**Virtual Family, Gate Keepers, Toolbox and Online Club: Four Profiles Of Online Communities In Organized Sports**

**Nanny Kuijsters – Timmers\*, John Goedee\*\* and Ronald Leenders\*\***

\*Fontys University of Applied Science for Sports Marketing and Communication (SPECO), Tilburg, The Netherlands

\*\* Tilburg University, School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Tilburg, The Netherlands

E-mail:

n.kuijsters@fontys.nl; j.goedee@tilburguniversity.nl; r.t.a.j.leenders@tilburguniversity.edu

**Aim of the research**

Social Networking Sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter are increasingly implemented in voluntary sports clubs (VSCs) as channels for organizational communication. By using these SNSs, the sports clubs are, in fact, building virtual, online communities as an extra layer, in which the club, its members and non-members (e.g. fans, sponsors, friends) have contact with each other. Although almost all nearly 25,000 voluntary sports clubs in The Netherlands use the social networks sites as formal communication channels, there is little insight into how these SNSs together function as an online community. To fill this gap, this study suggest that two types of frameworks are important: (1) frameworks that focus on online communication (e.g. information richness, media richness or communication adequacy) and (2) frameworks that focus on community building (e.g. social connectedness and sense of community). If voluntary clubs understand how the processes of online communication and community building interact, they can develop sustainable online communities that, ultimately, contribute to organizational goals. From this consideration, we formulated the following research questions:

(RQ1) Which aspects of online communication and community building are currently interlinked?

(RQ2) How do these aspects contribute to profiles of virtual communities?

(RQ3) Can we distinguish key concepts to virtual community building in the context of VSC?

**Theoretical background and literature review**

In general, communities create value because members have a feeling of belonging, that they matter to one another and that they have shared commitment (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). One essential aspect of this ‘sense of community theory’ is that members feel connected. Social connectedness is often defined as the social interactions, relationships and networks that people have in a larger context than family and friends, and the benefits of it to individuals and to organizations (Lee & Robbins, 1998). In this research, we assume that in organizations the social connectedness between members is the reflection of the communication climate. This communication climate is often defined in terms of openness and trust, have a say, adequacy and supportiveness (Smidts, Pruyn, & Van Riel, 2001; Trombetta & Rogers, 1988).

Nowadays, communities exist both off-line and online, through social networking sites (SNSs), that, together form so called ‘virtual communities’, online spaces with potential of integration of (member-generated) content and communication. SNSs are seen as effective (rich) communication channels, because they offer opportunities to immediate feedback, interpersonal communication and vivid content (Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012).

To commercial brands, virtual or online brand communities are of vital importance to customer engagement (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014). Our research project focuses on virtual community building in member organizations, such as voluntary sports clubs and measures the impact of aspects of community building and aspects of online communication.

**Methodology, research design, and data analysis**

To answer the research questions, we analysed essays of 22 students of the bachelor program Sports Communication, all members of voluntary sports clubs. These students are an adequate research population, because of their interest and experience with SNSs in a sports-related context. Given that we know that adolescents are a risk-group in terms of retaining membership of a VSC, the perceptions of these students can, eventually, contribute to a profound understanding of how virtual communities at the VSC can contribute to retention strategies.

To perform the task, the students were asked to write about their perceptions of SNS use in their VSCs. With a qualitative approach, we expected to identify the individual perceptions and ideas of virtual building and thereby gain an in-depth insight. After two rounds of coding (deductive and inductive), using coding tool Atlas.ti.8.0, we could derive 64 concepts out of the essays of the students. These concepts referred to aspects of our two main frameworks: online communication and community building. Subsequently, using a repertory grid, we interconnected these concepts and tried to construct profiles.

**Results, discussion, and implications/conclusions**

The first results indicate a framework with four demarcated profiles of online communities in VSC-context: (1) the online club community profile, (2) the virtual family profile, (3) the online toolbox profile, and the (4) gate keepers community profile. These four profiles portray how the students perceive the online communities at their club in terms of community building and online communication. Furthermore, we were able to identify several key concepts in the context of online community building at VSCs. Ultimately, the four profiles and the key concepts will provide insight into the potential of virtual communities at non-commercial member organizations, such as VSCs. Until the end of May 2018, the empirical research of this study will be conducted, and the completion of the research report is expected until the end of June, so the project along with its results will assuredly be presented at the conference in Malmö, in September 2018.

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