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On leaders' presence: interactions and influences within online communities

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Abstract

By conceptualising presence as a behavioural construct, this study explores how online leaders' presence exerts an influence on online communities and their members. Drawing on qualitative research where five online communities were examined, the findings show that online leaders' presence is identified in different forms which ultimately may have different impacts on the community and its members. Articulations of leaders' presence online included interactive, instructive, stimulating and silent and for each the leader was found to exert a different influence on online community members. The theoretical and practical implications of the study are discussed and areas for further research are identified.

Keywords: online communities, presence, leaders, interaction, influence, silence

Introduction

Online communities as spaces for interaction and collaboration have attracted much attention in the recent years (e.g. Faraj and Johnson, 2011; Wasko and Faraj, 2005; Zhao et al, 2013). Within these communities, leaders have been found to effectively contribute to the establishment of community norms and explicit policies (Butler et al., 2008; Burke and Kraut, 2008, Preece and Shneiderman, 2009) and enable coordination among members' interaction (O'Mahony and Ferraro, 2007). Building on this understanding on the importance of leaders online, in this paper we seek to examine leaders' influencing behaviours within online communities. The study takes a particular focus on presence as a behavioural construct and aims to explore the different articulations of leaders' presence in relation to online community members. No research has so far explored how much presence is required for a leader to exercise an influence within online communities. What if a leader who is initially present becomes absent from community interactions? And what if a community has a silent leader? What impact will these situations have on the continuity and sustainability of the online community? This study addresses the above questions and thus provides an insight into leaders' behaviours and interactions within emergent forms of online organizing.

Drawing on the literature, the paper begins by reviewing existing studies on online presence and identifies the key role that leaders play in online communities. Qualitative methods are used to explore this type of behaviour online. Five cases of online communities are studied for this purpose and data are analysed using the grounded theory approach. Finally, there is

discussion on how the empirical findings contribute to theory development by improving understanding of the way in which leaders can influence online communities through different forms of presence.

Presence, Leaders and Online Communities

Traditionally, presence has been described as ‘the sense of being there’ and as such it has been related to physicality, synchronous availability and face-to-face communication (Lombard and Ditton, 1997). Such articulations, however, that link presence to physicality cannot be applied to the context of the online space (Panteli, 2004) where communication and interactions take place in a dispersed and technology-mediated environment. Within the online environment therefore particular emphasis has been given to social instead of physical presence. In the theory of social presence (Short, Williams and Cristie, 1976), presence has been conceptualised as the degree of interpersonal contact that the medium allows and is encapsulated in terms of intimacy and immediacy (Rogers and Lea, 2005). Thus, some communication media such as video-conferencing systems may be perceived to be more sociable, warm and intimate with higher social presence than other media such as email. That is, the latter is considered to have low social presence due to its asynchronous and text-based features (Karahanna and Limayem, 2000). In contrast, drawing upon the SIDE model and emphasising the importance of building shared identity and a sense of belongingness, Rogers and Lea (2005) posit that social presence can be a result of low-cue communication media. Nevertheless, a similarity among both bodies of literature is that presence is conceptualised as an experience and therefore the outcome of technology-mediated interactions rather than an action that derives from the active agency of the individuals involved.

In this study, presence is conceptualised as a behavioural construct which signals the active agency of individuals, leaders in particular, who themselves with the appropriate use of the online space can reveal, minimise or hide social cues in a mediated environment. Panteli and Fineman (2005) posited that individuals through their silence, which is itself an articulation of presence, can exert an influence on online interactions. The aim of this paper is twofold: first to extend understanding of presence as a behavioural construct by examining the different articulations of leaders' presence in relation to the members of the online community, and second, to examine the impact of this presence in terms of interactions among leaders and members as well as among members themselves.

Presence as an issue linked to management and leadership behaviour was first discussed in the literature as far back as 45 years ago (Fries, 1967). When leaders are present, they are said to become influential as they are approachable and visible within the everyday practices of their organization (Fries, 1967). Thus, the leadership literature has attributed a certain amount of presence to great leaders to explain their charismatic influence (Bryman, 1992; Weber, 1968). This is not surprising as presence has been related to increasing attention, social impact and familiarity (Latanet, 1981; Zajonc, 1968) as well as to exhibiting interest and care for other (Fries, 1967). However, Fairhurst and Cooren (2009) have described this kind of (and reference to) presence in the leadership literature as being more 'about an elusive, ephemeral effect that a leader produces than on specific actions performed or conditions that exist' (p.469). Indeed, in a study of charismatic leaders at times of crises, Fairhurst and Cooren (2009) found that effective presence is enabled by leaders being in situ, at the scene of the damage or problem, and at the time of crisis providing inspiration as well as hope when people need it most. They also found that the role of digital media becomes significant in these cases as leaders' presence is portrayed to the wider and distant audience, thus exerting an even bigger and concurrent

influence. The study presented here contributes to this debate. While Fairhurst and Cooren (2009) have examined charismatic leaders' presence using technology-mediated (digital) media, the study presented in this paper looks at leaders within the technology-mediated environment of online communities.

Online communities have been described as self-organizing (Hiltz and Turoff, 2002; Wasko and Faraj, 2005; Williams and Gothrel, 2000) and informal (Ganley and Lample, 2009) and organic (Ross, 2007). They provide opportunities for offering support as well as developing stimulating discussions and exciting new projects (Preece, 2001; McWilliam, 2010). Both formal and informal types of organizations increasingly emerge in online environments with unprecedented opportunities for interactions and collaborations (Faraj et al, 2011). There is a body of literature that argues that such communities do not require leaders as they can be self-organizing (Hiltz and Turoff, 2002; Wasko and Faraj, 2005; Williams and Gothrel, 2000) and informal (Ganley and Lample, 2009) or organic (Ross, 2007). As such, online communities may be managed and run by members themselves with no obvious leader in place.

Nevertheless, several researchers agree on the importance of leadership in online communities with others positing that leadership online is different to that in offline organizations (Preece and Shneiderman, 2009; Johnson et al, 2015). In their analysis of social roles enacted in online communities Preece and Shneiderman (2009) have shown how a user moves from the role of a reader to becoming a contributor, a collaborator and finally a leader. This model shows the influence that a member could have on the community and on other members through the undertaking of different social roles. As Preece and Shneiderman (2009) posit: "Leadership is a higher calling to which only a small fraction of readers, contributors and collaborators

aspire. [They] may be motivated to improve the community.. [They] are typically able to synthesize and communicate ideas...They usually enjoy the challenge of leading others...” (p.24). The ‘Reader to Leader’ model (ibid) is consistent with researchers who studied leaders’ behaviour in virtual teams (e.g. Yoo and Alavi; 2004, Huffaker, 2010) and which suggest that a member in order to become a leader should actively participate in several activities and have higher visibility within the community, make contributions to discussions and encourage other members to collaborate. The frequency with which virtual team leaders communicate with their team members has been seen as an indication of effective leadership (Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 1999; Kayworth & Leidner, 2000; Yoo & Alavi, 2004). Thus, there is an implicit assumption in these studies that one needs to be present in community interactions in order to enact the role of the leader. No study has previously explored the different articulations of leaders’ presence online and the influence that these have on others within the environment of the online community. The section that follows presents the methods adopted for the empirical part of this study with the aim being to address this gap in the existing literature.

Research Sites

The appropriate selection of case studies was crucial for the study. The sites had to meet the following criteria: they showed evidence of leadership, thus they are sites that are being led; and had a sufficient amount of activity that would justify an in-depth investigation of its interactions.

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were carried out in order to identify sites suitable for this research. One-to-one interviews were conducted with users of online communities. Fifteen individuals, all frequent users of online communities of different age groups, ranging

from 16 to 40, were asked whether the online communities they were part of had evidence of leadership, what role the leader played in the community and how his or her role affected community interactions. Sites that were mentioned included primarily ideological sites such as religious and political sites, as well as sites related to environmental issues, animal rights, technology, photography and football teams. Leaders were found by the interviewees to guide the discussion topic and to bring alternative views to the discussion as a way of ‘calming down’ members’ feelings on controversial topics (e.g. a football team’s poor performance) in order to promote a positive atmosphere, a leadership behaviour identified by Lord (1977). Following investigation of the suggested sites, which entailed reading randomly selected threads, three ideological online communities were selected which included a religious, political and an environmental site. These are identified in the study as IC1, IC2 and IC3 respectively.

The sites tracked members’ usage and showed the number of posts, profile and reputation for each user. A common theme across all the above sites was the availability of moderators as the site’s leaders. They were members who due to their expertise and number of posts, were appointed to the role. These individuals normally had a history of frequent and prolonged entries that established them as experts in the topic. In a sense, they possessed expert power (Raven, 2008), thus they were knowledgeable about the subject matter and consequently they could advise and guide others. Through their role, they obtained managerial power which allowed them to influence others by giving warnings and banning members from the site. Moderators were also found to answer to members’ concerns about the forum, to respond to general questions, as well as to deal with complaints. Although moderators were rarely referred to in the cases as leaders they did possess recognizable leadership characteristics such as being influential, trustworthy and managerial (Puccio, Murdock and Mance, 2007; Yukl, 1989).

However, even though these sites contributed to some understanding of the role and impact of leaders' presence on the community, only one type of leadership, that of managerial influence, came to light. With an understanding that leaders' influence can also be of a different kind such as charismatic (Bryman, 1993) the view was taken that these sites provided only partial understanding of leaders' behaviour in online communities and that further research was necessary. From a grounded theory perspective, it is not uncommon that the researcher collects and analyzes data in order to decide what else is needed in order to develop theory. This process is known as theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and it shows the intricacies of data collection and analysis, involving the researcher refining her observation and attuning her data collection to her emerging conceptualizations (Vaast and Walsham, 2012).

Following the initial analysis of the three communities, data collection continued. For this, two focus groups with four participants in each were organized. During the focus groups, those attending were given a brief of the project and were asked to talk about the types of online communities they were part of as well as whether there was evidence of leadership of any kind in these communities. Different types of online communities were mentioned, both ideological and non-ideological. The first focus group consisted of postgraduate students, and the second involved researchers on the subject of online communities. In both focus groups, leaders were not only identified by the participants as experts on the topic but also as people who could act as mediators between members in cases of dispute.

Reference to a spiritual community (thereafter SC) and to a beauty community (thereafter BC) was made in the first and second focus groups respectively. SC was identified in the focus group as an exemplar of an online community with an influential leader. The site was founded

in April 2006 by an internationally-known spiritual writer, who, for the purposes of this paper is called SL (spiritual leader) . He has been identified as a spiritual teacher and author in BestSpirituality.com (accessed on June 1, 2011). Most members of his online community know him by his books; for them he is their savior and inspiration. The case of BC and its leader, BL, was intriguing. The focus group revealed that BL gradually emerged as a leader in a different online community and then with her popularity increasing, she set up her own site, BC. In this site, her presence was limited but the site itself remained popular.

Overall, both the interviews and focus groups provided awareness of sites of relevance for the study. It is readily acknowledged that the site selection was influenced by the views and experiences of the interviewees and focus group participants. However, as the interest was in how leaders exercise an influence on community members, using sites that have been identified by people who are themselves community members was deemed a valid way for site selection.

Research Methods

The qualitative case study method became a suitable method for the data that was needed to be collected for this study. In essence this method is used as a means to explore human interaction and to identify patterns of behaviour, that although specific to a particular online context, can contain truth that may be applicable (Bryman, 2004; 2012) in other online environments.

The main dataset from IC1, IC2, IC3 and SC derived from the community's discussion forums. With regard to the three ideological communities, although a wide variety of topics were being discussed, ranging from education, lifestyle and health, three threads were closely observed

from each site. These threads involved discussions on topics core to the interests of the community at large; i.e. they were of religion nature in IC1, political in IC2 and environmental issues in IC3. In SC, the threads chosen were the three threads which received the largest number of comments within the period February-May 2011; these were compared to one of the site's earliest threads in April 2006. Within these sites, the content of the sample threads built the dataset: all the messages posted by the leader were identified; also members' messages about or to their leader during online discussions. Overall, more than 800 posts have been examined across the four sites.

In the BC case, the opportunity was sought to explore leaders' presence online in relation to their leadership trajectory. This was made possible as two of the focus groups participants were active members of the community. In order to capture information about BL and her trajectory to leadership, a series of ten interviews were carried out; these included an interview with BL herself and interviews with nine users of the site. Interviews with users were achieved using the snowball technique. The interviews were guided by three main issues: member's perceptions towards BL, member's perceptions towards BC and leader's influence on the individual member-interviewee. Due to the geographical dispersion of the interviewees, the interviews were contacted via skype or instant messaging. The interview with BL explored the trajectory or roles that she undertook online, her motivations for her community involvement, her role on the site and her visions.

Analytical Approach

As aforementioned, the main dataset of the study consisted of the online discussions that took place within the chosen sites. Especially close attention was paid to those messages posted by

the identified leader of each site; thus the unit of analysis was the leader and his or her behaviour in relation to presence. Initial data analysis took the form of coding, whereby data are broken down, conceptualised, and put back together in new ways (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The initial analysis involved open coding on the messages in order to reveal themes in relation to leaders' presence and members' reaction to this so to identify trends and patterns that were derived from these interactions. First, leaders' posts were analysed by answering five core questions "How often does the leader intervene in the discussion (e.g. frequency)? What does s/he say? Why? To Whom? with What effect"? In order to find the effect of leaders' behaviour, particular attention was paid to what followers wrote about or to her/him during online discussions. In addition, the context and writing style adopted by the users were closely examined. Once all the data had been analysed, the concepts were grouped in terms of recurring themes which led to the identification of two sets of broad categories. The first pertained to the forms of leaders' online presence (i.e. instructive, interactive, stimulating and silent) and the second to classifications of leaders online based on how they undertook their role (appointed, emergent, founding members).

Cases IC1, IC2 and IC3 reached analytical saturation early on in the analysis stage as they shared similar characteristics on the role and behaviour of the moderators as well as their presence in the community. Collectively the cases contributed towards better understanding of the different forms of online presence that leaders may undertake online in order to exert their influence and implications of these are discussed in the sections that follow.

Results

The data were categorized into different forms of leaders' presence, namely, interactive, instructive, stimulating and silent presence, all of which were found to exert an influence on

interactions within the focal online communities.. As shown in Table 1 and explained in the in-depth analysis of the findings, each form of presence relates to different categories of leader online. Moreover, the results indicate that leaders have different relationships with their community members and ultimately different impacts on them. Table 1 summarizes these findings.

Insert Table 1 about here

Interactive Presence

Interactive presence is used to denote the extent to which leaders interact with their followers not only in terms of how frequently but also, whether they did so in a responsive and engaging manner. These characteristics were found to be important for someone to attract fans and thus emerge as a leader. Interactive presence was evident in the BC case. Table 2 shows illustrative quotes on the role of a leader with interactive presence and the influence she/he can exercise online.

Insert Table 2 about here

BL started her online activities as a reader in a beauty-tips online community. As she had burns on her face following an accident, she was interested in finding out information and getting advice online about make-up techniques to cover her facial burns. Learning from the forum,

along with her experience from doing her make-up, she then started to share her knowledge with other users. In doing so she introduced a step-by-step make up approach in the form of different posts. Although her initial involvement was that of a reader of other people's posts, she gradually became an active contributor to discussions developing an enthusiasm for and expertise in the area. Her entries started becoming popular and she got several followers on every topic she posted. She increasingly gained reputation and became a beauty guru on the forum. As a result, many people followed her advice, responded to her product reviews and often requested her to make more contributions. BL explained that her philosophy was that of 'Give and Take':

"...each time I wanted to find some information, another user would volunteer some answers. I therefore learn to take from the community and was determined to give back to the community... I am not a guru. I am just an average blogger who writes about the things I am interested in and unintentionally, it is the same interests that most people have..." (interview).

Following her popularity on this forum, she set up her own blog as a way for better managing her posts and this became one of the most popular blogs on the site for two years in a row. There were more than 200,000 people viewing her blog entries each month. In the interview she said that she was able to gain a number of fans through her integrity of reviewing the products. This according to her, was the most important factor for making her site reliable and widely accepted. At the time of her peak, she was highly present online with her frequent and highly readable entries. During that time, she also often replied back to her fans who wanted to share their own views and ask questions directly to her. Further to the blog, BL set up an online beauty community, where her leadership presence changed which is discussed later.

Instructive Presence

This form of presence was more notably evident in those leaders who were recruited to a leadership role within the online community and this was seen in the enactment of the moderators' role. IC1, IC2 and IC3 all showed evidence of instructive presence. Unlike, however, the case of BL who emerged as a leader through her popularity, the leaders observed in IC1, IC2 and IC3 were appointed to this role by senior members (often administrators) of the community. These leaders become important in the community as they had to be available to manage the site and ensure that this is not misused by members. In this way, these moderators were influential because of their ability to take action (e.g. ban, warn, clean posts) and resolve conflicts. Table 3 presents exemplary posts of moderators' interventions.

Insert Table 3 about here

The following appeared on IC3 explaining the moderators' role:

“...[moderators] have the power to edit or delete posts and lock, unlock, move, delete and split topics in the forum they moderate. Generally moderators are there to prevent people going off-topic or posting abusive or offensive material.”

Their power was legitimate because of the role they had been granted in the community. By enacting their role and using their power that this allowed them, these leaders promoted consistency across the forums, impacting the overall quality of the site and ultimately the community identity. Despite these moderators being rarely referred to on the forums as leaders (with only one exception), the definitions given to them indicate their power over others. This power was derived from their expertise on the subject, their reputation (often this was shown in their profile with every post they added in the forum), as well as on their moderator's title, which not only gave them responsibilities, but also, privileges over other members.

Stimulating Presence

This form of presence was evident where a leader was exerting an inspiring influence on community members. The case of the spiritual leader, SL, was clearly exhibiting stimulating presence on the site. As an internationally known writer whose books have been read by millions of people around the world, SL is a spiritual leader with many followers both online and offline. SL has been identified as a spiritual teacher and author in BestSpirituality.com (accessed on June 1, 2011). Most members of his online community know him by his books and read his posts; for them he is their savior and inspiration.

As a leader, SL was present online through the frequency, relevance and worth of his entries to his members. On average each month SL posted around 66 messages. The content in his posts cover general topics with a wide range of issues such as fear, loneliness, friendship, motherhood. Each entry had its own meaning and was specifically written for his audience. He had strong charismatic influence which can be an extremely powerful way to lead others (Bryman, 1993); he added value to people by sharing wisdom, resources and thoughts whilst opening up his ideas for discussions. Further, he gained his audience's trust by posting

consistent data content, actively making contributions and at times, though rarely, replied to comments. Though his readers were not expected to register with the community, many of them are frequent contributors to the threads by posting their own comments, stories and ideas.

Insert Table 4 about here

All threads were initiated by SL. Consequently, he intended to make an influence on the topic of discussion and interactions among members on the topic being discussed.

In Thread 1, SL wrote on the issue of dance and shared with his readers a story where he referred to his shyness towards dancing, but when he finally moved onto the dance floor with the encouragement of a friend, he felt liberated. SL's story attracted 191 comments within two days. Several readers commented on his inspirational ability and charisma: "Thanks SL for always inspiring me". One reader commented: "Seriously I can't dance, and I feel ashamed for that". This comment was one of the rare ones that received a reply from SL: "when the episode above took place, I also could not dance" (SL). Other members commented on SL's inspirational ability and charisma: "Thanks ... for always inspiring me". Adopting SL's approach where he used the post to share a personal story, readers shared their own personal stories and admitted their own shyness to dance in front of others. In other words, SL not only influenced the topic of the discussion, but also, the way it was being discussed. Members talked about their passion for dancing and what it meant to them, whilst others shared personal stories about their first dance.

Thread 2 (on friendship) received 219 comments and was one of the most commented upon for the period February-March. Similarly to the previous thread, several readers thanked and/or congratulated SL for his writings and inspirations: “ I want to congratulate the God given gift of imagination to you; this paper is simple but inspiring”. Despite the popularity of the thread, SL made no other attempt to communicate with his readers on this topic. Instead, the number of comments received shows that his readers were able to communicate with him and with each other even when he remains silent.

Thread 3 (on motherhood) received the maximum number of responses for the four months duration of the study and in particular, there were 304 between the period May 8-21. The entry aimed to present mothers as highly competent and caring individuals, which was topical as it was posted on the internationally-celebrated Mother’s Day (2nd Sunday of May). No other comment was made by SL in this thread, but the popularity of the topic was enormous, with some taking the opportunity to thank their own mother, share poems about motherhood (in different languages including Greek, Spanish, Portuguese) and to write personal stories on their experience as mothers or with their mother:

“...and this brought so much tears to my eyes...tears of all emotions... Happy Mothers day everyone”.

Similarly to the case of emergent leaders, community founders such as SL, need to show their commitment, expertise and enthusiasm in order to attract and grow their followers, thereby increasing the membership of their communities. Their presence therefore in terms of stimulating discussions and interactions is vital.

Silent Presence

In addition to the three forms of presence identified in the cases, there is a fourth type, that of silent presence. For community members this means that the leader is still available; however, s/he is not expected to interact with the members on a frequent basis. This form of presence complements rather than replaces the forms identified earlier in the analysis.

Insert Table 5 about here

Evidence of silent presence was found in the cases of BL and SL (Table 5). BL when she founded her own community her leadership presence changed from that of being interactive to a less active one, even silent at times with her main presence being through her editorials. This silence however did not jeopardize her own popularity or indeed the popularity of the community. Her fans continued following her posts on her website and still considered her as the leader of the site and every time she posted something on it. Moreover, there were still plenty of comments by members.

Similarly, SL who was previously said to be having stimulating presence, remains primarily silent to the contributions of his readers. This silence did not however deter the readers from

posting or interacting with each other. In fact it is noted that in two out of the three selected threads that attracted the maximum of the comments between the period February-May 2011 (threads 2 and 3), no comment or reply was added at all by SL. This shows that a leader does not need to remain interactive in order to keep discussions going within the community in order to attract members nor is his presence constantly required to stimulate discussions. There were some rare occasions where SL replied to comments posted by his followers, which gave visibility as well as providing reassurance to the members that he, although a silent leader, did (or was perceived to) read the comments posted by his followers. Members found satisfaction not only by reading his entries, but also, by interacting with others. Members also showed solidarity by giving support and encouragement to each other, a lesson probably learnt from their leader. Sharing personal views and stories enabled the community to grow and sustain itself without the constant presence of its leader.

Discussion

Existing literature on leaders in online environments has made an implicit assumption that they need to be actively present and available in online interactions. For example, Preece and Shneiderman (2009) and Yoo and Alavi (2004) identified a leader in online environments as someone who emerges through his/her contributions and expertise over a period of time. Similarly, O'Mahony and Ferraro (2007) referred to the participative role of online community leaders in coordinating and linking members' activities.

The findings from the current inductive study have led to the identification of different forms of online presence, which include interactive, instructive, stimulating as well as silent. These

forms of presence do not connote frequency of communication online but rather are conceptualized in terms of the influence that leaders may exert on community members. Collectively, the different articulations of presence online show that leaders' presence is embedded in the content of online discussions either directly with the leader initiating ideas and actively enacting their role or indirectly in the interactions that take place among community members.

Leaders' interactive presence has the ability to attract more members or fans, as in BL's case. These leaders were seen as experts on specific topics, had many followers, were listened to and their advice was followed. The link between interactivity and influence has been recognised within the organization literature; Fortin and Dholakia (2005) for example referred to a mutual influence between the co-communicators when they engage in a dialogue and evidence of this was shown with the interview data in the BC case (i.e. Give and Take philosophy). Leaders with instructive presence were found to introduce, through their interventions, consistency and coordination in their online communities. Leaders with stimulating presence are able to develop a positive atmosphere within their community. This presence can be both textual and visual as well as psychological. In contrast to the enactment of instructive and interactive presence that were seen in some of the cases where leaders were making interventions during the online discussions, the leader with stimulating presence only made his appearance in order to start the discussion and then was silent leaving members to discuss the topic among themselves. What therefore has emerged from the findings is that leaders with silent presence give the opportunity to community members to develop their own active participation in the community and interact with other members. In the two cases of online leaders where this was evident, SL and BL were perceived by community members to be too busy to interact with individual members. Nevertheless this did not deter members from interacting among

themselves. Interestingly, with leaders' silence, there was more members' presence. These findings are in line with the notion of latency explored in Velasquez et al (2014). These researchers found that latent users bring an additional dimension to existing models on social roles online (e.g. Preece and Shneiderman, 2009) as despite their having limited participation, they nevertheless remain interested in community affairs. As such their participation can still make a significant contribution to individual members and the community as a whole.

The paper makes a contribution to theory generation in the areas of online presence and leadership behaviour in online communities. First, it has been proposed that presence is conceptualised as a behavioural construct and not just an experience in order to show the active agency of individuals involved in online interactions. Another contribution of the study is that different forms of leaders' presence exist online and each of this is vital for their development and enactment of their role, as well as important for the growth and sustainability of online communities. This extends theory on leaders' behaviour online through the identification of different types of leaders' presence. Earlier research (e.g. Preece and Shneiderman, 2009) posited that one of the key characteristics of leaders that distinguishes them from other members is their high visibility within the community. However, this study has shown that influential leaders are not necessarily present online through visibility and frequency of interactions. Instead, online leaders can be silent and yet exert a strong influence on the members of the online community and the community at large. This kind of silent presence of leaders online remains effective because members are able to develop relationships and interactions among themselves by drawing upon their own resources, thereby keeping the community sustainable. Taken together, these findings contribute to providing better insights regarding who the leaders are, their characteristics, the role they perform and the behaviours they enact within online communities. The study broadens our understanding of leaders'

behaviour online and the different ways that they can exercise influence on community members.

Conclusions and Implications

This paper has examined the role of leaders' presence in online communities. It has taken the position that despite there being acknowledgement in the literature that leaders play an important role in online communities, it has previously been unclear how the extent and type of leaders' presence online influence interactions within the community. Through a series of qualitative case studies and analysis, different articulations of leaders' presence have been identified. The findings have shown that the ongoing presence of leaders is not necessary for effective community development or for encouraging interactions among community members. In the cases studied, silence was found to have a positive impact on community interactions.

From a practical perspective, leaders of online communities (e.g. founding members, moderators etc) should note that presence through frequent participation and quality of entries is crucial during the early stages of community development and also critical for leaders to attract followers. Awareness about the pitfalls that may occur when leaders remain silent or absent from community interactions early on is important as this could jeopardise their reputation and ultimately their ability to influence their members. Thus, a leader who remains silent (e.g. due to technological, communication or other reasons) from the start will not be as effective as one who is actively present online and who at a later stage becomes silent. Further research however is needed to ascertain whether there are any cases of leaders' silence that negatively affect online community interactions. That is, when does a leader's silence have a

negative effect and when a positive effect on the community? One limitation of this study is its focus on the recognizable or known leaders. Consequently, it did not involve investigating individuals who might covertly perform leadership roles and thus secretly influence others. Future research could address this type of online leadership behaviour. Moreover, given focus on leaders, the effect of members' silence on community interactions was not examined. This could be another item on the agenda for future research.

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Table 1: Summary of Findings

Forms of Leaders' Online Presence	Categories of Online Leaders	Characteristics-key features of leader behaviour	Examples
Interactive	Emergent leaders	Frequent role enactment through posts, responses and comments to other users; they arise to the leadership role due to their expertise and enthusiasm in the subject matter	“BL is a leader who is friendly, caring and active enough to regularly reply or interact with her followers (BC interviewee 6)
Instructive	Appointed Leaders	A form of emergent leaders; they are people who are recruited or elected to the post; frequent role enactment as expected by their assigned role and this is exercised through warnings, rules, enforcement and facilitation.	“Hello Everyone... a reminder to all participants that we should follow the rules when posting and interacting with each other. Please debate the issues and not the poster, respond kindly to each other posting

			on topic and with proof if necessary...” (moderator, IC1).
Stimulating	Community Founder	Leader introduces topics for discussion; Leader makes minimum intervention in discussions	We are again over 2 million unique visitors in March ... I don't intend to publish the stats every month here, but I want you all to know that we have stabilised at a higher level. (SL's post to the community, March 2011)
Silent	Sustaining Leaders	Leader is mainly silent; Minimum input to the community; solidarity among members	“Recently, BL does not contribute to BC as much as she used to...her disappearance has not affected the way I follow the site”

			(interviewee/BC member 10)
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Table 2: Interactive Presence: concept & illustrations

Concept	Sub-concepts	Evidence of leadership influence	Exemplary quotes
Interactive Presence	Closeness with users	Sharing knowledge Creating a positive atmosphere	<p>“It is like I have a girlfriend with whom I could have a girl talk” (BC, interviewee 2)</p> <p>“BL is a sociable person who makes her followers feel close to her, as though they were in the same family, rather than acting like a community leader”(BC interviewee 5)</p>
	Interplay	Inspiring; creating motivation; developing orientation	“By visiting a user’s piece of work (how to...) and leaving comments, followers like myself feel

			encouraged to keep trying and developing as recommended by the leader” (BC interviewee 8)
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Table 3: Instructive Presence: Concept & illustrations

Concept	Sub-concepts	Evidence of Leadership influence	Exemplary quotes
Instructive Presence	Rule enforcement	Initiating action; maintaining focus; maintaining orientation	“ ‘MOD HAT ON’ This thread has been cleaned -up from off topic posts and some personal attacks. Please be mindful to keep the conversation about the posts NOT the posters! ‘MOD HAD OFF’” (IC1,

			<p>moderator, April 2011)</p>
	<p>Intervention</p>	<p>Solving conflict</p>	<p>To me this attack was very malicious and geared to malign and damage this man's reputation.</p> <p>I've seen a lot of distasteful stuff in this movement over the last few years, none of it admirable or honourable in any way...</p> <p>And I'm determined that wherever this disgusting behaviour rears its ugly head I'll do my best to snub it out.” (IC2, March 2011)</p>

Table 4: Stimulating Presence: Concept & Illustrations

Concept	Sub-concept	Evidence of Leadership Influence	Illustrative posts
Stimulating presence	Creating focus in discussions	Initiating action; developing orientation; creating positive atmosphere and increasing motivation; providing encouragement	Thanks SL [name] for always inspiring me”. “I am too [like yourself] shy to dance as well. Reading this, well, I think I WILL dance, thanks SL
	Supporting interactions among members	Encouraging solidarity	Thank you very much for your strong support, your comments and your

			interaction with each other.
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Table 5: Silent Presence: Concept & Illustrations

Concept	Sub-concept	Evidence of Leadership Influence	Illustrations quotes
Silent presence	Minimum input to community	Giving space to members to interact with each other	“If users love the site they will stay no matter what” (BL, interview)
	Leader is not needed to sustain the community	Creating a community ethos; emphasis on the community not on the individual leader	“now, some BC members do not even know me! I think this is amazing! It means that what I have been trying is successful given the concept that BC is a website and is not equated to me” (BL interview)

	Solidarity among members	Encouraging positive atmosphere; encouraging interaction among members	Thank you very much for your strong support, your comments and your interaction with each other. (SL's post to the community, March 2011)
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