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Pramukh Nanjundaswamy Vasist

Indian Institute of Management Kozhikode, pramukhn02phdpt@iimk.ac.in

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Brand Engagement in Virtual Communities – A Netnographic Study

Short Paper

Pramukh Nanjundaswamy Vasist

Indian Institute of Management

Kozhikode India

pramukhno2phdpt@iimk.ac.in

Abstract

Social media groups help foster discussions, but it can be challenging for brands to maintain user engagement and collaborate in value co-creation. Despite a pressing need to comprehend the dynamics of virtual communities, there is a lack of a concerted view of how users engage with brands in virtual communities. To explore this, we use a sport-based virtual community as context since fan engagement levels are substantially higher in sports communities than in other virtual communities. Leveraging the sense of community theory and netnography as a method, we study community formation in a Facebook group comprising fans of a European football club. Preliminary findings reveal a strong presence of membership, influence, and shared emotional connection, while integration and fulfillment of needs are relatively less dominant. As next steps, we plan to examine how a sense of community evolves in virtual communities through a longitudinal approach. Potential implications are discussed.

Keywords: Social media, sense of community, virtual community, netnography

Introduction

Virtual Communities (VCs) refer to online social networks of individuals with shared interests or objectives who may or may not meet in person but engage in social interactions, exchanging posts, messages, and ideas via computer-mediated communication (Chiu et al., 2006; Rheingold, 1993). VCs have grown in prominence and are now a key front for companies to enhance brand engagement and engage in social discussions with consumers (Zheng et al., 2022). Recent research on brand VCs reveals that four out of five consumers view a community as essential to brand engagement, with eighty-four percent agreeing that the community surrounding a brand influences how they feel about it (Ben, 2023).

Despite the rising popularity of VCs, research in this area remains constrained, and conceptual gaps persist (Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2018; Lizzo & Liechty, 2020). Firstly, there is a lack of systematic understanding of the psychological mechanisms behind the users' affinity toward VCs (Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2018). Secondly, user participation remains a key challenge for VCs, with the lack of perspectives on enhancing participation and increasing brand engagement being a persistent concern (Kamboj & Rahman, 2017). In an increasingly competitive market landscape characterized by the growing significance and complexity of brand building, the success of VCs hinges on the level of engagement that they are able to generate (Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2018; Gómez et al., 2019).

The comprehension of factors and the processes by which a sense of community is established among the users that brands interact with is crucial for developing the brand's social media presence. Without this insight, brands could face challenges in enhancing their popularity on social media platforms, and brand managers may find themselves without adequate guidance to manage their brand's online presence. Comprehending the intricacies of user participation in VCs and the formation of a collective identity can be pivotal in enhancing brand involvement and the efficacy of community branding strategies. In line with this intent, we formally propose the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: How does a sense of community form and evolve in brand VCs?

RQ2: What are the critical factors that contribute to developing a sense of community among individuals in brand VCs?

To address these research questions, we employ the theoretical lens of sense of community theory (SoC) and netnography as a method since it is deemed more appropriate for an exploratory context aimed at comprehending group interactions in an online milieu and elucidating a complex phenomenon, such as the development of SoC among the user base of a VC.

We leverage a sport-based VC as the research setting to examine the development and progression of community dynamics within social networks. Sport-based VCs offer the ideal context for the current study for two reasons. Firstly, sports generate substantial interest in fostering cohesiveness among groups online (Stavros et al., 2014). Several companies operate successful sport-based brand communities, demonstrating their belief in the power of sport-related VCs to establish and sustain long-term relationships with consumers (Popp & Woratschek, 2016). Secondly, individuals participating in sport-based VCs demonstrate a stronger psychological connection to their community than those participating in other VCs. Consequently, research emphasizes the significance of companies acknowledging sport-based VCs as a novel avenue for securing sponsorships and extracting value from social media interactions focused on sports or sports teams (Popp & Woratschek, 2016). Among sport VCs, football has garnered exceptional online engagement, particularly on Facebook, where the top three communities are associated with European football clubs (Socialbakers, 2021). Hence, we conduct an in-depth netnographic study to examine SoC among members of Real Madrid Fans (RMF), an unofficial but highly popular Facebook group associated with a professional football club in Europe, where football enjoys significant popularity as a sport.

By examining the development and progression of community dynamics within VCs on social networks, our study seeks to address the aforementioned gaps and uncover the theoretical linkages between the dimensions of SoC and their relative prominence in contributing to community formation in VCs. This is especially crucial from a theoretical standpoint, considering that dimensions of SoC have been extensively critiqued with modifications attempted in past literature (e.g., Proescholdbell et al., 2006; Tartaglia, 2006), while the applicability of SoC in the online realm has also been challenged (Abfalter et al., 2012). Acknowledging this, the study aims to advance our theoretical understanding of SoC formation in the online space by exploring the study setting and participants' experiences in brand VCs and the meanings they attribute to them. Consequently, we extend recent information systems (IS) literature which seeks to empirically discern the critical success factors that contribute to enhancing community participation in VCs (Kim et al., 2023).

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In the next section, we delve into literature on brand engagement in VCs and the theory of SoC. Subsequently, we elaborate on the research method and the data collection process. We then discuss the envisaged plan for data analysis and highlight findings from preliminary data analysis. We then outline potential implications before concluding in the last section.

Literature review

Brand Engagement in Virtual Communities

Social media-based brand communities are extensively leveraged by firms to engage consumers and forge stronger consumer-brand relationships (Lee & Hsieh, 2022). A substantial volume of scholarly research has been conducted on the optimal strategies for brands to effectively utilize VCs on social networks to engage and communicate with their fan base (Meng et al., 2015; Williams & Chinn, 2010). In this regard, recent studies have looked at how VCs impact brand sponsorship (Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2018; Pradhan et al., 2020) and brand loyalty (Yoshida et al., 2015).

However, brand VCs differ from traditional communities in two ways. Firstly, VCs on social media encompass the functionalities of both social networks and brand communities. These communities lack a clear means of distinguishing their members and have the potential to amass a substantial number of followers, evolving into massive brand communities (Habibi et al., 2014). In contrast, other communities cannot be compared to this scale (Habibi et al., 2014). Secondly, these VCs provide several avenues for

brand enthusiasts to express emotive support and empathy towards other fans. The existence of multiple formal and unofficial VCs for a particular brand enables followers to partake in numerous memberships and interactions across these platforms (Habibi et al., 2016).

In this regard, our understanding of what drives community engagement and how individuals' love for a brand can be facilitated through VCs remains limited (Lee & Hsieh, 2022). There is a dearth of research studies on the motives that drive fans to engage through social networks, and the extant literature presents diverse perspectives on this topic (Filo et al., 2015). Nevertheless, it is imperative for brands to enhance their comprehension of users' involvement in VCs to successfully manage their online presence and establish stronger connections with fans. This will eventually result in an expansion of the fan base and a heightened level of fandom and engagement on brand VCs.

Social media studies focusing on advertising and marketing communications have predominantly lacked a solid theoretical foundation, with those incorporating one primarily relying on social identity and social influence theories (Knoll, 2016). The communicative constitution of organization is another theoretical perspective that emphasizes the role of communication in creating, generating, and sustaining organizing practices (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015; Schoeneborn et al., 2019). This perspective has been applied to studies on social networks and VCs (e.g., Eddington, 2018; Smith, 2023). However, transitioning from mere communication to active involvement and engagement can be a formidable challenge in online interactions (Major, 2022). In this regard, the theory of SoC by McMillan and Chavis (1986) is widely regarded as influential in marketing literature (Rosenbaum et al., 2005). Hence, we anchor our study on the theory of SoC to discern brand engagement in VCs.

Sense of Community Theory

The theory of SoC was developed to gain a deeper understanding of group cohesiveness and to explore the process by which a sense of community emerges through the interaction of multiple elements (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Initially developed to comprehend the dynamics of traditional face-to-face communities, SoC encompasses four interdependent components: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). *Membership* refers to the level of cohesion in a group. Prior research demonstrates that groups experience a heightened sense of collective identity due to connections and membership-based status (Forenza & Tredinnick, 2020). *Influence* is a perception held by members of a brand's community on the impact they have on the community and determines whether they hold on to their membership (Royal & Rossi, 1996). *Integration and fulfillment of needs* refer to the group's and the group members' ability to meet each other's needs while maintaining a positive sense of togetherness in the brand's VC (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). A *shared emotional connection* emerges from continued interaction among members over a long period, which starts as a social attraction between members, leading to member attraction towards the group. The greater the interactions, the stronger the bonding within the group.

In recent years, the pervasiveness of computer-mediated communication has offered numerous avenues for individuals to establish and sustain social connections in their quest for a sense of belonging. In this regard, the concept of SoC has been expanded to include VCs and applied to several studies concerning them (e.g., Blanchard, 2008; Welbourne et al., 2009). However, there are notable distinctions between VCs and their offline counterparts, prompting inquiries into the applicability of the conventional concept of SoC in the online realm (Abfalter et al., 2012). Online interactions differ from offline interactions due to the absence of social cues and increased anonymity in online settings (Li & Chen, 2022). As a result, online social interactions are often transient, leading individuals to have heightened concerns regarding the authenticity of others' identities (Gibbs et al., 2019; Joinson & Dietz-Uhler, 2002). Hence, it is crucial to evaluate whether social interactions observed offline also hold true in VCs (Li & Chen, 2022).

In addition, the four factors of SoC have been critiqued, and modifications have been proposed in the literature. Some have suggested a three-factor model (e.g., Proescholdbell et al., 2006; Tartaglia, 2006). However, others have asserted confidence in the original four-factor model, attributing problems in reduced models to measurement limitations rather than flaws in the underlying theory (Peterson et al., 2008). Growing recognition of measurement issues in the scales used to measure SoC (Lorion & Newbrough, 1996; Peterson et al., 2008) has prompted scholarly investigations into the theoretical underpinnings of the dimensions constituting SoC. Several researchers have endeavored to explore alternate perspectives on the notion of community as experienced by individuals, while also acknowledging

the overarching boundaries established by prior empirical research, which has predominantly relied on quantitative methods. Simultaneously, there is a contention that employing a qualitative methodology is more likely to facilitate the exploration of the subjective interpretations individuals attribute to their experiences and perceptions of community (Dionigi & Lyons, 2010; Lorion & Newbrough, 1996).

In summary, existing scholarly literature acknowledges that brand VCs differ from traditional communities, and our understanding of drivers behind community engagement and how individuals' love for a brand can be facilitated through VCs remains limited. In addition, the factors contributing to SoC have been critiqued, prompting research to focus on the theoretical foundations of the dimensions constituting SoC. Considering the noticeable absence of a unified perspective regarding user engagement on VCs, and the potential likelihood of a qualitative approach providing access to the meanings individuals assign to their experiences and understandings of community, we examine the various dimensions of SoC that are exhibited by users in VCs using netnography as a method.

Methodology

To investigate the phenomenon of SOC formation within brand VCs, we adopt netnography as a qualitative research approach. Netnography is a distinct form of ethnography that capitalizes on the online communication platforms provided by the contemporary digital landscape (Kozinets, 2010). The method has been widely employed in the research of VCs (e.g., Fenton et al., 2023; Ivan, 2019). The method is particularly appropriate for this study for three reasons. Firstly, compared to other qualitative research techniques, netnography is especially adept at capturing and comprehending complex social phenomena and helps the researchers to build out themes from the viewpoint of the users (Kozinets, 2002). Secondly, this method is less obtrusive, more naturalistic, and more objective than interviews and focus groups (Wu & Pearce, 2014), and faster and less expensive than traditional ethnographic methods (Kozinets, 2002). Thirdly, netnography as a qualitative research methodology is particularly well suited and appropriate to understand group interactions in an online setting.

Netnography constitutes a stepwise process comprised of planning and entrée, data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Kozinets, 2010, 2015). *Planning and entrée* is when the research questions are formulated, and the most appropriate VC is chosen for the netnographic study. *Data collection* involves a direct copy of online communications with which members of the community are engaged. *Analysis and interpretation* involves classifying posts, coding, and contextualizing the communications in the group.

Entrée: Selecting the Most Appropriate Virtual Community for the Study

Kozinets (2002) advises that selecting the most informative and appropriate online forum is crucial for the study. Considering the research questions we had posed at the outset and the significance that community members ascribe to their experiences in VCs, the following factors were used to select the most appropriate community. These included (1) identification of a focused segment that is relevant to the research question; (2) A group with 'high' traffic in terms of postings; (3) Availability of rich descriptive data; and (4) Evidence of significant between-member interactions.

In accordance, our data was derived from Facebook brand pages concerning sport-related VCs. Facebook brand pages exemplify computer-mediated communication, offering diverse possibilities for users to forge and sustain social connections (Wiese & Akareem, 2019). These sites demonstrate all key attributes commonly associated with brand communities (Zaglia, 2013). Firstly, they embody a form of consciousness, suggesting a sense of affiliation. Consequently, members often experience a feeling of association and collective identity via their participation in the brand community (Algesheimer et al., 2005). Secondly, these pages can foster a sense of moral responsibility and ultimately establish a common thread that unifies community members (Wiese & Akareem, 2019).

In addition, sports VCs warrant greater consideration as VC users associated with sporting events demonstrate a deeper psychological connection with the community vis-à-vis other VCs (Popp & Woratschek, 2016). Sports fans are deeply engaged; for many, it is a vital part of their daily lives (Sutton et al., 1997). Various studies on fan behavior suggest that supporters' attitudes towards sports clubs may very well exhibit genuine characteristics (Farrelly & Quester, 2003; Redden & Steiner, 2000), making it a perfect

setting for our study. Furthermore, prior research acknowledges that fans and their engagement in brand VCs play a pivotal role in shaping the identity of sports teams (Yoshida et al., 2015).

Football has garnered exceptional online engagement among sports VCs, especially on Facebook, where the top communities are associated with European football clubs (Socialbakers, 2021). Hence, we chose a Facebook community for *Real Madrid* fans formed in December 2019 with a current member base of over five hundred thousand members (Facebook, 2023). We obtained membership in the VC by formally requesting permission to join the community as a researcher, with the commitment to uphold the principles of anonymity of community members. To familiarize ourselves with this community, we read over two hundred posts on various Real Madrid-related issues. This is particularly significant from a netnographic research perspective (Kozinets, 2010).

Data Collection

Facebook fan groups are relatively active during match days, and this determined our choice of timeframe. Moreover, the COVID-19 outbreak resulted in heightened participation in Facebook communities (Hutchinson, 2020), prompting us to select a period during the pandemic to gather richer insights. Prior studies on the development of SoC online recommend collecting all posts during a particular period and all posts during or immediately after a specific event (Wu & Pearce, 2014), which are match days in the current context. This approach enables a holistic view of community discussions and is considered the most appropriate (Lizzo & Liechty, 2020). Additionally, data collection on match days spanned an entire 24-hour period to ensure the inclusion of discussions from international community members in the study.

We chose a period when the group witnessed high traffic due to four league matches played by Real Madrid between the 3rd and the 15th of April in La Liga and the UEFA Champions League. We non-obtrusively observed the interactions in this community, and the sample was collected from the 1st to the 17th of April 2021. The author carefully studied the posts, and data was collected manually through a direct copy of online communications on the group. Posts that were reshared from another group or website were only examined but considered for the study if found substantial in terms of comments and likes they generated. The primary data comprised textual posts and comments with occasional images and links if they added significant insights to the text. We also focused on announcements from admins that were intended to draw the group members' attention, leading to greater interaction. As a result, a total of 355 posts and comments were collected over the 17-day period. In addition, we continued data collection till data saturation was reached and no new information could be elicited from the data (Creswell, 2009).

Envisaged Plan for Data Analysis and Next Steps

Initial Findings

Preliminary analysis revealed evidence of posts linked to each dimension of SoC. Firstly, in the context of membership, the members of the RMF group demonstrated a strong sense of belonging through their discussions. In response to a member's inquiry regarding Real Madrid's entry to the semi-finals, the responses from other members clearly indicated a strong sense of collective identity. This was evident through their use of 'we' instead of referring to Real Madrid as a separate entity. For instance, some posted comments read: "*We are in Semi-final*"; "*We're champions*."

Secondly, in the context of *influence*, McMillan and Chavis (1986) note that members are likely to continue their membership and participation in a community if they feel that their voice is heard, and they are influential in community decisions. This was apparent in the posts that received significant participation from the group members. In one such instance, a post on 13th April with a call to action mentioning "*Voting Vote, Three beautiful assists*" (wherein assist refers to a contribution by a player that helps in scoring a goal) received over 3300 likes and 552 comments in just five days since the time it was posted.

Thirdly, in the context of *integration and fulfillment of needs*, it was observed that the group effectively fulfilled the needs of its members, resulting in a noticeable sense of satisfaction. In response to a member's post requesting others to say something, notable instances of need fulfillment were observed in the form of comments expressing happiness, such as "*I don't have something to say because I'm so happy*." Also, there were indications of a strong community feeling, as evidenced by comments affirming loyalty to the group, such as "*We are always real*." These can be construed as traits of need gratification.

Lastly, in the context of *shared emotional connection* as a factor, a prevailing sentiment of connectedness was evident in the comments. For instance, whenever someone expressed support for an opposing team's victory over Real Madrid, the fans exhibited strong backing for Real Madrid, as evidenced by the comments. In response to a member's request for score predictions regarding the Barcelona versus Real Madrid match, another member expressed an opinion that Barcelona would emerge victorious with a score of 5-0. This comment received significant criticism from other members, who expressed their disagreement with statements such as "you didn't say anything real leads 2 goals."

Preliminary Data Analysis through Open Coding

As a next step, we extensively examined the compiled material to gain familiarity with its content. Later, the collected posts, comments, emoticons used, and likes received for the posts were first open coded to generate a total of 45 codes. To ensure that no codes were overlooked throughout the process, the author double-checked the data for any new codes that may need to be included. As we progressed with the coding process, notes were maintained with the author's thoughts against the codes. In line with Kozinets' (2010, 2015) recommendations, the codes generated and supported by the notes were evaluated and compared with known frameworks and theoretical approaches to check if they could be leveraged to explain the dataset. The qualitative software QDA Miner Lite v2.0.8 was used for this study to store the data, codes, and sort the coded data. The 45 codes generated were compared with the theoretical framework of SoC to check for fitment with the four dimensions of the theory. In all, we were able to map a total of 43 out of 45 codes to the dimensions of SoC. The codes and their mapping to the dimensions of SoC are displayed below in Figure 1.

Themes	Codes									
Membership	Family	Belongingness		Personal relatedness		Self-investment		Right to belong		Boundary specifications
	Emotional safety	Feeling of acceptance		Common symbols		Group identity		Willingness to sacrifice		
Influence	Voice matters	Difference through individuals		Conformity	Say of members in Group activities		Consensual validation	Closeness	Group influence on individuals	
	Need satisfaction	Reinforcement		Member rewards	Membership status		Group success	Person-Environment fit		Group & Individual competence
Needs: Integration & fulfillment	Receipt of help	Shared values		Seek help	Willingness to help					
	Share a history	Common places		Shared events	Time together		Spiritual bonds	Shared importance of events		Inter-member bonding
	Emotional risk	Rewards	Humiliation	Completion of tasks	Honors	Time investment				
Shared emotional connection										

Figure 1. Thematic Mapping of Codes

A bar chart was generated to analyze the percentage of words that were mapped to the codes used in the data analysis phase (see Figure 2). Preliminary findings reveal a strong presence of *membership*, *influence*, and *shared emotional connection* among members, with nearly 26.5%, 32.5%, and 28.7% of the codes aligning with these factors. In contrast, *integration and fulfillment of needs* appears relatively less dominant as compared to the other three dimensions of SoC, with close to 12.3% of the codes aligning with it as a factor. Overall, the preliminary analysis of data from the RMF community revealed that SoC was indeed present and had a central role in the research setting, although each dimension of SoC exhibited varying levels of influence.

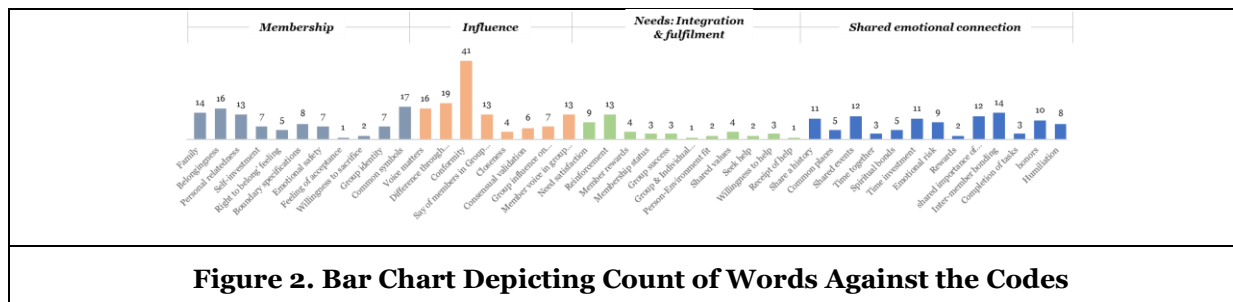


Figure 2. Bar Chart Depicting Count of Words Against the Codes

Next Steps

Netnographic studies recommend analyzing data from the first day of the creation of the VC (Seoudi, 2019), while such an approach also helps capture the factors that contribute to the emergence of SoC. The group was created on the 26th of December 2019, with over 100 new posts daily on average based on statistics at

the time of our study. Considering over 450 days between the group's creation and the target period of 1st to 17th April 2021, we intend to compile an average of 10 posts per day from 26th December 2019 to 1st April 2021, totaling over 4,500 posts. This facilitates the longitudinal analysis of codes corresponding to each theme and their variations over time since the group's formation. As next steps, we also plan to extend the preliminary findings by corroborating evidence for interlinkages among the four dimensions of SoC and examining how the sense of community grows and evolves in a brand's VC.

Potential Implications of the Study

The findings from this study have several implications for theory and practice. Firstly, the study seeks to explore the theoretical links between the dimensions of SoC and their varying significance in contributing to community formation in VCs. In doing so, the study advances our theoretical understanding of SoC dimensions, which have been extensively critiqued and modified in past literature (e.g., Proescholdbell et al., 2006; Tartaglia, 2006). Furthermore, the study extends recent IS literature which seeks to empirically discern the critical success factors that enhance community participation in VCs (Kim et al., 2023). Secondly, through a longitudinal approach to SoC and a novel and emergent research methodology in netnography, the study adds a unique perspective to the literature on VCs by examining how SoC forms and evolves in VCs over a period of time. Thirdly, the study extends the applicability of all four dimensions of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) SOC theory by demonstrating that these traits also manifest in a VC. By doing so, our study alleviates previously expressed concerns over the applicability of traditional SoC in virtual settings (Abfalter et al., 2012). Lastly, the study aims to offer essential cues for social media practitioners to foster greater levels of engagement on their brands' VCs and empower individuals towards co-creating value for brands.

Conclusion

Sense of community is an important concept in studying offline communities and has been extensively used to demonstrate how a feeling of belongingness develops and drives participation in communities. However, there is a lack of a systematic comprehension of the mechanisms underlying users' affinity for VCs, and user participation remains a critical challenge. At the same time, the applicability of the conventional concept of SoC in the online realm continues to be challenged. Our study seeks to address these gaps using netnography as a novel methodological approach and a sport-based VC as the research setting. In doing so, we seek to investigate and theoretically elucidate the formation and evolution of engagement in VCs and contribute to the expanding corpus of research on brand engagement in VCs.

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