “A Couple of Forehands in Slow Motion”, especially posts ranging between 1 and 14. To obtain material refer to <https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/a-couple-of-forehands-in-slow-motion.551810/>.


⁴⁸ Tennisplayer.net is an online tennis magazine that requires member subscription. For more information refer to <https://www.tennisplayer.net/>.

⁴⁹ The discussion refers to the publicly available article from Tennisplayer.net, entitled, “Your Strokes: TLM’s Forehand”. The article was created by an expert called John Yandell, a professional tennis video analyst working for the magazine, to help a fellow poster with their strokes. As background, John Yandell is a videographer of modern professional tennis who has done video analyses for pro players including former top WTA player, Justine Henin and former top ATP player, John McEnroe. The article is a comparison of member’s strokes with that of a pro player, Rafael Nadal. The article outlines some of the faults and recommendations for improvement. More specifically, the article outlines solutions, such as adjustments in “key positions” for the poster to help them produce “a significantly faster and heavier ball”, for example. It goes into great detail commenting on the specifics such as “coil, checkpoints, opposite arm, timing, process, finishes, extension checkpoints, and boiled down” concluding that how “the turn” and “the extensions” can be mastered physically and mentally. To obtain full article refer to https://www.tennisplayer.net/public/your_strokes/tlm_forehand/.

⁵⁰ BT sport – BT sport is short for BT Sport: The Heart of Sport. It is a collection of sports television channels provided by a company called BT Consumer (<http://sport.bt.com/>). This is an online TV service that provides access to streaming sites of sports including tennis.

⁵¹ Dragon Ball Z is a collection of video games based on TV series and comic books that some Talk Tennis posters play and relate players to its characters such as Ultron in their thread discussions. For more information refer to <http://www.dbzgames.org/>.

APPENDIX A: A Profile Messaging Feature in Talk Tennis



LeeD

Bionic Poster, Male, from East side of San Francisco Bay

There's hardly a greater hell than growing old, going blind, losing reactions and explosion. Jul 26, 2015

LeeD was last seen: Yesterday at 8:33 PM

Last Activity:
Yesterday at 8:33 PM


Joined: Dec 28, 2008

Messages: 42,242

Likes Received: 1,113


Trophy Points: 113

Profile Posts
Recent Activity
Postings
Information



muddlehead LeeD hope you get this. 60 yr old 4.5 male Dave from Santa Rosa. Wife and I babysitting grandson in San Anselmo Mondays noon slot roughly. I noticed on a post of yours a while back you mentioned the 2 courts behind the Ross Valley/ Fairfax Fire Station. Any c


Apr 9, 2016



LeeD Albert Park is mostly 4.0 weekday after 4 PM, so Rafael Racket Club can work, if you go in with "guest" status looking for a match with a 4.5 level player.

College Of Marin is 4 miles away turn right at the Hub, to CorteMadera, and late afternoon can have some 4-5.0 level player's, but most have partners.

Jun 22, 2016



muddlehead Thanks for the info. Joined Canyon Club in Fairfax. Not too expensive. And on the days and times when we babysit, senior doubles players are playing.


Jul 1, 2016


Followers 24

?

?

?





?


Show All


Gender: Male


Location: East side of San Francisco Bay

Occupation: barely working, barely retired

Share This Page


 Tweet

 Recommend 0




Say Chi Sin Lo Hey, I hit all over san francisco. But mostly at ggp.

Mar 29, 2016



MarTennis You should hit with my kid sometime. We live in Richmond.

Dec 10, 2015




LeeD There's hardly a greater hell than growing old, going blind, losing reactions and explosion.

Jul 26, 2015

President likes this.

[View previous comments...](#)



Sentinel What about growing old and obese ?

You are active and slim, better than most people your age :)

Jul 27, 2015

APPENDIX B: Poster Status

Table 2.

Poster Status per Number of Posts


Status	No. of Posts
New User	0-99
Rookie	100-399
Semi-Pro	400-799
Professional	800-1,499
Hall of Fame	1,500-4,999
Legend	5,000-9,999
G.O.A.T.	10,000-19,999
Talk Tennis Guru	20,000-29,999
Bionic Poster	30,000+

Note. Source: TTW FAQ: READ BEFORE POSTING! (Sigs, Avatars, Pictures, etc!)¹², <https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php?threads/ttw-faq-read-before-posting-sigs-avatars-pictures-etc.319306/>


APPENDIX C: A Sample of Avatars Used by Posters

 <p>California Rookie</p> <p>Joined: Nov 19, 2004 Messages: 152 Location: SF Bay Area</p>	 <p>Sisyphus Legend</p> <p>Joined: Jun 24, 2014 Messages: 8,527 Location: Grigolo's harem</p>	 <p>DreddyTennis45 Semi-Pro</p> <p>Joined: Jun 22, 2016 Messages: 606 Location: England</p>	 <p>ruerooo Legend</p> <p>Joined: Jul 15, 2008 Messages: 7,779 Location: Right behind you</p>	 <p>Fed for Pope Rookie</p> <p>Joined: Oct 19, 2013 Messages: 251</p>	 <p>HipRotation Hall of Fame</p> <p>Joined: Jun 30, 2014 Messages: 1,843</p>	 <p>Roddick85 Hall of Fame</p> <p>Joined: Jun 16, 2011 Messages: 1,928 Location: Montreal</p>
 <p>bjsnider Hall of Fame</p> <p>Joined: Feb 5, 2012 Messages: 1,890</p>	 <p>Poisoned Slice Legend</p> <p>Joined: Jun 4, 2014 Messages: 8,869 Location: EB Northern Ireland</p>	 <p>cc0509 G.O.A.T.</p> <p>Joined: Sep 16, 2010 Messages: 18,314</p>	 <p>newpball Legend</p> <p>Joined: May 28, 2013 Messages: 7,056 Location: Northern California, USA</p>	 <p>vive le beau jeu ! G.O.A.T.</p> <p>Joined: Mar 4, 2006 Messages: 13,326 Location: Ometepe, Pink Granite, Queyras, Kerguelen (...)</p>	 <p>robbo1970 Hall of Fame</p> <p>Joined: Aug 12, 2010 Messages: 2,911 Location: UK</p>	 <p>Booger Professional</p> <p>Joined: Sep 4, 2008 Messages: 1,246</p>
 <p>Flash O'Groove Hall of Fame</p> <p>Joined: May 28, 2012 Messages: 2,780</p>	 <p>TupeloDanger Professional</p> <p>Joined: May 31, 2016 Messages: 1,197</p>	 <p>Levi_Ackerman Legend</p> <p>Joined: Mar 20, 2015 Messages: 8,202 Location: London, United Kingdom</p>	 <p>NatF Talk Tennis Guru</p> <p>Joined: May 10, 2012 Messages: 22,189 Location: Cretaceous</p>	 <p>iceman_d16 Semi-Pro</p> <p>Joined: Oct 21, 2009 Messages: 447</p>	 <p>Max G. Hall of Fame</p> <p>Joined: Feb 18, 2004 Messages: 4,644</p>	 <p>Ignatz Tushwop New User</p> <p>Joined: Saturday Messages: 1</p>


APPENDIX D: A Sample Member Profile Card



Zebrev
New User
Male, 21
[Profile Page](#)
Member Since: **Saturday** Messages: **24** Likes Received: **3** Trophy Points: **3**
Zebrev was last seen: **Viewing thread Now will you believe me when I say Jack Sock is a future world #1?, A moment ago**




Krish872007
Legend
from **London, United Kingdom**
Amongst all the successes in Rio last night, let's not forget Wayde van Niekerk! Remember the name.
[Profile Page](#)
Member Since: **Aug 29, 2014** Messages: **7,604** Likes Received: **6,109** Trophy Points: **113**
Krish872007 was last seen: **Today at 3:48 AM**




























mike danny
Legend
Male
[Profile Page](#)
Member Since: **Feb 26, 2013** Messages: **7,296** Likes Received: **1,442** Trophy Points: **113**
mike danny was last seen: **Viewing forum General Pro Player Discussion, 14 minutes ago**

APPENDIX E: Online Status Indication

 <p>THUNDERVOLLEY Y G.O.A.T.</p> <p>Joined: Feb 1, 2007 Messages: 11,202</p>	 <p>marc45 Legend</p> <p>Joined: May 29, 2008 Messages: 6,252 Location: Ohio</p>	 <p>beltsman Hall of Fame</p> <p>Joined: Feb 25, 2013 Messages: 2,060 Location: Strong era</p>	 <p>im1980 Legend</p> <p>Joined: Jun 30, 2011 Messages: 8,403</p>	 <p>stringertom Talk Tennis Guru</p> <p>Joined: Sep 10, 2010 Messages: 20,606 Location: In a sureshsian vortex</p>
 <p>Goosehead Hall of Fame</p> <p>Joined: Nov 2, 2012 Messages: 3,750 Location: A bloke in Brighton, England.</p>	 <p>mattosgrant Hall of Fame</p> <p>Joined: Jun 29, 2015 Messages: 4,130 Location: New York City, New York</p>	 <p>Nostradamus G.O.A.T.</p> <p>Joined: Nov 30, 2011 Messages: 15,458 Location: In the future</p>	 <p>Attila_the_gorilla Hall of Fame</p> <p>Joined: Jun 3, 2013 Messages: 1,906 Location: Melbourne, Australia</p>	 <p>Man of steel Professional</p> <p>Joined: Aug 21, 2014 Messages: 1,344</p>
 <p>Cenarius Professional</p> <p>Joined: May 23, 2015 Messages: 833 Location: Ashenvale</p>	 <p>vandre Hall of Fame</p> <p>Joined: Aug 27, 2007 Messages: 1,826 Location: no man's land</p>	 <p>Jovana New User</p> <p>Joined: Feb 21, 2016 Messages: 29 Location: Belgrade, Serbia</p>	 <p>TheNatural Legend</p> <p>Joined: Jan 27, 2005 Messages: 8,134</p>	 <p>PHS_10 Rookie</p> <p>Joined: Jan 24, 2016 Messages: 298</p>

APPENDIX F: Kinds of Responses Posters use to express Emotion through Video, Memes, Images, GIFs, and Emojis

<p>Video</p> 		<p>Memes</p> 											
<p>Images, GIF, and Memes</p>													
<p>Anticipation</p> 	<p>Frustration</p> 	<p>Happy/Mocking Opposition</p>  	<p>Nervous</p> 										
<p>Amused/Laughing</p> 	<p>Power (concur)</p> 	<p>Surprised</p> 	<p>Happy/Excited</p> 										
<p>Emoticon (emojis)</p>													
													
Happy	Angry	Confused	Wink	Wink	Cool	Grin/ Laugh	Sad	Shy	Tongue	In shock	Eye roll	Devilish	