

Extended abstract

Virtual Community Building in Organized Sports in the Netherlands

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1. Aim and Research Questions

Virtual communities are online spaces with potential of integration of (member-generated) content and conversations [7,8]. In our research project we are interested in the adoption and building of virtual communities in organized sports, that is to say in the voluntary sports clubs (VSCs) in the Netherlands. Since these VSCs have massively transferred their communication with members from paper club magazines to online channels, these virtual communities arise from the use of a growing number of websites, e-mail and social network sites (SNSs). Although virtual communities are broadly investigated, such as social communities, brand communities, and public communities, there is little scholarly interest in virtual communities of member organizations that VSCs are an example of.

The study that is to be presented at SECSI2019 concerns the clubs' use of SNSs (ClubSNSs), such as Facebook and Twitter, within the virtual communities. These SNSs are increasingly used by the VSCs to facilitate organizational communication and to obtain a good internal climate [9]. However, academic understanding of the impact of ClubSNSs' content and conversations on the organizational performance of the VSC is in its infancy. In our study, we examined this impact of ClubSNSs use on the involvement among members and whether we can explain this by members' identification with the club. Furthermore, we have tried to categorize ClubSNSs by content types, such as informative, conversational or sociable ClubSNSs, and their role in stimulating the use of ClubSNSs. In this way we attempted to gain insight into the effect of types of ClubSNSs' content and conversations on membership involvement and the mediating role of identification with the club. This insight can help VSCs to develop effective ClubSNS channels that contribute to organizational goals such as supportive and loyal membership.

2. Background

As part of the virtual communities, social network sites are increasingly important for knowledge sharing, innovation and social interaction within organizations [2, 3]. In fact, SNSs facilitate working within companies by stimulating interconnections amongst employees [5]. In order to reach effective organizational communication, the identification of members with their organization is important [4], but we noticed that scholarly work about the role of SNSs to developing member identification in VSC is elusive. Moreover, we know that, as far as consumer brands are concerned, different motivations for the use of SNSs are distinguished (such as information, fun or empowerment) in order to explain the involvement of consumers in so-called online brand communities [6]. These motivations are used to elaborate content on these brand communities to engage and ultimately bind members [1]. In our research to VSCs, which are member organizations where members are the producers of the sports service themselves, we want to explore this motivational use of ClubSNSs, and the impact of content and identification with the VSCs.

3. Research Design, Methodology and Data Analysis

In a survey, students of the Fontys University of Applied Sciences, all members of voluntary sports clubs in the Netherlands ($n = 129$) were asked about their perceptions of their club's ClubSNSs uses, the content and conversations on ClubSNSs and the aspects of involvement and identification with their club, see figure 1. Since young adolescents are a risk group when it comes to retaining membership [9], it is important to gain more insight into their perceptions and ideas about SNSs as organizational channels of VCSs' virtual communities. Using factor analysis, we distinguished components, with which we conducted regression and mediation analyses in order to explore relationships.

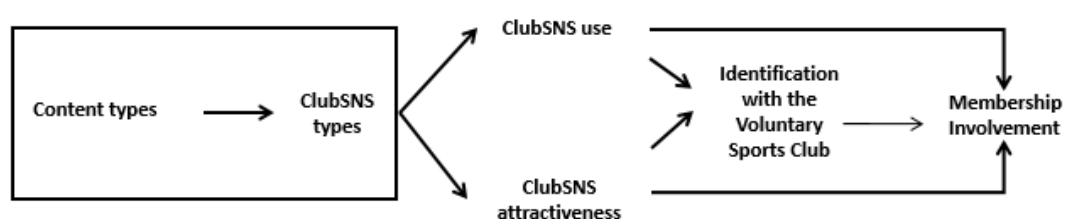


Figure 1. Conceptual model ClubSNSs and Membership Involvement.

4. Results / Findings and Discussion

Foremost, ClubSNSs are characterized as informational types of communication channels and less entertaining or interactional, which was underpinned by the strong relationships with informational content on ClubSNSs. Participants reported content about sports, members and clubs as favorite content, while other content types (e.g. polls, games) were less favorite. It

is important that this content is posted in messages, conversations, photos and video on the clubs' social network sites. Furthermore, participants motivated their use of ClubSNSs, because of its entertaining content and the opportunities to get in touch with other members. Ultimately, relationships were found between use of ClubSNS and membership involvement of members, which were explained by the identification of members with their sports club. Although we realize that the samples of students are quite specific, the results provide insights into aspects of use of ClubSNSs as virtual community channels and the potential of them for effective organizational performance of voluntary sports clubs.

5. Conclusion, Contribution and Implication

The main contributions of this study are the new insights into use of social network sites as part of virtual communities within member organizations in general. Moreover, our study extended our knowledge of use of ClubSNSs and the relationships with membership involvement and organizational identification within the context of member organizations, such as voluntary sports clubs, based on content, motivations and types of SNS channels.

Practical implications aimed at increasing effectiveness for engaging and binding members within the voluntary sport clubs are described, such as the introduction of a typology of ClubSNSs as a basis for management decisions.

6. References

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