THE REAL-WORLD IMPLICATIONS OF AN IMAGINARY WORLD: A
NETNOGRAPHY OF A HARRY POTTER BASED VIRTUAL COMMUNITY
(HOGWARTS RUNNING CLUB)

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development, growth, and diffusion of technology throughout the world today

has spurred an integration with socializing and engagement that is fast becoming a part of

everyday life (Baym, 2015; Blank, 2012; Consalvo & Ess, 2011). One such manifestation of this

new form of social interaction is communities formed online or virtual communities (Ridings,

Gefen, & Arinze, 2002). Virtual communities have been in existence for over thirty years

(Ridings, Gefen, and Arinze, 2002) and existing studies of these communities have yielded

powerful insights into learning, communication, marketing, relationships, benefits of

participation, and more (Hiltz & Wellman, 1997; Mamonov, Koufaris, & Benbunan-Fich, 2016;

Nimrod, 2014; Welbourne, Blanchard, & Boughton, 2009; Wellman & Gulia, 1999; Winkelman

& Choo, 2003). However, there are still aspects of virtual communities about which little is

known. Therefore, this study utilized the qualitative research technique of Netnography

(Kozinets, 2010; 2015) to explore the experiences of participation in a virtual community and the

meanings participants associate with membership in this group. Specific research questions

focused on motivations, potential benefits, and potential implications for participants' offline

reality. The Hogwarts Running Club (HRC), a virtual community established in 2014 (HRC,

2017), on Facebook was the study setting. This Facebook group had approximately 16,000

members who engaged in online discussions and activities that focused around the Harry Potter

book series and running (HRC, 2018a). The posts within the virtual community Great Hall

(named for a location that is significant in the Harry Potter book series) served as the source of

study data. As the researcher was a member of the HRC, four qualitative techniques were

utilized to alleviate concerns surrounding "backyard" research (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). These

four techniques were member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), prolonged engagement in the

study setting (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), peer debriefing (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and reflexive journaling (Genoe & Liechty, 2016; Walsh, 2003). Findings of the study have been presented as three manuscripts with unique foci. Sense of Community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), Serious Leisure (Stebbins, 2007; 2012), and benefits and motivations each serve as the focus of a manuscript where implications for research and application have been discussed.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The Research Problem

Virtual communities or online communities have been in existence for over thirty years (Ridings, Gefen, &Arinze, 2002). With advancements in technology came a new form of socializing and engagement. The rapid growth of virtual communities has been documented in such works as Gross's (1999) article focused on how for profit businesses can partner with internet sites to draw together like-minded consumers and Petersen's (1999) work revolving around communities that feel like home. Accompanying this rapid growth came an upsurge in research on virtual communities. This research challenged the traditional definition of community introducing the term cybercommunity (Fernback, 1999). In addition, early studies centered on virtual communities introduced web resources in public online communities as a way to filter data (Hill & Terveen, 1996), explored asynchronous learning in virtual classrooms (Hiltz & Wellman, 1997), and investigated online communities as meaningful gathering places as explored by Wellman and Gulia in their article *Net Surfers Don't Ride Alone* (1999).

The study of virtual communities has been a theme in social scientific research since approximately 1994 (Nimrod & Adoni, 2012; Rheingold, 1996). However, the study of virtual communities is not extensive and gaps in the literature still exist. For instance, little is known about what motivates participation and about the role of virtual communities in participants' offline lives (Nimrod, 2014; Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002). Research has documented both positive and negative outcomes of online interaction (e.g., Appel, Gerlach, and Crusius's,2016; Nimrod & Adoni, 2012), thus, as technology continues to advance rapidly, understanding individuals' experiences in online communities is vital to facilitating positive leisure experiences

within this environment and mitigating negative experiences. This study sought to further the understanding of virtual communities and add to the existing literature related to online leisure (or "e-leisure").

Virtual Communities

Some scholars have suggested various definitions of virtual communities. As defined by Rheingold (1996), a virtual community is "a group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through mediation of the computer bulletin boards and networks" (paragraph 4). Or as defined by Ridings, Gefen, and Arinze (2002) "Virtual communities can be defined as groups of people with common interests and practices that communicate regularly and for some duration in an organized way over the Internet through a common location or mechanism" (p. 273). What is generally agreed upon is that virtual communities involve groups of people for whom communication is mediated through computers or other internet-based mediums.

Increasingly, individuals have personal handheld technological devices and access to the internet on a daily or even hourly basis. Online communication has advanced so far within society that it is no longer tethered to a physical location (i.e. a desktop computer) or even an electrical outlet (i.e. portable charging stations) (Blank, 2012). With such common access to technology and the internet, studies built around virtual communities have focused on topics such as virtual communities as communities (Wellman & Gulia, 1999), the role of sense of community within social network sites (Mamonov, Koufaris, & Benbunan-Fich, 2016), the benefits and constraints to participation in seniors online communities (Nimrod, 2014), trust in the virtual community setting (Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002), the role of virtual communities in wedding planning (Nelson & Otnes, 2005) and, of course, using various research methods to

conduct online research (Bowler, 2010; Consalvo & Ess, 2011; Genoe, Liechty, Marston, & Sutherland, 2016; Kozinets, 2002; 2010; 2015). These studies have identified benefits experienced by individuals as a result of membership in a virtual community. Some of the documented benefits include a positive impact on psychological well-being, enhanced self-image, improved self-confidence, increased social connectivity, higher levels of perceived social support, decreased feelings of loneliness, lower levels of depression, status neutralization, feelings of joyfulness, feelings of stimulation, companionship, and positive impact on offline reality (Nimrod, 2014). Other advantages of virtual communities are that the physical location is irrelevant to participation, logistics and social costs to participation are generally lower than participation in face-to-face communities, and that virtual communities tend to be larger than face-to-face communities enabling individuals of all ages, genders, socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicities, and diverse backgrounds to come together to share a common interest (Sproull & Faraj, 1997).

Online Harry Potter Fandom

Existing research on virtual communities has tended to focus on a limited number of populations and settings. For example, numerous studies have been conducted in business settings, marketing settings, and technological settings (e.g., Kozinets, 2002; 2010; Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002). Studies conducted within a medical support group setting are also popular (e.g., Welbourne, Blanchard, & Boughton, 2009; Winkelman & Choo, 2003). One notable absence in the literature, however, is research exploring the wide range of topics around which virtual communities have been formed. In terms of the scope and breadth of virtual community topic or purpose, there are innumerable communities formed around too many topics to count. One such topic that has spurred the development of virtual communities is that of

fandom. Virtual communities have been developed to support and encourage interaction with content that has generated a fan base (e.g., Dr. Who, Lord of the Rings, Firefly). One such example is the Harry Potter book series and films, which have attracted a large and loyal following as indicated by the following comment documented by a Harry Potter scholar (Anelli, 2008; Brummitt, 2016).

> …before I read Harry Potter I was composed of magic dust and fairy breath, and reading the first book had been what brought all my particles together. That Harry Potter was my personal Big Bang. (comment by a Harry Potter fan, cited in Anelli, 2008, p. 11)

The author of the book series, J.K. Rowling had this to say about the fandom and the online reach of the Harry Potter book series:

> So, this book is a history of a community…It can be read as a warts-and-all expose of fan mentality or as a story of the world's biggest book group or as the personal journey of a group of people who would never otherwise have met. The tale of the online fandom is every bit as extraordinary as Harry's own, and it has left me with a feeling of awe and gratitude. (comment by J.K. Rowling, cited in Anelli, 2008, p. xii).

These comments from the Harry Potter literature demonstrate the depth and scope of the personal and global impacts of the Harry Potter book series and give some explanation for the virtual communities founded around this common interest.

Additionally, these quotes not only give a personal view from important Harry Potter experts, but they give entree into the research that has been conducted regarding the Harry Potter book series. A *New Statesman* (2017) article written about the "Harry Potter generation" summarized key statistics revolving around the scope of Harry Potter in today's society. First, a

survey was conducted of more than 2,000 adults to mark the 20th anniversary of the release of the first Harry Potter book and found that, in Britain, 81 percent of 18 to 24 year olds and 68 percent of 25 to 34 year olds were fans of Harry Potter books, films, or both (Leszkiewicz, 2017). Second, in 2014, "a study found that young children who read Harry Potter were likely to be more empathetic and less likely to be prejudiced than their peers" (Leszkiewicz, 2017, p. 13). Finally, Leszkiewicz (2017) proposed that Harry Potter changed the reading habits of a generation. Research by the Federation of Children's Book Groups found that 84 percent of teachers noticed the "difference that Harry Potter made to their students' reading abilities, and 73 percent said they were surprised at how many of their students were able to read the books" (Leszkiewicz, 2017, p. 14).

These statistics detail individuals spending their leisure time engaged with Harry Potter in many forms and bring to the forefront the potential for widespread research surrounding Harry Potter. Such research should, but has yet to extensively explore the virtual communities formed around this interest. As an example and the setting for this study, the Hogwarts Running Club (HRC) was a virtual community with over 16,000 members spanning all seven continents (HRC, 2018b). The popularity of this virtual community made it an ideal setting for exploring individuals' experiences of participating and engagement in a leisure-based virtual community.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of participation in a virtual community (Hogwarts Running Club) and the meanings participants associate with membership in this group. The specific research questions addressed were as follows:

Question 1: What motivates virtual community members to voluntarily join and participate in a virtual community for leisure purposes?

Question 2: What benefits, if any, do virtual community members experience as a result of participation in a virtual community?

This research was designed to further the understanding of virtual communities while also adding to the existing literature related to online leisure (or "e-leisure").

Position of the Researcher

Prior to undertaking a study in which the researcher is a member of the study population, it is important to consider the position of the researcher (Genoe & Liechty, 2016). On April 4th 2017 I was officially welcomed into the Hogwarts Running Club (HRC) and received my letter of acceptance. Since that time I have joined the Faculty (a sub-group within the virtual community), been sorted into Hufflepuff House (another sub-group), become a Perfect Prefect (a level of attainment based on participation), and much more. I was initially attracted to the HRC and virtual communities in general during this time in my life as a result of a few different factors that had recently combined. In January of 2017, just three months prior to joining the HRC, I was starting my second semester as a faculty member at the University of Illinois. I had previously studied at the University since 2013 as a doctoral student in the Department of Recreation, Sport, and Tourism. It was this same department that hired me on as faculty in August of 2016. This new position coupled with my ongoing struggle to find motivation to finish my PhD program along with the stress of re-identifying myself in a new role within an already established environment left me searching for some place to belong that was stress free with no strings attached. Additionally, I had started running in 2015 and by 2017 was having trouble finding running buddies and the support to continue running. It was at this time that the HRC popped up on my Facebook page as a community I might like to join.

Since becoming a member and receiving my letter of acceptance into the HRC during April of 2017 I have indeed found the stress free environment I was searching for to balance out my work. Some benefits I have experienced include but are not limited to: joy, support of a healthy lifestyle, a sense of belonging and importance within the community, a sense that I am "doing so much good" in the world, creativity, kindness, and generosity. I should also note here that my relationship with Harry Potter, the books and movies, began when the books were first released almost twenty years ago. I have since read the entire series and watched all of the movies perhaps too many times to count. This acceptance and participation within a community that combined two of my passions, running and Harry Potter, was the spark that initiated my curiosity surrounding virtual communities. My reasons for participating and the benefits I received made me wonder what other members were experiencing. Thus, this study came to be. As a member of the HRC I do understand that membership within the study population has its pros and its cons.

This study used Netnography, a form of ethnography adapted for online communities (Kozinets, 2010; 2015). As such, it was important to establish a relationship with the study population in order to identify and develop an understanding of meanings within the community (Creswell, 2009). One key way that ethnographers and Netnographers do this is by engaging in activities within the community being studied (Creswell, 2009). As I was already a member of the HRC community this process of relationship building and activity engagement was already underway.

As an active member within the HRC community I share two common interests with the other community members; running and Harry Potter. This shared interest has enabled me as a researcher to take advantage of my already existing knowledge of the shared terminology within

the community (e.g., abbreviations such as NRR- not running related- and NHPR- not Harry Potter related- are often used) and my already existing knowledge of a shared symbol system (e.g., nargles and/or Peeves, mischievous characters from the books, are often blamed for typos or malfunctioning technology). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I was able to take advantage of the access and rapport I had already been granted within the community as a member and as a researcher.

However, not all aspects of my current status as investigator as insider (Hull, 2017) are positive. One challenge to conducting "backyard" research, or research involving your own community, friends, or work setting (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) is that as an insider the researcher possesses knowledge of the norms of the community culture. This knowledge can then cloud objectivity and effect the ability of the researcher to see truth in findings generated by study data (Hull, 2017). In other words, I needed to be especially careful not to project my own meanings, experiences, and motivations onto other community members. Fortunately, there are established methods within qualitative research design that can be implemented to mitigate these possible negative effects of "backyard" research. Four primary practices were employed within this study: member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), prolonged engagement in the study setting (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), peer debriefing (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and reflexive journaling (Genoe & Liechty, 2016; Walsh, 2003).

Introduction to the Findings

The following three chapters are dedicated to presenting the findings of this study in the form of three separate manuscripts. The first manuscript titled "The Hogwarts Running Club and Sense of Community: a Netnography of a Virtual Community" was written with the intent

that it will be submitted for publication to the journal *Leisure Sciences*. This journal has a 9,000

word limit and encompasses:

> scientific inquiries into the study of leisure, recreation, parks, travel, and tourism from a
>
> social science perspective. Articles cover the social and psychological aspects of leisure,
>
> planning for leisure environments, leisure gerontology, travel and tourism behavior,
>
> leisure economics, and urban leisure delivery systems (Leisure Sciences, 2018, paragraph
>
> 8).

The second manuscript titled "Virtual Community Participation as Serious Leisure: a

Netnography of the Hogwarts Running Club" was written with the intent that it will be submitted

for publication to the journal *Leisure Studies*. This journal has an 8,000 word limit and focuses

on

> all aspects of leisure, including perspectives from sociology, psychology, human
>
> geography, planning and economics. The topics covered in the journal include the whole
>
> range of leisure behaviour in the arts, sports, cultural and informal activities, tourism,
>
> urban and rural recreation (Leisure Sciences, 2018, paragraph 1).

The third and final manuscript titled "Benefits and Motivations for Virtual Community

Participation: a Netnography of the Hogwarts Running Club" was written with a 7,000 word

limit in order to facilitate submission and publication in the *Journal of Park and Recreation*

Administration. JPRA was established "to encourage scholarly research and the advancement of

knowledge for best management practices and delivery services" (JPRA, 2019, paragraph 1).

Overall, the findings of this study encompass numerous elements to support, challenge, extend,

and add to current leisure and communication literature and have been written to incorporate

both theory and practice. Lastly, abstracts and an executive summary will be included for

publication with each article as directed by the intended journal. However, they have not been

included within this document in order to promote flow and ease of reading.

CHAPTER 2: MANUSCRIPT 1

The Hogwarts Running Club and Sense of Community: a Netnography of a Virtual Community

Introduction

Virtual communities have been in existence for over thirty years (Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002) having been spurred on by advancements in technology and new forms of communication and social interaction. The rapid growth of virtual communities has been well documented (Gross, 1999) and has been accompanied by an upsurge in research on virtual communities. The study of virtual communities has been a theme in social scientific research since approximately 1994 (Nimrod & Adoni, 2012; Rheingold, 1996). This research challenged the traditional definition of community introducing the term cybercommunity (Fernback, 1999). However, the study of virtual communities is not extensive and gaps in the literature exist. For instance, little is known about what motivates participation and about the role of virtual communities in participants' offline lives (Nimrod, 2014; Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002). Additionally, Sense of Community has been shown to play a role in participation in offline leisure-based groups (Breunig, Todd, Anserson, & Yount, 2010) and yet has rarely been explored among virtual leisure-based groups. As technology continues to advance, understanding individuals' experiences in virtual communities is vital to facilitating positive leisure experiences and the development of community within this environment.

Currently, there is limited research exploring leisure-based virtual communities. Specifically the literature is lacking in terms of studies that explore virtual communities that have formed solely for the purpose of leisure and populations that have sought out and joined a virtual community for their own purposes and motivations (i.e. not medical patients or surveyed product consumers). Therefore, this study utilized an online qualitative methodology in order to fully

understand the study setting, the study population, and what drew them to the virtual community. The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of community and community building among participants of a leisure-based virtual community and the meanings they attribute to those experiences.

Literature Review

Leisure, community, and technology have been studied together in many unique and productive ways. With the continual advance of technology, leisure has become increasingly mediated by technologies such as smart phones, tablets, and laptops (Baym, 2015). Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) has become a vehicle for building community, expanding leisure opportunities, and for experiencing community online (Valtchanov & Parry, 2017). Therefore, in order to provide context for this study, existing research on CMC, virtual communities and leisure, and the Sense of Community conceptual framework will be summarized.

Computer Mediated Communication

Broadly speaking, theoretical CMC research addresses four main concepts: lack of cues, social construction, social shaping, and domestication. First, CMC scholars assert that CMC has limited non-verbal cues (e.g., facial expressions, eye contact) and as such cannot accomplish the same functions as face-to-face communications. The fewer cues a technology platform supports, the less warmth and involvement individuals experience with one another, and this promotes contentious interactions or "troll like" behavior (Walther, 2011). Second, some CMC scholars suggest that technologies arise from social processes. The inventors of technology, the purpose for which they are designed, and the users of the technology all influence which technologies are designed, adopted, and flourish (Baym, 2015). Third, scholars (Walther, 2011) suggest that it is

important to consider how CMC is socially shaped in that CMC develops and revolves around an interaction or mix of affordances (the capabilities of the technology) and the unexpected and emergent ways that individuals use those affordances (Baym, 2015). Finally, CMC scholars (Haddon, 2006) highlight the need to understand the process by which a newly developed technology moves from introduction into use to eventual domestication. When a new technology enters use it is often seen with fear, concern, idealism, and wonder. However, as it is used the technology will at some point become tame or domesticated. This domestication process is encountered by individuals on a daily basis through the decisions of how and when to use the new technology, who gets to use the technology, and who is restricted (Baym, 2015; Silverstone, Hirsch, & Morley, 1994).

In addition to conceptual CMC research, some CMC literature relates to leisure in terms of context and theory utilization. Oldenburg's discussion of the Third Place, in particular, has been applied to virtual leisure sites such as discussion forums and online gaming (Okun & Nimrod, 2017; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). Oldenburg (1999) proposed that individuals need a place outside of their home and work environment (e.g., cafe, community center, bar) that provides a context for social interactions, community building, spontaneity, and to express emotions freely. This 'Third Place' is essential to individuals' health and well-being in that it provides relief from the demands or stress of work and home life and provides for a sense of inclusiveness and belonging (Mair, 2009; Oldenburg, 1999; Soukup, 2006). Oldenburg's idea of needing a place that is neither home nor work to fulfill a vital social role in an individual's life is applicable to computer mediated communities (Kendall, 2002; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006); however, when the Third Place was first conceptualized virtual spaces did not exist and therefore were not taken into account (Yuen & Johnson, 2017). In a study of online gaming, Steinkuehler

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and Williams (2006) demonstrated that these environments "provide sites of neutral ground, equal status, sociable conversation, easy access, known regulars, playful interactions, (sometimes) homely aesthetics, and a homelike atmosphere" (Baym, 2015, p. 85). Similarly, in his examination of the similarities between Third Places and electronic communities, Schuler (1996), found that the CMC context "emphasize[s] conversation, humor and play, [is] on neutral ground, provide[s] a home away from home and involve[s] regular members" (Soukup, 2006, p. 424-425). Overall, CMC scholars agree that both Third Places (physical locations) and computer-mediated environments (chatrooms, bulletin boards) should be considered essential social spaces outside of the home and work environment that embody the characteristics of Third Places (Browne, 1997; Kendall, 2002).

Virtual Communities and Leisure

CMC and other forms of technology are now significant factors in what people do for leisure and how they do it (Nimrod, 2016). "New information and communications technologies, personal computers, Internet and mobile phones, have profoundly and radically changed norms and practices in all life domains" and more specifically, how and what individuals choose to do for leisure (Nimrod & Adoni, 2012, p.32). The impacts of such an infusion of technology can be both positive and negative. Recent research has now recognized this technological trend and has established e-leisure as a unique setting or unique form of leisure. One specific dimension of e-leisure is the virtual community.

Scholars have suggested various definitions of virtual communities. As defined by Rheingold (1996), a virtual community is "a group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through mediation of the computer bulletin boards and networks" (para. 4). Or as defined by Ridings, Gefen, and Arinze (2002)

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"virtual communities can be defined as groups of people with common interests and practices that communicate regularly and for some duration in an organized way over the Internet through a common location or mechanism" (p. 273). What is generally agreed upon is that virtual communities involve groups of people for whom communication is mediated through computers or other internet-based mediums.

With the advance of technology and common access to technology and the internet, studies of virtual communities have explored the functions, benefits, and challenges of virtual communities (Lifshitz, Nimrod, & Bachner, 2018; Nimrod, 2014). For instance, Wellman and Gulia (1999) found that virtual communities can and do facilitate strong and supportive community ties. Nimrod (2014) studied the benefits and constraints of participation in a seniors' virtual community finding that members experienced the benefits of joyfulness, stimulation, and companionship while also experiencing lack of time as the primary constraint. A study conducted by Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) revealed that the use of Facebook as a social networking site contributed to the formation of social capital and had added benefits for users experiencing low self-esteem or low life satisfaction. The documented benefits of participation in online communities include but are not limited to: a positive impact on psychological well-being, enhanced self-image, improved self-confidence, increased social connectivity, higher levels of perceived social support, decreased feelings of loneliness, lower levels of depression, status neutralization, feelings of joyfulness, feelings of stimulation, companionship, and positive impact on offline reality (Nimrod, 2014). In addition to benefits, negative aspects of Facebook and other online platforms have been documented. For example, Appel, Gerlach, and Crusius (2016) studied the interaction between Facebook use, social comparisons, envy, and depression and Tandoc, Ferruci, and Duffy (2015) explored Facebook use among college students. Both of

these studies found that Facebook use was linked to feelings of envy and depression among users.

Despite the potential benefits and drawbacks of participation in virtual communities and the accessibility of online communication, limited research on the topic has been done within the leisure field. Studies done outside the leisure field have tended to focus on a limited number of populations and settings. In particular, studies have been conducted in business settings, marketing settings, and technological settings focused on improved efficiency, larger profit margins, and increasing consumer purchasing (Kozinets, 2002; 2010; 2015; Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002). Studies conducted within a medical support group setting are also popular in terms of medical condition treatment, support, and recovery times (Welbourne, Blanchard, & Boughton, 2009; Winkelman & Choo, 2003). However, additional research on leisure-based virtual communities is needed to understand how members experience them and their potential to facilitate Sense of Community.

Theoretical Framework: Sense of Community

Sense of Community Theory was first proposed by McMillan and Chavis in 1986. Since then researchers have critiqued, defended, operationalized, and applied Sense of Community Theory within the leisure literature. Literature suggests that leisure spaces and leisure experiences, specifically ones that are social in nature, encourage interaction among individual participants and contribute to developing Sense of Community (Shinew, Glover, & Parry, 2004; Yuen, Pedlar, & Mannell, 2005). Further, existing research suggests that leisure activities can provide a focal point for bringing together a group of individuals and that the activity radiates into the surrounding social contexts, gathering even more individuals around the focal point. So, it is the activity itself that interests people and community is built as a consequence of shared

interest in an activity (Yuen, et al., 2005), suggesting that community is built almost without thought when individuals gather around a shared interest.

Within Sense of Community Theory four factors have been identified as building sense of community: Membership, Influence, Integration and Fulfillment of Needs, and Shared Emotional Connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). *Membership* refers to group cohesion. Wilson defined Membership as the "bond that links group members to the group, the degree to which the members are attracted to one another and the group, and the unity a group has towards its members" (2002, p. 238). Additionally, Membership is composed of five key attributes: emotional safety, boundaries, common symbol systems, personal investment, and sense of belonging (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). *Influence* suggests that members are more attracted to and more likely to maintain membership in a community if they feel they are influential within that community. Group members must simultaneously respect the authority of the group structure while feeling that they can sway the group in terms of decision making (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). *Integration and Fulfillment of Needs* refers to the ability of the group and group members to fulfill the needs of the individual members as well as the needs of the group as a whole (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). A "successful community is able to fit people together so that each person meets other members' needs while meeting his/her own" (Breunig et al., 2010, p. 554). Finally, *Shared Emotional Connection* is built via a shared history and/or shared identification with the community's history, and extensive interaction between group members (Breunig et al., 2010). Higher degrees of group effort lead to social attraction between group members followed by member attraction to the group as a whole. "Not only is the group more cohesive, but group members feel a sense of emotional connection and group self-esteem" (Breunig et al., 2010, p. 555).

The four factors of Sense of Community have been critiqued and attempted modifications have been tested. For example, Proescholdbell, Roosa, and Nemeroff (2006) and Tartaglia (2006) both proposed a condensed three factor model of Sense of Community. However, neither of these studies conclusively validated their three factor modifications and ultimately found weaknesses that the original four factor model did not have (Dionigi & Lyons, 2010). Additionally, Peterson, Speer, and McMillan (2008) solidified their belief in the original four factors of Sense of Community suggesting that previous problems were actually a weakness of the instrumentation utilized and not of the model.

Within the leisure literature, Sense of Community has been applied among a multitude of settings and populations. For example, Breunig et. al. (2010) studied college students in an outdoor trip setting and found that there was a significant increase in perceived sense of community as a result of trip participation. Legg and colleagues (2015) studied parents of youth in a youth sport context finding that the parents did indeed develop a sense of community among the parent group. Obst and Stafurik (2010) examined individuals living with a physical disability and their involvement with a virtual community. Their findings revealed that community members received moral support and advice as well as developed a sense of community that was positively associated with well-being, personal relationships, and personal growth. Lastly, both Dionigi and Lyons (2010) and Nimrod (2014) studied older adult populations and found that sense of community was built and experienced as a result of community involvement.

Finally, studies on Sense of Community have explored both place-based contexts and connection-based contexts. Research applying Sense of Community Theory in connection-based contexts such as social networking sites (e.g., Facebook) and online learning environments is particularly relevant to this study. For example, Mamonov and colleges (2016) studied

Facebook users finding that Sense of Community had an impact on information consumption and information contribution by users. The study highlighted the importance of Sense of Community to the survival and sustainability of virtual communities. Furthermore, as online and distance education continues to grow in popularity and use, so too have studies of these types of contexts. In research on virtual classrooms, Rovai (2002a) found that these environments have the potential to build and sustain Sense of Community. In a similar study, Rovai (2002b) focused on the asynchronous nature of learning networks and online educational environments and found that a strong relationship existed between classroom community and perceived cognitive learning.

In conclusion, the leisure literature demonstrates that leisure-based groups can be a setting for developing Sense of Community. Further, CMC and its ability to promote community building in today's society has spurred on the development of leisure-based virtual communities. However, despite the increase of leisure-based virtual communities, limited research has been done on this setting in either the CMC or leisure literature. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the experience of community and community building among participants of a leisure-based virtual community and the meanings they attribute to those experiences.

Methods

This research was conducted using a qualitative methodology, Netnography, which is appropriate for understanding online group interaction. This study utilized a social constructivist worldview in that the researcher relied on the participants' views and sought to understand the meanings they attribute to their social interactions and experiences in the virtual community (Creswell, 2009). As data collection and analysis progressed, it became clear that the Sense of Community Theory was salient in understanding and explaining the findings. Thus, the analysis

was paired with the four factors of Sense of Community Theory at the end point of data analysis. The first author was a member of the study population, which proved to offer numerous benefits in terms of understanding terminology, interpreting meaning, and building a rapport within the community. However, being a member of the study population does present challenges and concerns of "backyard" research (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). As such, a range of qualitative techniques was employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

Netnography

Netnography – a specialized form of ethnography adapted to the unique computer-mediated communication of today's society (Kozinets, 2010; 2015) - was utilized in this study. "Our social worlds are going digital, with perhaps hundreds of millions of people interacting through various online communities and their associated cybercultures. To stay current, our research methods must follow" (Kozinets, 2010, p.1). Kozinets, who first identified and defined Netnography, defined it as:

> a type of online, or Internet, ethnography; netnography provides guidelines for the
> adaptation of participant-observation procedures- planning for fieldwork, making a
> cultural entrée, gathering cultural data, ensuring a high-quality ethnographic
> interpretation, and ensuring strict adherence to ethical standards- to the contingencies of
> online community and culture that manifest through computer-mediated communications.
> (Kozinets, 2010, p. 191; 2015)

Netnography was first developed within the area of marketing and consumer research. The original consumer research pulled from such fields as anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies in order to incorporate a range of insights into the consumer experience. Since then, the use of Netnography has branched out across disciplines as technology and its common use has

spread, including some application in leisure research (e.g., Berdychevsky & Nimrod, 2017; Mkono & Markwell, 2014). The Netnographic process can be broken down into four steps beginning with solidifying what is being studied and concluding with the representation and evaluation of data. These steps are planning and entrée, data collection, representation, and evaluation (Kozinets, 2010; 2015). Also to be noted, an acknowledged limitation of Netnography is that any given virtual community will have members that participate to varying degrees (i.e., lurkers) and as such the data collected is not equally representative of all listed community members in that those who are more active will be represented to a higher degree and those who do not actively participate will not be represented (Kozinets, 2010; 2015).

Setting: Hogwarts Running Club

The Hogwarts Running Club (HRC) is a Facebook community that was founded in 2014. The HRC is one of three fandom clubs managed by Random Tuesday Inc., a 501c3 non-profit organization.

> Random Tuesday, INC [RTI] is a Non-Profit organization whose mission is to "change the world, one mile at a time". Our fandom groups have been created to support, motivate and inspire our members to move forward and to support charities – to change both their world through fitness and the world around them through charitable means. (HRC, 2018c., p.1)

One way that RTI works to accomplish its goals is through the virtual race events that are hosted within the HRC. A virtual race is a running/walking/biking event that can be completed at any location at any time at any pace. Participants are even encouraged to break up the distance if it is too much to do in one day (HRC, 2018d). Participants typically complete races on their own, post finisher photos online, show support and encouragement to other racers online, and receive

completion medals in the mail. Of the $25 race registration fee paid by participants, $21 are donated to the chosen charity partner for that event. Through these virtual races and other community events, the HCR and RTI have donated over 1.9 million dollars in the last three years to various charity partners (HRC, 2018e).

The HRC virtual community exists within the HRC Great Hall (a Facebook group) and was created as a place for members to share stories, experiences, and a passion for running and Harry Potter. The Great Hall is named after an important location in the Harry Potter book series. The focus of discussion in the Great Hall is on running, encouragement and support, and enjoying the community and Harry Potter fandom (HRC, 2018f). As of February 2018 the Great Hall community had 16,381 members with more joining regularly (HRC, 2018a) and had community members in 42 countries, on seven continents, and all 50 states within the United States (HRC, 2018b).

One element of the HRC community that is strongly embraced and carried throughout all aspects of the HRC design is theming. For example, the HRC has an assortment of subgroups available to its members. These subgroups have a variety of purposes, are optional to join, and cover topics such as cooking, crafting, gardening, and the Hogwarts Houses. All of these subgroups are named in theme with the Harry Potter book series by incorporating characters, settings, or plotlines described in the book series. For example the Transfiguration Classroom (subgroup) is the group focused on the creation of crafts and sharing those crafts with other interested individuals. This subgroup is named for the academic subject (Transfiguration - the magical art of transforming one object into another) that students study in the book series.

Sample and Data Collection

The sample for this study consisted of posts collected from the Facebook group the HRC Great Hall beginning in May 2018 and concluding October 2018. Even though data collection took place over a total of six months, actual engagement with the study setting began in April 2017 to facilitate prolonged engagement in the study setting. Collecting and analyzing posts and information from Facebook groups, pages, and profiles has been utilized by researchers as an established data source (Almansa, Fonseca, & Castillo, 2013; Harlow, 2013; Lee, 2015).

Multiple sampling strategies can be used in Netnographic studies. One that has been used in some leisure research is to define the scope of the dataset by collecting all posts during a specific timeframe such as during/immediately following a specific event or on particular days over a set timeframe (Wu & Pearce, 2014). This approach provides a comprehensive view of the community as it allows researchers to track all interactions between participants on a given day and to observe development of the community over time without being limited, for example, to posts on a selected topic. As this study sought to further the understanding of virtual communities and was focused on developing understanding of meaning within the community, this approach was most appropriate. All posts within the Great Hall were collected on one to two days per week during the data collection time period. One to two days per week were selected to define the scope of the sample without limiting the ability to observe participant interactions over time. Additionally, each data collection day consisted of an entire 24-hour period so that international community members were not inadvertently excluded from the sample based on time zone differences.

Data were collected in the form of posts within the Great Hall using the copy and paste method of textual post retrieval (Kozinets, 2010; 2015). The primary data collection focus was

on the copy and pasting of textual posts and occasional photos, videos, and links were considered for inclusion when they added notable context or additional insight to the text. In addition to the post text, the number of comments and the number of emoticon reactions (i.e. features to indicate a reaction to a text post such a surprise, anger, laughter) for each post was recorded. This allowed for some sense of agreement based on number of "likes" and helped to capture some information from "lurker" members. All member posts were considered for data collection; however, spam and sidebar advertisements were ignored and not collected. As noted by Kozinets (2010) most Netnographers choose to treat spam and advertisements in this way.

All textual data were analyzed as a primary data source; however, data was also elicited from community members as part of the member checking process in which summaries of the data were presented online for participants' feedback four time during the data collection period. This elicited data was added to the dataset of existing posts. The total number of posts collected was 2,134 posts over 43 data collection days. This number fell within a range of total posts collected that is typically seen in the Netnographic literature (e.g., Berdychevsky & Nimrod, 2017; Lee, 2015; Nimrod, 2012). In addition, data saturation, the concept of collecting/analyzing data until no new information is obtained (Creswell, 2009) was reached during data analysis.

Data Analysis

This study employed a Netnographic approach to data analysis (Kozinets, 2010; 2015). The collected posts, comments, and elicited data were first open coded line by line with a total of 48 codes generated. As this coding took place, notes were maintained regarding individual codes, thoughts of the first author, and the analysis process. Following coding and noting, codes were analyzed and compared to known theories and frameworks to ascertain if one or more aided in understanding the dataset more fully (Kozinets, 2010; 2015). The qualitative software NVivo

was employed for storing, coding, and sorting collected data (Kozinets, 2015; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). During the process of data analysis and coding, saturation was reached roughly 13 days into data coding. However, the first author continued to code roughly half of the data to ensure analysis of data collected over time. In total 1,088 posts were analyzed. At this point in the process the first author compared the 48 codes to the Sense of Community Theory to check for fit between the generated codes and the four factors of Sense of Community. A total of 43 of the 48 codes mapped onto the factors of Sense of Community Theory.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness prolonged engagement in the study setting, member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling were incorporated into the research process (Creswell, 2009; Genoe & Liechty, 2016; Kozinets, 2015). Engaging in the study setting for a prolonged period of time promotes trustworthiness within a dataset and study as a whole (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This prolonged time enables the researcher to learn the "culture", to test for misinformation or distortions, and build trust within the community (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, engagement with the study setting began in April 2017 and continued through October 2018. Secondly, a summary of the findings was shared with the study participants via member checking (Creswell, 2009) four times throughout the data collection process. Member checks were posted in the Great Hall to allow participants to interact with the content in the same way they interact with normal community posts. Participants were encouraged to share their thoughts regarding the conclusions drawn from the data and to express their agreement or disagreement with the summary. Participants expressed joy in reading and understanding the summary and supported the conclusions drawn from the data. This elicited data was then added to the data set for analysis. Third, the raw data and the codes assigned to each block of text were

sent for peer debriefing (Creswell, 2009) at the conclusion of data coding. The peer debriefer

reviewed the raw data and accompanying codes to determine that the blocks of text had been

assigned the proper codes. The peer debriefer and the first author then communicated regarding

specific questions and concerns the review generated. This process yielded an understanding and

agreement of codes and how they were assigned to each post that was collected. Lastly, the first

author maintained a reflexive journal (Genoe & Liechty, 2016; Kozinets, 2010) of her position as

a researcher, connection to the study population, thoughts, speculations, worries, and logistical

notes throughout the duration of the study. This promoted researcher self-reflection and helped

create an open and honest narrative that shed light on the thought processes of the first author

throughout the research process.

Findings and Discussion

The data revealed that Sense of Community was present and played a role in the study

setting. Following is a breakdown of each of the four factors of Sense of Community

(Membership, Influence, Integration and Fulfillment of Needs, and Shared Emotional

Connection) and the findings that fit within each factor. All quotes in the following sections

have been pulled directly from member posts.

Membership

Membership refers to elements of group cohesion, emotional safety, boundaries, a

common symbol system, personal investment, and a sense of belonging (McMillan & Chavis,

1986). In line with Membership, codes within the dataset that mapped onto this factor

encompassed elements of a shared symbol system and shared terminology, shared experiences,

group identity expression, expressions of community pride, and a sense of belonging. For

example, many posts within the dataset conveyed a shared symbol system indicating that

members of the community have built a system of shared experiences and ways of communicating that are unique to membership within the HRC. The member post below demonstrates the use of a shared symbol system as well as shared terminology:

Red Ford Explorer that turned at the railroad tracks on 9th Street heading towards Rincon, I couldn't get a picture of your sticker because a black Ford truck got between us but you have been "flipped"!

HRC members use the term flipped to refer to a community activity involving a shared symbol. Members of the HRC have the option to purchase an HRC car magnet for their vehicle. If another member sees a magnet they will flip it upside down as a way of indicating that another member is nearby. There is great excitement within the community when someone is "flipped." Other common terms used within the community are nrr (not running related), nhpr (not Harry Potter related), and house identifiers such as Lion, Puff, Snake, and Badger. The data also suggested that membership in the HRC provided opportunities for group identity expression and recognition indicating members had incorporated the HRC and elements of Harry Potter into their self-image. In some instances shared symbols were used to enhance members' expressions of identity within the community:

Two Badgers [badger is the house emblem of Hufflepuff House in the Harry Potter book series] and a Lion [emblem of the Gryffindor House] (not in that order) completing the Forgotten 5k today. United we stand on this 20th anniversary.

Finally, participants' posts demonstrated feelings of pride at being part of the community and feelings of sense of belonging within the HRC space. For instance:

Is anyone else absolutely ecstatic that there is a little corner of this world, with many very different people, who also read so much into the tiniest little details in what was essentially a childrens book and want to discuss them?

Because I am ❤️💙💛💚🦁🏔️🐾🐍

The sense of belonging was particularly suggested by the numerous posters who described the HRC as "family.": "Hello! Thank you for the add, I can't tell you how excited I am to be a part of this family! …So truely excited for this!"

These findings support and add to the existing research on Sense of Community in leisure settings. First, current research suggests that leisure activities can provide a focal point for bringing people together and that community is built as a consequence of the shared interest or activity (Yuen et al., 2005). In this case, Harry Potter and running are the shared interests that have attracted members and the HRC has given them a means to express their group identity as a member of a group of individuals with the same passions and interests. Second, Membership is the first of the four factors of Sense of Community that has been supported by this study. Elements of group cohesion, membership boundaries, a common symbol system, and a sense of belonging (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) were present within the dataset. All aspects of the original definition of Membership were present to some extent within the data.

Also demonstrated by the findings are similarities to the Third Place research on virtual communities. As Oldenburg (1999) originally proposed, individuals need a place outside of home and work in order to lead healthy and balanced lives. The current findings support the argument of HRC as a Third Place in that members expressed that the HRC provides a sense of inclusiveness and belonging that are essential in the development of a Third Place (Mair, 2009; Oldenburg, 1999; Soukup, 2006). Additionally, as Steinkuehler and Williams (2006)

demonstrated in their study, virtual environments can provide neutral ground, social conversation, easy access, known regulars, and playful interactions. All of these characteristics were evident within the dataset collected from the HRC. The current findings support scholars who argue that both physical locations as well as virtual spaces can provide spaces that embody the criteria for being a Third Place (Browne, 1997; Kendall, 2002).

In terms of practice, these findings indicate the importance and impact of a shared symbol system and shared terminology. These two elements bring a community together and facilitate a shared bond, shared activities, and a sense of belonging. With this in mind, practitioners could use this knowledge to deliberately design these elements into virtual spaces and communities in order to better accomplish the organization's goals.

Influence

As McMillan and Chavis (1986) state, members are attracted to and more likely to maintain membership in a community if they feel they are influential within that community in some way. Members of the HRC demonstrated feelings of influence both within the community as well as within the world at large as a result of community participation. For example, members were frequently given the opportunity within the HRC to contribute to the process of suggesting charity partners for virtual races, race event themes, and medal inspiration. In terms of the world at large, one of the more prominent concepts expressed was that of finding joy, satisfaction, and meaning in being "part of something bigger." In other words, community members felt they not only had an influence within the community itself but within the larger world through the actions of the community. One example began with an HRC member posting the following:

NHPR - but seriously, BDR [Best Damn Race, a non-HRC running event] is not allowing

a service dog! A dog who has ran for them before 6 previous time, who has finished

Spartan [non-HRC running event], who has done Disney [non-HRC running event].

Grrrrrrrrr.....

This participant's post regarding a race organization (BDR) not allowing a service dog actually

resulted in various community members calling their local agencies that enforce the Americans

with Disabilities Act (ADA), investigating the law, and taking action against BDR. The result

was that BDR changed their stance on service dogs at their race events. Another example of the

community's external influence is demonstrated below:

I just have to share this here! Last year's Adipose 5k fully funded the adoption process for

Charlie, and today RODS Racing announced that he has found his family!!!!

This member was celebrating the success of a past race and the charity partner chosen. This

particular race had the goal of fully funding the adoption of a child with downs syndrome

through a charity partner.

DIP UPDATE #8: The Kansas elves [an HRC themed title for volunteer workers]

worked late into the night last night...so late, in fact, that I wasn't able to give you the

complete wrap up. All I was able to tell you was that we have CRUSHED OUR GOAL!

As of last night, all three RTI programs have donated: 1,402,007 Bandages!

This update by community administrators brings the community Direct Impact Projects (DIP) to

the forefront. Twice a year the HRC organizes a DIP to directly impact a small non-profit

organization and aid in fulfilling their mission. This mentions the Noah's Bandage Project DIP

in which the community came together to donate over 2 million bandages to children's hospitals

and clinics by the end of the campaign. Overall, community members demonstrated their influence within the community by contributing to event development via charity partner suggestions and race theme suggestions, by volunteering for hands on roles within the community (house elves), and by being able to freely express their thoughts and ideas; and demonstrated their influence in the world at large via community participation by banding together, for example, to promote ADA accommodations at race events or by participating in various outreach projects, such as the DIP projects. The data suggests that this aspect of influence has not only empowered individuals to feel they can make a difference, but has drawn the group together more cohesively in its mission to "change the world, one mile at a time" (HRC, 2018c, p.1).

This study supports the second of the four factors of Sense of Community, Influence, adding to and strengthening the existing literature. Additionally, these findings extend beyond current leisure literature in terms of fandom communities and philanthropy. This particular community highly values and takes great meaning from being involved in philanthropic ventures as part of regular community participation. Future research could benefit from exploring the intersections of virtual communities, fandom, and philanthropy more thoroughly. These findings demonstrate the true power and influence being "part of something bigger" can have on an individual and how they experience sense of community. As such, practitioners should consider adding a philanthropic element to a community to attract and maintain members and facilitate the growth of sense of community.

Integration and Fulfilment of Needs

This factor refers to the ability of the group and its members to fulfill the needs of the individual group members as well as the needs of the group as a whole (McMillan & Chavis,

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1986). Data suggested that this occurred as participants shared a passion for and discussion of the Harry Potter books and films with other enthusiastic individuals, by sharing personal stories and/or requesting emotional support in trying times, by sharing personal victories and having people to celebrate with, and by receiving support, encouragement, and motivation to continue to improve physically or mentally.

> NRR but I thought I would share this. My favorite moment in the Battle of Hogwarts was when Neville pulled the Sword of Gryffindor from the sorting hat, because that moment was PROOF that Neville was in the right house all along; only a true Gryffindor could do that. It was a moment that showed just how strong Neville really was, despite bearing his burdens in silence for years. What's your favorite moment of the Battle of Hogwarts?

The post above is one of many that demonstrates one member's passion for the Harry Potter books and films and sparked a lengthy discussion between members. Additionally, this was posted on the 20th anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts (a significant plot point within the book series), showing that community members mark the large events within the books in real time. In addition to this quote, many members posted memorials of their favorite characters that lost their lives during the Battle of Hogwarts as a way to share their grief and be supported by others experiencing the same emotions. Even though this is an example of members fulfilling each other's needs in a time of sadness, there were also times when members shared joy or excitement within the community and experienced support from other members.

> I'm going back to school and got into the first college I applied to! (Like ever. I didn't try after high school.) They sent me socks! I's a free elf now! [allusion to a Harry Potter book character]

This member is celebrating a great achievement by sharing it with the community as well as demonstrating how elements of Harry Potter have been incorporated into her celebration.

Can I get a 'you can do it'? I spent the past few weeks sick because of allergies and building a boat for the current rain apocalypse. I don't care if I just get a short walk in today, I want to get back into working out again.

Or this member, quoted above, asking for support in a trying time as well as the member's desire to receive encouragement and motivation to keep physically active. Time and time again, members reached out to the community to fulfill their own needs, such as needing support and encouragement or just wanting someone to share their enthusiasm about Harry Potter with, and in return, similarly fulfilled the needs of others.

This study documents the various needs members have and the ways in which the community meets those needs by reacting to and commenting on the various posts. The findings support the factor of Integration and Fulfillment of Needs and further lend support to the four factors of Sense of Community. In addition to supporting the Sense of Community literature, the findings support research by Nimrod (2014) and Lifshitz and colleges (2018) in that benefits of virtual community participation included experiences of joyfulness, stimulation, and companionship. Joyfulness was demonstrated by member posts celebrating a great achievement and experiencing support from community members for that achievement. The various posts that sparked conversation among members about the Battle of Hogwarts, for example, on the anniversary of the event are examples of stimulation. Companionship was demonstrated when members asked for encouragement and support and received them from community members via responses to those requests.

The findings suggest that practitioners should take into account the diverse needs of community members and the many ways a virtual community can facilitate needs fulfilment. For example, each Wednesday has a NSV (non-scale victory- any activity, accomplishment, or achievement that a member has experienced that is not related to their weight on a scale) post where members are encouraged to share their NSVs with other members. This post each Wednesday was one of the most popular each week, as demonstrated by the number of comments and reactions the post received. This example suggests that one goal of the HRC is to celebrate all achievements, not just those measured by weight loss, and that community members respond to this type of goal and the activity in place to address this goal. Practitioners should take into consideration the goals of each member and the community at large in order to better assess the needs of those involved. By assessing the needs of a given community, practitioners can then develop unique and individualized activities to address those needs. One powerful tool for any practitioner is a successful example from which to draw inspiration and ideas.

Shared Emotional Connection

Shared emotional connection is built via a shared history and/or shared identification with the community's history and extensive interaction between group members (Breunig et al., 2010). With an average of 54 posts per day over the data collection time period it was evident that community members were interacting and building history with one another. This was also apparent by numerous posts in the dataset related to sharing emotional experiences, expressions of gratitude, experiences of camaraderie, and of members supporting other members. For example, this member shared a frustrating experience and commiserated with other members that were experiencing shipping issues as well:

Nargles [reference to mischievous creatures from the book series] are messing with the

clerks at the USPS because my medal keeps getting stuck in KC, MO and KC, KS ... it

needs to come to Topeka, KS 🫠 Pretty sure I'm not getting it today 😉

Next, we have an example of a member expressing the opposite of frustration as intense

excitement is shared with a community that is excited right along with them: "I am happy

dancing like mad at my desk, y'all because I just scored tickets to the open captioned

performance of Harry Potter & The Cursed Child!" Or, another example of a member sharing

their experience of rereading the Harry Potter books- a very common activity within the

community- and sharing their emotional experiences in real time: "Just finished re-reading

Deathly Hallows Chapter 34. I cannot get through that chapter without ugly crying! 😭🥲😭"

This particular shared experience is one of grief and sadness and is understandable without

clarification by others who have read the book.

As the last of the four factors of Sense of Community, Shared Emotional Connection was

supported by the dataset and suggests that the findings of this study hold to the original four

factor model of Sense of Community as tested by Peterson and colleagues (2008). Also, not

specific to one factor but representative of all four, this study supported current literature

suggesting that a qualitative approach might be better able to access the complexity of Sense of

Community than a quantitative approach. For example, Lorion and Newbrough (1996) argued

that a qualitative approach might be able to better access the meanings individuals assign to their

experiences and understandings of community. Other researchers agree on the basis of the

uniqueness of an individual's experience, on the ever-changing context of experiences, and the

interactions between community members and their sharing of meanings (Hill, 1996; Puddifoot,

1996).

Overall, the dataset adds to existing studies that support the four-factor model and therefore strengthen Sense of Community as a theoretical framework. In addition, there is much that practitioners can take from this research to improve existing virtual community spaces or design future spaces specifically to fulfil individual's leisure needs and to promote a healthy leisure lifestyle.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The sample gathered for this study was limited to English speaking Facebook users. Future studies could benefit from taking these limitations into consideration by targeting non-English speaking populations and by exploring virtual communities that use non-Facebook online platforms. Secondly, this study was limited to one virtual community with specific interests that have drawn the members together: Harry Potter and running. The Harry Potter book series and films have attracted a large and loyal following (Anellie 2008; Brummitt, 2016) and the Harry Potter fandom community is a unique study population that may or may not be like other fandom communities (i.e. Star Trek, Dr. Who, or Star Wars). Future studies could benefit by broadening the leisure literature surrounding fandom communities that have formed online. Additionally, despite conscious efforts to acknowledge negative or contradictory data, the Great Hall revealed itself to be a largely positive space with a very limited number of negative posts present in the dataset. This could be a result of the members attracted to the community and their general disposition. However, this could also be a result of the community norms enforced by the community administrators (i.e., the community policy states that offensive comments may be removed). As such, future studies could benefit by exploring this phenomenon in other settings to uncover an explanation for the lack of negative comments and posts. Also, this lack of negative posts and comments is in direct opposition to the CMC concept

that a lack of non-verbal cues leads to "troll like" or negative behavior (Walther, 2011). It may be speculated that with the development of emoticons, video and photo sharing, and other non-text based response options that the lack of non-verbal cues is being mitigated. As virtual spaces adapt to new response options almost no virtual spaces remain that are exclusively text based. Future studies should explore the viability and/or obsolescence of this aspect of CMC theory. Further, these findings contradict the negative outcomes of feelings of envy and depression that some studies have linked to Facebook use (Appel, Gerlach, & Crusius, 2016; Tandoc, Ferrucci, & Duffy, 2015). This may be the result of individual Facebook use versus community Facebook use and merits attention moving forward. Lastly, the current findings suggested that the charitable elements of this particular virtual community were connected to the development of Sense of Community. Future scholars would do well to explore the intricacies of this connection.

Conclusion

This study yielded findings that in some cases support and in others extend or contradict the existing literature.   For example, all four factors of Sense of Community were supported by the findings, lending strength to the four-factor model. Additionally, a unique contribution of this study is that the findings highlight a virtual setting as a setting for the development of Sense of Community. This suggests that Sense of Community, as can be developed in face-to-face leisure-based communities, can also be developed in leisure-based virtual communities in a similar fashion (Rovai, 2002a). However, the findings of this study do contradict the CMC literature regarding the lack of non-verbal cues leading to negative or "troll like" behavior (Walther, 2011). This study came up short on evidence of negative online behavior within the HRC as a community. This suggests that the use of emoticons, photos, and content from the

Harry Potter books and movies might have enabled community participants to bridge the gap created by the lack of non-verbal cues, building new avenues of communication.

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CHAPTER 3: MANUSCRIPT 2

Virtual Community Participation as Serious Leisure: a Netnography of the Hogwarts Running

Club

Introduction

The development and study of virtual communities has been documented for over thirty

years (Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002) with recent rapid growth as a result of advancements and

dissemination of technology today. In fact, technology now plays a direct role in what

individuals choose to do for leisure and how they choose to do those activities. Recent research

has even established e-leisure as a unique setting or form of leisure (Nimrod, 2016).

Additionally, e-leisure settings and virtual spaces, such as online multiplayer gaming spaces,

have been explored as sites of Serious Leisure (Holt, 2011; Silverman, 2013; Urban, 2007).

However, the study of virtual communities is limited and gaps in the literature exist. One such

gap pertains to a topic that predates the development and study of virtual communities: fandom-

a collection of individuals organized socially around the interest of one particular piece of

literature, movie or television franchise, or fictional character (Baym, 2007; Jenkins, 2006).

An example of a fandom that is on the rise and that has gathered a large and loyal

following is that of the Harry Potter book series, which includes seven original books followed

by eight movies, various merchandise, and most recently numerous theme parks around the

globe (Anelli, 2008; Brummitt, 2016). As of 2018, half a billion Harry Potter books have been

sold worldwide, meaning that one in fifteen individuals in the world now own a Harry Potter

book (Pottermore News Team, 2018). The popularity of the books and this fandom has not only

spurred the development of numerous fan sites online, book clubs, and conversation groups, but

has also been the catalyst for the formation of virtual communities. Despite the widespread

popularity of the Harry Potter fandom, it has received almost no attention in the leisure literature. In addition, despite the potential for online communities to provide a site for meaningful or even Serious Leisure, little attention has been given to fandom-based virtual communities. As such, the purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of participation and engagement among participants of a fandom-based virtual community.

Literature Review

Although fandom-based virtual communities have not been extensively explored within the current leisure literature they have been identified as important topics of research within fields such as information technology and media studies. Virtual spaces are fast becoming vehicles for building community, expanding leisure opportunities, and for experiencing fandom-casually or seriously (Stebbins, 1996; 2007; Valtchanov & Parry, 2017). Therefore, in order to provide context for this study and to understand the interplay between virtual communities, fandom, and Serious Leisure, existing research on these topics will be summarized.

E-Leisure and Virtual Communities

To begin, it is important to discuss the concept of virtual leisure or more commonly e-leisure (electronic-leisure) in general. Technology has long been developing and has shaped leisure since the early days of human history (Nimrod, 2016). Further, some scholars have argued that major changes in technological communication have transformed entire civilizations (Innis, 1951; McLuhan, 1964). One way that technology directly impacts society is through the experience of leisure. Technology now impacts, both positively and negatively, the activities that people choose to do for leisure and how they access leisure opportunities (Nimrod, 2016). Recent research has recognized this technological trend and has established e-leisure as a unique setting or unique form of leisure. Within leisure settings, new technologies are used for a variety

of purposes such as information gathering, entertainment, and online games (Nimrod, 2016).

The e-leisure setting of multiplayer online gaming specifically has experienced a higher degree of research interest than other settings. For example, Holt (2011) explored the virtual world of World of Warcraft conducting an 'Elfnography' of participant involvement with and development of their avatar characters describing such experiences of player self-actualization via avatar development.

However, one e-leisure setting that has not been widely researched is that of the virtual community. Virtual communities, as a form or setting of e-leisure, typically involve groups of people for whom communication is facilitated through computers or other internet-based mediums (Rheingold, 1996; Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002). Scholars have explored a variety of topics related to virtual communities as well as the functions, benefits, and challenges of virtual communities (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Lifshitz, Nimrod, & Bachner, 2018; Nimrod, 2014; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). For example, Valtchanov, Parry, and Glover (2016) in their study of online social networking sites found that the increased social isolation and anxiety-inducing culture of today surrounding motherhood was mitigated by participation in an online mothers' group demonstrating the need for and benefit of online leisure-based communities. Despite these studies, the research on virtual communities within the leisure field is still limited. Specifically, leisure literature incorporating both virtual communities and fandom are almost non-existent.

The Harry Potter Fandom

In terms of the scope and breadth of virtual communities, there are innumerable groups formed around even more topics. One such topic that has spurred the development of virtual communities is that of fandom. Virtual communities have been developed to support and

encourage interaction with media content that has generated a fan base (e.g., Dr. Who, Game of Thrones, Firefly). One such example is the Harry Potter book series and films which have attracted a large and loyal following (Anelli, 2008; Brummitt, 2016). J.K. Rowling, the author of the book series described the phenomenon saying:

> So, this book is a history of a community…It can be read as a warts-and-all expose of fan mentality or as a story of the world's biggest book group or as the personal journey of a group of people who would never otherwise have met. The tale of the online fandom is every bit as extraordinary as Harry's own, and it has left me with a feeling of awe and gratitude. (as cited in Anelli, 2008, p. xii).

Similarly, Anelli (2008) documented the impact on individual fans. For example, one fan commented "…before I read Harry Potter I was composed of magic dust and fairy breath, and reading the first book had been what brought all my particles together. That Harry Potter was my personal Big Bang" (p. 11). These quotes from the Harry Potter literature demonstrate the depth and scope of the personal and global impacts of the Harry Potter book series and give some explanation for the virtual communities founded around this common interest.

Additionally, these quotes not only give a personal view from an important Harry Potter expert, but they highlight the significance of Harry Potter as a social phenomenon and suggest the need for research. Leszkiewicz (2017) reported on the "Harry Potter generation" and summarized key statistics on the scope of Harry Potter in today's society. First, YouGov conducted a survey of more than 2,000 adults to mark the 20th anniversary of the release of the first Harry Potter book and found that, in Britain, 81 percent of 18 to 24 year olds and 68 percent of 25 to 34 year olds are fans of Harry Potter books, films, or both (as cited in Leszkiewicz,

2017). Second, in 2014, "a study found that young children who read Harry Potter were likely to be more empathetic and less likely to be prejudiced than their peers" (Leszkiewicz, 2017, p. 13). Finally, Leszkiewicz (2017) argued that Harry Potter changed the reading habits of a generation. Research by the Federation of Children's Book Groups found that 84 percent of teachers noticed the "difference that Harry Potter made to their students' reading abilities, and 73 percent said they were surprised at how many of their students were able to read the books" (as cited in Leszkiewicz, 2017, p. 14).

These statistics detail individuals spending their leisure time engaged with Harry Potter in many forms and bring to the forefront the potential for widespread research surrounding Harry Potter. Such research should, but has yet to extensively explore the virtual communities formed around this interest. Additionally, research into online multiplayer gaming has indicated that these settings can be venues for Serious Leisure participation (Holt, 2011; Silverman, 2013; Urban, 2007), but further research on fandom-based virtual communities is needed to explore the intersection of online community participation, fandom, and Serious Leisure.

Conceptual Framework: Serious Leisure Perspective

First conceptualized by Robert A. Stebbins, he has offered the following definition of Serious Leisure:

> Serious Leisure is the systematic pursuit of an amateur, a hobbyist, or volunteer activity sufficiently substantial, interesting, and fulfilling for participants to find a (leisure) career there acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and experience (Stebbins, 2012, p.69).

To clarify, career is used in this definition not in the traditional work-life sense but in reference to a dedicated approach to an activity or interest. As such this broad view of career can be

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applied to such situations as leisure, politics, religion, volunteering, and so on (Stebbins, 2007;
2012).

Stebbins further elaborated by differentiating the amateur role from the hobbyist role. He
notes that both the amateur and the hobbyist dwell in a realm between the dabbler and the
professional (Stebbins, 2007; 2012). "Serious Leisure participants take an intense interest in
their pursuit that sets them apart from those who dabble in the activity" (Baldwin & Norris,
1999, p. 4). Meaning that the hobbyist and the amateur are both more involved than a casual
dabbler yet are not at the level of a professional. In differentiating the amateur from the
hobbyist, Stebbins clarified that an individual taking on the amateur role has a professional
counterpart within their area of interest. Amateurs are often found in the arts, science, sports,
and entertainment (Stebbins, 2007; 2012). For example, an individual who participates in
basketball as Serious Leisure has a professional counterpart in the NBA. Additionally, rules and
regulations are established for basketball via the professional standards used in the NBA. This is
often the case that an amateur participates in an activity with established, sometimes rigid, rule
structures. Professionals "set the standards" of amateur pursuits (Baldwin & Norris, 1999;
Stebbins, 2012). In comparison, a hobbyist does not a have a professional counterpart, although
they may have a commercial counterpart or even a public following (Stebbins, 2007). Lastly,
Stebbins (1996; 2007; 2012) adds that most amateurs and hobbyists are completely immersed in
their own social worlds.

Beyond differentiating between an amateur and a hobbyist, Serious Leisure is also
defined by six characteristics:

1. Significant personal effort is expended to acquire pertinent skills and knowledge.
2. Participants persevere in spite of injuries, fatigue, bad weather, and other distractions.

3. Participation is viewed as a career.

4. Participants strongly identify with the activity

5. There is a unique subculture with relevant values, beliefs, norms, events, traditions, moral principles, and performance standards developed around the pursuit.

6. Participants experience several long-lasting benefits as a result of participation (Siegenthaler & Gonzalez, 1997; Stebbins, 2007).

Also of note, scholars have more recently analyzed the Serious Leisure perspective and questioned the dichotomous nature of the original conceptualization. It has been proposed that not only can leisure be Serious or Casual, but is can also be project based or considered on a continuum of seriousness. It has been argued that most leisure activities can and are engaged in with varying degrees of "seriousness" (Shen & Yarnal, 2010; Veal, 2017).

Within the leisure literature, Serious Leisure has been applied among a variety of settings and populations. For example, Baldwin and Norris (1999) studied American Kennel Club participants finding that the costs associated with intense time and monetary commitments were justified by the benefits associated with participation. Brown, McGuire, and Voelkl (2008) studied older adult participants of shag dancing finding that shag dancing was a form of Serious Leisure for older adults and supported the role of Serious Leisure in successful aging. Or, Gibson, Willming, and Holdnak's (2002) study of Florida football fans that confirmed Stebbins' six characteristics of Serious Leisure existed as participants pursued sport fandom as a leisure activity. However, even though a variety of populations and settings have been explored, the vast majority of the existing literature has focused on face-to-face activity. The one notable exception to this has been the virtual world of video gaming. Online multiplayer gaming has been studied in the Serious Leisure context with findings confirming that multiplayer online

gamers can be considered Serious Leisure participants (Holt, 2011; Silverman, 2013; Urban, 2007)

In conclusion, the leisure literature demonstrates that e-leisure, including online communities, is now considered a unique form or setting for leisure experiences. Existing research on virtual communities has tended to focus on a limited number of populations and settings such as business/marketing consumer groups, users of specific technology platforms or within medical support groups (e.g., Kozinets, 2002; 2010; Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002; Welbourne, Blanchard, & Boughton, 2009; Winkelman & Choo, 2003). One notable absence in the literature, however, is research exploring the fandom-based virtual communities. Additionally, various leisure-based groups have been studied in the Serious Leisure context, but these studies have been primarily limited to face-to-face style activity participation. Thus, more research is needed that focuses on e-leisure settings as Serious Leisure experiences.

Methods

This research was conducted using Netnography in order to better explore the perceptions of participation and engagement among participants of a fandom-based virtual community. The first author was a member of the study population, which proved to offer benefits in terms of understanding terminology, interpreting meaning, and building a rapport within the community. However, being a member of the study population does present challenges (Genoe & Liechty, 2016). As such, a range of qualitative techniques was employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

Netnography

Netnography refers to a specialized form of ethnography adapted to the unique computer-mediated communication of today's society (Kozinets, 2010; 2015). Kozinets first identified and

defined Netnography in 2010 and later refined the technique in 2015. Netnography was first developed within the area of marketing and consumer research, which pulled from such fields as anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies in order to incorporate a range of insights into the consumer experience. Since then, the use of Netnography has branched out across multiple disciplines, including some application in leisure research (e.g., Berdychevsky & Nimrod, 2017; Mkono & Markwell, 2014). Generally speaking, Netnography is used to explore and develop an understanding of online or virtual settings and the individuals interacting within those settings. It is important to note that as Netnography collects data in the form of available online interaction (e.g., text, photos, emoticons), an acknowledged limitation is that the experiences of less-active members (i.e., lurkers) will receive less representation in the findings (Kozinets, 2010; 2015).

Setting: Hogwarts Running Club

The Hogwarts Running Club (HRC) is a virtual community with over 16,000 members (HRC, 2018b). The popularity of this virtual community made it an ideal setting for exploring individuals' experiences of participating and engagement in a fandom-based virtual community. The HRC was founded in 2014 and is one of three fandom clubs managed by Random Tuesday Inc., a 501c3 non-profit organization "whose mission is to 'change the world, one mile at a time'" (HRC, 2018c, p.1). The HRC seeks to encourage physical activity and charitable giving by arranging "virtual races" which members run or walk in their own communities and report completion online. Members can participate in a variety of individual or team activities and the majority of race fees are donated to a selected charity.

The HRC virtual interaction takes place within the HRC Great Hall (a Facebook group) and was created as a place for members to share stories, experiences, and a passion for running and Harry Potter. The Great Hall is named after an important location in the Harry Potter book

series. The focus of discussion in the Great Hall is on running, encouragement and support, and enjoying the community and Harry Potter fandom (HRC, 2018d) As of February 2018 the Great Hall community had 16,381 members (HRC, 2018a) and had community members in 42 countries, on seven continents, and all 50 states within the United States (HRC, 2018b). The first author was a member of the HRC from April 2017 through the conclusion of the study and an active participant in community activities. Prior to data collection, the first author received permission to collect data within the community and began the study by creating an administration-approved post introducing the study to the community members.

Sample and Data Collection

The sample for this study consisted of posts collected from the Great Hall beginning in May 2018 and concluding October 2018. Collecting and analyzing posts and information from Facebook groups, pages, and profiles has been utilized by researchers as an established data source (Almansa, Fonseca, & Castillo, 2013; Harlow, 2013; Lee, 2015). The sampling strategy used in this study entailed collecting all posts within the Great Hall during a set timeframe (Wu & Pearce, 2014). This approach provides a comprehensive view of the community as it allows researchers to track all interactions between participants on a given day and to observe development of the community over time. Posts were collected on set days chosen to evenly represent all days of the week and the day was defined as an entire 24-hour period to allow for time zone differences. Data were collected in the form of posts within the Great Hall using the copy and paste method of textual post retrieval (Kozinets, 2010; 2015). Occasional photos, videos, and links were considered for inclusion when they added notable context or additional insight to the text. In addition to the post text, the number of comments and the number of emoticon reactions for each post was recorded.

All textual data were analyzed as a primary data source; however, data was also elicited from community members as part of the member checking process. Four times during data collection, the researcher presented general findings from the analysis and posted additional probing questions in the Great Hall in order to evoke feedback from the participants. This elicited data was added to the dataset of existing posts. The total number of posts collected was 2,134 posts over 43 data collection days. This number fell within a range of total posts collected that is typically seen in the Netnographic literature (e.g., Berdychevsky & Nimrod, 2017; Lee, 2015; Morgan, 2008; Nimrod, 2012). In addition, data saturation, the concept of collecting/analyzing data until no new information is obtained (Morse, 1995) was reached during data analysis.

Data Analysis

This study employed an inductive Netnographic approach to data analysis and as such, logical reasoning was used to build up individual observations into an order that provided a holistic representation of the dataset (Kozinets, 2010; 2015). First, the data was open coded line by line. Following this, codes were refined by sorting similar codes into categories and independent codes. Third, these independent codes and categories were evaluated and four emergent themes were uncovered related to participation and engagement in the virtual community (Kozinets, 2010; 2015). During the process of data analysis and coding, saturation was reached roughly 13 days into data coding (Morse, 1995). However, the first author continued coding roughly half of the data to ensure analysis of data collected over time. In total, 1,088 posts were analyzed.

As is often the case with an inductive design, this study was designed to compare the emergent themes to numerous theories and frameworks that the first author had been sensitized

to in order to better understand and explain the findings. The inductive analysis suggested that the Serious Leisure perspective was relevant to the findings. Thus, after the thematic analysis the first author compared the independent codes, categories, and emergent themes to the Serious Leisure perspective to explore connections between the dataset and Serious Leisure.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were used to improve trustworthiness including prolonged engagement in the study setting, reflexive journaling, member checking, and peer debriefing (Creswell, 2009; Genoe & Liechty, 2016; Kozinets, 2015). Engaging in the study setting for a prolonged period improves trustworthiness by enabling the researcher to learn the "culture", identify anomalies, and build trust within the community (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Engagement with the study setting began in April 2017 and continued through October 2018. Member checks were conducted by sharing summaries of the findings with the study participants and requesting feedback (Creswell, 2009). Participants expressed joy in reading and understanding the summary and supported the conclusions drawn from the data. Third, the raw data and the codes assigned to each block of text were sent to a colleague for peer debriefing (Creswell, 2009) at the conclusion of data coding. The peer debriefer and the first author communicated regarding specific questions and concerns the review generated. This process yielded an understanding and agreement of codes and how they were assigned to each post that was collected. Finally, the first author kept a reflexive journal (Genoe & Liechty, 2016; Kozinets, 2010) of her position as a researcher, experiences with the study population, and logistical notes throughout the duration of the study. This helped ensure the findings reflected the perspectives of the participants. For a more in-depth description of the methods utilized for this study please see Lizzo (in progress).

Findings

This analysis revealed four emergent themes within the dataset: You're a Wizard Harry: Shared Passion for Harry Potter; Hogwarts is Home: Identity; Running in the Rain: Engagement Despite Challenges; and Pepper-up Potion: Improvements in Well-being. Following is a synopsis of each theme with examples from the dataset to demonstrate how HRC members communicated these themes. All quotes in the following sections have been pulled directly from member posts.

You're a Wizard Harry: Shared Passion for Harry Potter

The first theme relates specifically to one of the two main interests of the HRC: running and Harry Potter. Members expressed their love and passion for all things Harry Potter through participation in Harry Potter themed activities as well as frequent references to characters and events from the book series in casual discussion. One example of this presented itself via the DailyHRCprophet post. Each day a different community volunteer was responsible for creating a post that engaged the community in conversation. The name DailyHRCprophet was named for the Daily Prophet wizarding newspaper from the book series. One such post asked the question "Would you rather: be a rat for 12 years or be in Azkaban for 12 years?" In laymen's terms, would you rather be sent to wizarding prison for 12 years or be transfigured into a rat for 12 years; both significant plot points in the book series. Interestingly enough, this discussion was intense with a nearly even split between preferences. Many members used their vast knowledge of Harry Potter to quote from the books in their argument for one option over the other.

Another way that members showed their passion for Harry Potter was through telling anecdotes from their offline lives as this member has done:

Had to share. I'm a teacher and we had a visit by the local librarian yesterday. She was

listing activities and mentioned a Harry Potter themed camp...cue 17 heads turning

around to stare at me...ha my kids know I'm a Harry Potter nerd 🤓

Another example of members' shared passion for Harry Potter was seen in the popular Hogwarts

Mystery game that members downloaded and played on their phones. This particular game was

a hot topic within the community as tips and secrets for success were shared. Additionally,

members frequently posted questions or comments about aspects of the game play such as:

"Does anyone else feel guilty about poking that poor house elf by the potions classroom? He just

wants to get some rest. Poor thing looks exhausted." It turns out, that yes, many community

members did feel guilty for disturbing the house elf (sympathetic characters from the series) in

the game, showing that their passion for a book series has led them to anthropomorphize

characters to a point of having real feelings of guilt. Harry Potter has shown itself to be a

powerful force in the lives of members of the HRC and a phenomenon that drew members

together.

Hogwarts is Home: Identity

The second theme references the common phrase "Hogwarts is Home" used by the Harry

Potter fandom community at large to indicate their deep commitment to and involvement with

Harry Potter. It also demonstrates how some members have gone one step beyond simply

sharing a passion for Harry Potter into actually incorporating Harry Potter and the HRC into their

everyday identity and how that identity is expressed. This was inclusive of members labeling

themselves as Hufflepuff, Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, or Slytherin (houses/groups into which

students are sorted at the school in the Harry Potter series that have unique traits) and using

various shared symbols to express this; members incorporating elements of Harry Potter into key

aspects of their lives such as how they raise their children; and members indicating that the HRC is like family. For example, an aspect of dedicated community participation can be earned via Perfect Prefect status. This status entails seven stages of achievement and is meaningful within the community as indicative of full participation in all HRC virtual race events and the final challenge event of the year. Once earned, participants receive a commemorative pin. This commemorative pin was a status symbol within the community, was worn with pride, and often played a part in members' identity expression.

Additionally, as a part of community participation members took a sorting test, were sorted into one of the four Hogwarts Houses (Hufflepuff, Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Slytherin), and identified strongly with their assigned house. Members often referred to themselves as a member of their house and used these labels to explain various behaviors and daily activities. For HRC participants being a Hufflepuff, for example, was meaningful within the community and for the individual's identity as a person who was hardworking, just, and loyal- all characteristics of Hufflepuffs within the Harry Potter book series. For example, this member identified as Ravenclaw (characters known for being intelligent) and attributed her behavior to this identity characteristic:

> That moment when your #ravenclaw is showing.....I catalogued all of the suggestions
> people gave me for my trip to Hawaii, cross referenced and condensed by my interest,
> then mapped it out. I'm about to start colour coding!

Or another member that had incorporated Harry Potter into her identity as a mother to the point of aspects of the book series being a common part of her 4 year olds behavior and felt this was a positive parenting strategy: "Just had to ask the 4 year old to stop yelling in parseltongue [a language from the book series]... I think it's a parenting win. 💛🧙‍♀️🐍"

Lastly, it was common for community members to express their identity via membership within the HRC "family" as a whole. For example, members would often begin their posts with the phrase "Dear HRC Family" indicating that they felt the community members were all part of a large extended Harry Potter family that supported one another in times of celebration, times of trouble, in everyday activities, and so much more.

Running in the Rain: Engagement Despite Challenges

As a community formed around the common interests of running and Harry Potter, it came as no surprise that community members often posted about experiences of running, including their running accomplishments and challenges. The theme *Running in the Rain: Engagement Despite Challenges* encapsulated this topic and brought to the forefront the fact that these runners not only run, but also stay engaged in the activity and the community despite facing numerous challenges. Members demonstrated perseverance and dedication to the community and to running even when things got tough. For example this participant clearly articulated not wanting to "get out there" but did so anyway in order to support her HRC team:

> I'm feeling proud of myself for getting out there even in the rain and even when I didn't
>
> want to this week to support my team for the #hufflescuffle! 🙂

Similarly, another participant's celebratory post with photos showed just what he was willing to endure in order to complete his first full marathon:

> Today I finished my first full marathon!!! This is my before "I'm so excited but also
>
> nervous!" face and my after "I'm really cold and wet and in pain I just want to collapse
>
> but the ground is wet also I have three beverages and a banana to balance" face. ha!

Time after time, community members demonstrated their will to continue despite challenges of heat, cold, pain, exhaustion, hunger, and rain. Even to the point where other members would

sometimes issues warning such as this: "I'm gonna say it again. Do NOT injure yourself... Or I'll drive up and make you write lines with a black quill!!! [the black quill is a reference to one of the most despised characters and a punishment in the Harry Potter series] 'I will not run too fast, I will not run too fast'." Engagement in the online community motivated participants to persevere through challenges in order to maintain participation in running. In some instances, this created the potential for excessive exercise, for example if participants were competing as a team and wanted to ensure their team accumulated the most miles. However, the vast majority of posts indicated that the community support led to positive engagement.

Pepper-up Potion: Improvements in Well-being

The last theme uncovered within the dataset related to the support that members felt from the "HRC Family". This theme tells the story of members supporting each other in order to help themselves and others make improvements in their lives. These improvements span the range of physical improvements such as weight loss or increased stamina; cognitive improvements such as increased will power to resist sweets or small daily victories over clinical depression; and general well-being such as feeling positive and upbeat. One example of this was the NSV (non-scale victory) posts that were coordinated within the HRC each Wednesday. These posts gave members an opportunity to post about a victory (large or small) that they had experienced that did not have to do with numbers on a scale. Here is one example of a member celebrating a mental health victory:

> My nsv is that I've been off my anxiety meds for a week and not once have I fallen under depression…. I've been positive and in high spirits.... It's the little things that mean the most

Or another member who was not only celebrating feeling stronger but was encouraging and supporting others to give themselves the chance for the same experience:

> I finished my 10th in person race today... If you ever thought about training for one, do it. I am a fat, slow runner; but I do it. There are more people like me than the super fit and super fast. Sign up for one. Give yourself time to train, but do it. Even if you have to walk the whole thing, you will find friends along the course. I feel stronger and more bad ass every time I finish one.

Overall, members engaged in conversations within the HRC to give support and to feel supported in their efforts to become healthier and happier in life. After all, one of the primary missions of the HRC was to "support, motivate and inspire …members to move forward… – to change …their world through fitness." (HRC, 2018c, p.1)

Discussion

HRC as Serious Leisure

This study was not designed to be analyzed with a theory or framework as a guiding force. However, as codes and categories emerged identity became a prominent theme from the start and continued involvement with the dataset led to the realization that considering the data from a Serious Leisure perspective could aid in understanding the findings further. Although Serious Leisure is typically studied among individuals, elements of serious leisure were common among data collected from members of this group. Those HRC members who posted in the Great Hall virtual community (acknowledging that some HRC members may not post or do so infrequently) exhibited one or more of the six characteristics of Serious Leisure as they demonstrated an intense interest in their chosen topic and activity (Harry Potter and running), have acquired specialized knowledge (Harry Potter lore), experienced benefits from being a

member of the HRC, and strongly identify as HRC members. For example, the theme *Running in the Rain: Engagement Despite Challenges* directly ties into the second characteristic that states participants persevere in their activity in spite of injuries, fatigue, bad weather, and other distractions (Siegenthaler & Gonzalez, 1997, Stebbins, 2007).

The first of Stebbins (2007; 2012) six characteristics suggests that long-term engagement in an activity combined with personal effort and attained knowledge or skills in the chosen pursuit distinguishes Serious Leisure from Casual Leisure or project-based leisure. The current findings demonstrated this characteristic as community members have acquired a vast amount of knowledge regarding Harry Potter- the books, characters, movies, merchandise- and spend time sharing and discussing this knowledge in the online forum. Perseverance is the second characteristic of Serious Leisure (Stebbins, 2007; 2012). Stebbins found that in the pursuit of the chosen activity participants might encounter difficulties or unexpected hardships. However, those that are serious about their activity persevere and push through the tough times. In the current study numerous participants mentioned challenges they faced (e.g., weather, injuries, lack of motivation) and their continued participation. Third, Serious Leisure participants characterize their experiences with long-term involvement that is inclusive of turning points and different stages of achievement within the activity (Stebbins, 2007; 2012). The HRC as a community provided members with numerous opportunities to develop skills and achieve goals. However, although many participants saw advancement in their skills and achievement, it is unclear if these same participants viewed their involvement in the HRC as a career. In other words, the third characteristic is only partially supported by the current study. Fourth, participants of Serious Leisure strongly identify with their chosen activity and construct a significant portion of their identity around the activity (Stebbins, 2007; 2012). This

characteristic was strongly evident in the current findings. Stebbins (2007; 2012) fifth characteristic suggests that participants of a Serious Leisure activity become part of a social world created around the shared activity that is characterized by its own unique subculture with specialized values and norms. It was clear within the dataset that elements of a shared symbol system, shared terminology, a sense of community, and community events within the HRC are all part of a unique HRC culture. For example, the shared terminology nrr (not running related), nhpr (not Harry Potter related), or HRC-ing (a verb used to mean that community members have inundated a web application or internet server) are examples of shared terminology commonly used within the community. The long-term physical and mental health improvements evident in the findings support the last characteristic of Serious Leisure (Stebbins, 2007; 2012). Stebbins found that participants of Serious Leisure activities experienced long-lasting benefits as a result of participation just as HRC members expressed through posts that detailed benefits such as weight loss due to physical activity, improvements in mental health, and increased social support.

Beyond the six characteristics, the findings support the conceptualization of Serious Leisure as a continuous experience instead of as a dichotomous one. The original conceptualization (Stebbins, 1996) portrayed Serious Leisure as either being present or being absent. However, Veal (2017) and Shen and Yarnal (2010) proposed that leisure participants more likely engage in activities with varying levels of seriousness. The HRC participants certainly displayed and embodied the characteristics of Serious Leisure, however, it was quite common for members of this large community to display the full range of participation levels and so too, varying degrees of seriousness.

This dataset as a whole supported Stebbins' (2007; 2012) six characteristics of Serious Leisure and added to the existing literature surrounding Serious Leisure and leisure activities. The current findings support research which suggests that Serious Leisure engagement can exist in a variety of settings including sport/physical activity, and online communities (Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2002; Silverman, 2013; Urban, 2007) as well as exist on a continuum of "seriousness" (Shen & Yarnal, 2010; Veal, 2017). Overall, the dataset supports virtual community participation as a form of Serious Leisure, adding to the limited research in this area.

Virtual Communities and Offline Reality

Further, the findings suggest that many aspects of engagement in the virtual community had implications for participants' offline reality. This supports research by Nimrod (2014) who found, unexpectedly, that participation in a seniors' online community had implications for participants' offline reality. Elements within the dataset that might have implications for participants' offline reality include improvements in physical and mental health and well-being, behaviors related to perseverance, or the depth and involvement of participants in the Harry Potter fandom and how that is incorporated into their identity. Some existing research has highlighted the potential negatives of screen-based leisure (Costigan, Barnett, Plotnikoff, & Lubans, 2013), however, the current findings suggest that e-leisure must be recognized as nuanced, with both benefits and drawbacks.

The potential for virtual communities to influence individuals' offline reality has numerous practical implications. For example, the HRC is a community with a very clearly defined purpose and topics of interest. This community has formed around the common interest of running and Harry Potter with a purpose of changing the world one mile at a time. Practitioners should take note of this and realize the value of these clear interests and purpose.

For those that want to build or create a virtual community of their own, clearly defining the purpose of the community and the common interests of focus could lead to a more successful community; the interests being the elements that draw a community together initially and the purpose acting as the glue that holds the community together long-term.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although the HRC has members around the world (HRC, 2018b), the sample gathered for this study was limited to English speaking Facebook users. As such, future research should explore a broader variety of languages and online platforms. Second, measures of actual behaviors, such as related to running or fitness, were not obtained due to the data collection method. Future research is needed to document the impact of virtual community engagement on physical activity or other offline behavior.

On another note, since the dataset was composed of archival data we cannot know that all participants were utilizing HRC community participation as Serious Leisure. It can be assumed that those members of the community that were choosing a less active role or were simply "lurking" (Berdychevsky & Nimrod, 2017; Kozinets, 2015) would, as a result, be represented in the dataset to a far lesser degree than members who were engaged in Serious Leisure. The current body of literature could benefit from a more in-depth study of the population in order to determine what percentage of the community were Serious Leisure participants and to what extent this is generalizable to other virtual communities. Additionally, this study has considered the six characteristics of Serious Leisure among a group rather than among individuals. This means that not all individuals within the community were experiencing all six characteristics at the same time, but rather represented the characteristics as a collective. This is not typical within

the Serious Leisure literature and this new application of Serious Leisure could represent a new direction for Serious Leisure research.

Finally, there are studies within the leisure literature which have suggested that increased screen time can have negative impacts on aspects of participants' lives (Costigan, et al., 2013). Although screen time was not measured as part of this study, it might be assumed that Serious Leisure participants of a virtual community would have increased screen time as a result of participation. This study indicated minimal negative impacts of increased screen time, however, scholars should consider looking into this more thoroughly. Lastly, many elements present within the findings of this study suggest participants' offline lives were impacted by their virtual community participation as Serious Leisure. Future studies should continue to explore this topic in order to better understand the tie between virtual community participation as Serious Leisure and participants' offline lives.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggested that members of this virtual community were able to experience Serious Leisure as they engaged in shared fandom, persevered through challenges, developed identity related to the virtual community, and reaped personal benefits. This study yielded findings that support, extend, and strengthen existing leisure literature on Serious Leisure in online environments. One such unique contribution pertains to the study population- the Harry Potter fandom community. Existing literature tends to focus on a limited number of populations and the fandom community at large is as yet understudied in the leisure literature. The Harry Potter fandom community is inclusive of age ranges from children to seniors and the books are widely read internationally (Leszkiewicz, 2017). Additionally, individuals have been documented spending their leisure time engaged with Harry Potter in many forms ranging from

the books, films, theme parks, and fan conventions. Research has yet to extensively explore the virtual communities formed around Harry Potter and other such fandom communities and how these activities might be experienced as Serious Leisure. This provides insight into an understudied population (the Harry Potter fandom community) in a unique setting (virtual space) and demonstrated that virtual community participation can be a form of Serious Leisure.

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CHAPTER 4: MANUSCRIPT 3

Benefits and Motivations for Virtual Community Participation: a Netnography of the Hogwarts

Running Club

Introduction

Park and recreation professionals are tasked with the challenge of keeping up with

today's ever changing technology. Agencies increasingly are finding the need to facilitate online

program registration, to incorporate new technology as it becomes available for program

implementation, and to remain vigilant and adaptable in order to survive and thrive and to attract

a new generation growing up as the Digital Generation. As Duerden, Aaron, and Cromwell

(2011) found in their study of technology and the Digital Generation, although some

practitioners feel a larger effort should be made to focus more on face-to-face program

implementation, most practitioners believe that technology is one of many programmatic tools

available and that it can and should be used to positively enhance current and future programs.

For example, in a study of geocaching, researchers found that combining the technology of GPS

with aspects of a treasure hunt was a way to encourage physical activity among youth in an

outdoor setting (Battista, West, Mackenzie, & Son, 2016).

In addition to technology use in program implementation, professionals should also

consider technology as a way to reach out to community members and potential program

participants in order to increase community involvement and to facilitate targeted outcomes.

One way this might be facilitated is via the formation and use of a leisure-based virtual

community designed and fostered by a parks and recreation agency. Virtual communities are

increasing in popularity at a rapid rate due to advances in technology and the new forms of

socialization resulting from these advancements. For example, the virtual worlds and

communities formed around the multiplayer online games World of Warcraft and Second Life have been studied with findings indicating these settings can foster Serious Leisure experiences and experiences of self-actualization (Holt, 2011; Urban 2007). Within these communities, members engage in game play, discuss character development and game strategies, and create long-lasting relationships with fellow community members. Although these communities have been around for over thirty years (Ridings, Gefen, &Arinze, 2002), they have not been commonly adopted into the park and recreation professional "tool kit" in such a way as to be seen as valuable in program delivery or in reaching out to community members to foster stronger community connections and involvements. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of benefits and motivations among participants of a leisure-based virtual community. This insight can allow practitioners to better assess the usefulness of this technological tool in designing programs and in reaching hard-to reach participant populations such as those living in rural areas or individuals living with mobility restrictions.

Background

Virtual Communities and Leisure

In today's society technology has spread to the point that cell phones, laptops, and other electronic devices are a part of everyday life (Baym, 2015; Consalvo & Ess, 2011) and have a significant impact (whether positive or negative) on what individuals choose to do for leisure and how they are choosing to do it (Nimrod, 2016; Nimrod & Adoni, 2012). This includes using electronic devices and the internet as sources of leisure. Examples of e-leisure (electronic-leisure) activities include geocaching, online multiplayer gaming, online shopping, blogging, online dating, and, of course, the plethora a games that can be downloaded to a cellphone. For instance, Holt (2011) conducted a study exploring the multi-player online game World of

Warcraft and the level of involvement individuals display in developing their online avatar finding that the more involved members experienced self-actualization as a result of avatar development via community resources and peer input. On the other hand, Oggins and Sammis's (2010) study of World of Warcraft gamers revealed characteristics of addiction among players, contrasting the positive findings noted above.

Since research into e-leisure is still developing, there are online settings that have not been widely studied, such as virtual communities. Virtual communities refer to a group of individuals for whom communication is facilitated through computers, gaming devices, or other internet-based mediums (Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002). Scholars have explored a variety of topics related to virtual communities such as their functions, benefits, and challenges (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Lifshitz, Nimrod, & Bachner, 2018; Nimrod, 2014). Particularly relevant to this study, research has revealed benefits of participation within a virtual community including but are not limited to: feelings of joyfulness, feelings of stimulation, companionship, enhanced psychological well-being, enhanced self-image, improved self-confidence, decreased feelings of loneliness, lower levels of depression, increased social connectivity, higher levels of perceived social support, status neutralization, and positive impact on offline reality (Lifshitz, Nimrod, & Bachner, 2018; Nimrod, 2014). Despite these studies, research on virtual communities within the leisure field is still limited and this study will aid in filling this gap within the existing literature.

Self-Determination Theory

A large body of literature has focused on benefits and motivations of leisure. Although some scholars argue that there is a nuanced difference, many see motivations and benefits as largely the same/similar because people are motivated to participate as a result of the benefits

they receive (Lee & Scott, 2006; Lemieux, Eagles, Slocombe, Doherty, Elliott, & Mock, 2012).

One theory that seeks to explain motivation and its interconnected relationship with benefits is Self-Determination Theory. This theory posits that humans have innate psychological needs that are the basis for self-motivation as well as healthy behavioral and psychological functioning: autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Deci and Ryan (2000) define autonomy as the human need to be an agent of change in our own lives, to feel that we are in control of the decisions we make and the outcomes we work toward. The second element, relatedness or belonging, is described as the universal need to interact with, care for, and experience the care of others. This second element can and often does manifest as aspects of community. The last need is that of competence or mastery which is described as working toward bettering oneself and seeking to gain more control of our experiential outcomes through this bettering process (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Self-Determination Theory attempts to understand individuals' needs and the contexts for meeting those needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Although not specifically stated in the initial conceptualization of the theory, leisure settings are an ideal place to address these human needs as a result of the intrinsic nature and freedom of choice that goes into choosing to be a part of a leisure setting. Social leisure in particular has been identified as a context where certain needs are satisfied via interaction with others of the community. For example, Broughton, Payne, and Liechty (2017) studied an older men's coffee group and found that their experiences facilitated emotional health, well-being, and support; and Kerstetter, Yarnal, Son, Yen, and Baker (2008) studied the Red Hat Society members and their experiences of emotional and social support as a result of belonging to the group. Additionally, Self-Determination Theory has been used to understand connections between leisure and well-being. For instance, Lloyd and Little (2010)

studied women's participation in leisure-time physical activities and their social context. Their

findings indicated well-being can be enhanced via participation in contexts that support

interactions between autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Overall, the literature and theory

focused on leisure, community, and Self-Determination Theory has demonstrated that humans

have an innate need for community and that social leisure settings have the potential to fulfill

that need.

Setting: Hogwarts Running Club

To date, studies of benefits and motivation of participation in leisure-based communities

have generally focused on face-to-face interactions and communities formed based on

geographic proximity. However, leisure-based virtual communities should also be considered as

settings for meeting innate human needs such as autonomy, relatedness, and competence. One

such community and the setting for this study is the Hogwarts Running Club (HRC). The

popularity of the HRC, with over 16,000 members around the globe, made it an ideal setting for

exploring perceived benefits and motivations of a leisure-based virtual community (HRC,

2018a). The HRC was founded in 2014 as one of three fandom clubs managed by Random

Tuesday Inc., a 501c3 non-profit organization. The agencies "mission is to 'change the world,

one mile at a time'" (HRC, 2018b, p.1) and it seeks to encourage physical activity and charitable

giving by arranging "virtual races" which members run or walk in their own communities and

report completion online.

The HRC community interactions take place in the HRC Great Hall, which is hosted on

the Facebook groups platform. The Great Hall was created as a place for members to share

stories, experiences, and a passion for running and Harry Potter. The Great Hall, as an aspect of

theming within the community, is named after an important location in the Harry Potter book

series. The discussion within the Great Hall is on running, encouragement and support, and enjoying the community and Harry Potter fandom (HRC, 2018c). Prior to data collection, the first author received permission to collect data within the community and began the study by creating an administration-approved post introducing the study to the community members.

Methods

This study used a qualitative methodology, Netnography, which is geared toward understanding online experiences. Specifically, Netnography is a specialized form of ethnography adapted to the unique environment of computer-mediated communication (Kozinets, 2010; 2015). The sample for this study consisted of posts gathered from the HRC Great Hall via the copy and paste technique of textual post retrieval (Kozinets, 2010; 2015). Posts were collected on preset days over a six-month period from April 2017 to October 2018. This approach was chosen to facilitate data collection over time which enabled a comprehensive view of the community to develop and be documented (Wu & Pearce, 2014). Additionally, each data collection day was defined as an entire 24-hour period to allow for representation of members across time zones. The total number of posts collected was 2,134 posts over 43 data collection days. This number fell within a range of total posts collected that is typically seen in Netnographic studies (e.g., Berdychevsky & Nimrod, 2017; Morgan, 2008; Nimrod, 2012).

Analysis of the data utilized a Netnographic approach paired with open coding to build up individual observations that provided a holistic representation of the dataset (Kozinets, 2010; 2015). The data was first open coded line by line with codes and then categories emerging from the data regarding members' perceptions of benefits and motivations. During the process of data analysis and coding, saturation was reached roughly 13 days into data coding (Creswell, 2009).

However, the first author continued to code approximately half of the data to ensure analysis of data collected over time. In total, 1,088 posts were analyzed.

The first author joined the HRC community in April 2017 and continued membership through the conclusion of the study. This provided a host of benefits including building report within the community, understanding terminology, and interpreting meaning. However, holding membership status within a study population also poses challenges (Genoe & Liechty, 2016). As such, certain techniques were implemented to ensure trustworthiness. First, prolonged engagement in the study setting enabled the first author to learn the cultural ins and outs of the community, to identify irregularities, and to build trust within the community (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Second, peer debriefing was coordinated between the first author and a colleague who was not otherwise involved in the project, in order to review and come to an agreement regarding the data coding and how each code was assigned to each line of text (Creswell, 2009). Third, the first author maintained a reflexive journaling throughout the research process documenting her position as a researcher, logistical notes, and experiences with the study population in order to ensure the study findings were representative of the perceptions of the community members (Genoe & Liechty, 2016; Kozinets, 2015). Finally, a summary of the study data was presented to community members via member check posts in order to solicit feedback (Creswell, 2009). Many members responded to these posts affirming the analysis and expanding on their experiences, which added richness to the data. For a more in-depth description of the methods utilized for this study please see Lizzo (in progress).

Findings

Data analysis revealed numerous perceived benefits and motivations that members attributed to participation in the virtual community. The findings indicated that community

members experienced motivation and encouragement as a result of participation in community activities and through support received from other community members. For example, this community member expressed a powerful sentiment in terms of the community and what it meant to her:

> You have no idea what this lion pride [reference to community subgrouping] has done for me! I have literally gone from suicidal to optimistic because of all of you! To actually, and quite literally, feel the love from a group of people that by most accounts are strangers has changed not only my life but my heart. I have been able to overcome so much in the last few months because of my fellow lions! HRC has saved my life and I can't thank you enough for that. This group, this organization, these people are more of a family than most of my blood family. I just wanted to say thank you.... All of you #onepride #onehouse #oneHRC

Generally, the findings regarding benefits and motivation could be categorized into three groupings: physical health and fitness, mental health, and social and emotional support.

Improved Physical Health and Fitness

As a community with a focus on running, it came as no surprise that members perceived benefits related to their physical health and fitness. Members of the HRC were diverse in their physical activity levels and physical health parameters, therefore their perceived benefits in this area were relative. For example, this member was just starting out on her physical activity journey:

> I signed up for my first live 5k. Its huge because I'm throwing myself into the world of exercise! I have been told by the doctors I need to, so finding HRC has been a huge encouragement!

For her, the HRC was providing the motivation needed to start making improvements to her physical health. This member was not alone in starting out on a journey to improve physical health, as posts like this were common within the Great Hall.

A bit further along the physical health spectrum is this mother: "I can jog for 3 min straight AND kinda answer my kids questions as we go. "What bird is that? Look a puppy! What flower is thag?" This particular post was in celebration of what this member considered a "win" in her physical fitness journey. Members often expressed feelings of acceptance and encouragement due to the norm established within the community of celebrating not only large achievements, but also small achievements along the way. For example, many members celebrated health milestones:

> My doctor appt. yesterday was terrific! All the "bad" numbers were below or close to normal ranges, may be able to discontinue Metformin at next checkup in 4 months, and he was amazed that I had turned it around so quickly. I've been walking farther each day and continuing to eat well, and feel pretty happy with myself! Now I'm going to go for another walk!

Also represented were members that had been running for years but acknowledge that members were at various stages:

> When I first started running 4 years ago, I could only go 20 seconds before needing to walk. Now I do half marathons and am doing my first marathon in October. We all have to start somewhere! 😊

Although the vast majority of the dataset was positive and reflected perceived benefits one drawback reflected in the dataset was potential injury due to community participation. Occasionally, a community member would be so dedicated to helping their team win points in a

competition that they pushed themselves beyond their limits or beyond what might be considered reasonable. For example, this member's description of a workweek might be viewed as excessive:

> I was able to do a 60 hour work week on my feet and still get to the gym every day before
>
> work to bike at least 10 miles and my fake knee only swelled on the last day!

Posts like this would, at times, prompt other community members to worry about potential injury and express concern for the individual's health and safety in a response to the initial post.

Overall, the findings related to physical health and fitness truly represented the entire range of fitness levels from novice to elite athletes. However, the acceptance and encouragement within the community made all levels of fitness and health feel welcome, accepted, and important. One member, fittingly, described engagement in the HRC as "A bit of community where you feel as you belong without feeling inadequate or mocked."

Improved Mental Health

As with physical fitness and health, members also perceived benefits related to improvements in mental health. Members described experiencing changes in the way they thought about and perceived themselves or their limitations and demonstrated improvements in confidence, body image, and depression. For example, this member not only experienced improvements in running speed and distance but also in the way he perceived his abilities:

> It made me feel as if I could go out in public and achieve anything! Since joining HRC I
>
> have run faster, farther and with actually groups of people now which I never could
>
> before. It made me realize that I could do things I never thought possible.

Or this member who also experienced a change in the way she saw herself and her body and realized how important that is:

I rarely buy things for myself, so after I bought this and it was a little snug I was

disappointed. Now it fits pretty perfectly. I think it's more about my attitude towards my

body than actual physical change, but that's what I need the most.

Members frequently expressed joy in finding that they were mentally stronger than they had been

only a day, week, or month before. For instance, one member described her struggles with

depression and celebrated overcoming aspects of her depression:

50 days binge free. I'm starting to feel the physical and psychological effects this has.

I've lost 13 lbs of the 25 lbs I gained from my depression fueled 4 month long binge

episode. My mind is not clouded with shame and guilt.

In addition, this same member celebrated improvement to her overall mental health related to

running:

I just started week 3 of marathon training, with 6x800 meter sprints. I hate sprints. Death

intervals are what I called them. Each week I complete this workout I am reminded I am

tougher than the toughest run, that if I can start off doing the least pleasant run first,

there's nothing stopping me.

Although it was uncommon, one drawback was noted in the findings that pertained to

discussions of Harry Potter merchandise. Often members would post details about items for sale

such as Harry Potter memorabilia, clothing items, collectibles, and foods. The items ranged in

price from just a few dollars to thousands for rare collectors' items. Generally, these posts were

received as informational and beneficial to those looking for Harry Potter merchandise.

However, occasionally, a member would comment in reaction to a merchandise post with a

comment like "... but seriously, they might as well just take all of my money!!!" An emoticon

depicting crying, distress, or anger often followed these types of posts. For these members being

exposed to a stream of Harry Potter merchandise was stressful as a reminder of the items they could not afford at that time. Generally, however, HRC members perceived benefits of improvements in mental health as a result of their involvement with the community and the support and encouragement they received as an active member.

Social and Emotional Support

Last, participants perceived that membership in the HRC provided valuable social and emotional support. Members in the HRC described group camaraderie, connecting with others via shared interests, as well as feelings of support and acceptance from the community. For example, this member explicitly stated that she "joined this virtual community because its nice to be in a group of like minded people who enjoy the same thing." This was a common sentiment as many members expressed joy in finding a group with whom they could discuss the Harry Potter book series and films. Or this member who was motivated because she "know[s] that other people are running solo the same time that I am just somewhere like I am for the same goal! I'm not alone." As this member has expressed, despite completing races alone, she perceived herself to be part of a community. Similarly, members often utilized the community as a means to meet friends in person that they would not have otherwise been able to connect with. For example:

> One of the benefits of HRC is the camaraderie! I went to school online, and I'm in a strange city for my graduation. I found a fellow Ravenclaw to run with today thanks to the regional pages, and I've been looking forward to today as a highlight of this trip.

This feeling of support and encouragement was not limited to facilitating running and physical fitness, but was also viewed as a benefit in and of itself. For instance, there was a community member who identified as trans and whose family was unsupportive. As such, this

individual shared updates regarding their transition that they could not share with their own family. As one member explained in a response to a member check post: "For some people, I think they also use the group as a replacement for emotional support they may not be getting in real life." Another member supported this thought of seeking support not available in her offline life as a motivation for joining the HRC, as described in response to a member check:

> I found HRC and joined for a since of community that i dont always have locally. I also needed a way to stay motivated and make goals. For me this sense of community is a huge benifit; I transitioned last year from active duty to mil spouse, not many other mil spouses understand that transition or my husbands crazy job or see me away from him and his job title. for me HRC gives me my own identity and when I talk to real live people i can talk to them about my hobby and virtual community.

For this member, the HRC gave her support she needed and helped with establishing her unique identity in a time of transition. Similarly, members often reached out in times of emotional distress for support from other community members. As one member described in response to a member check:

> it is very, very common for people to come to the group for sympathy when they lose a loved one - humans as well as pets...there's a scene in the sixth HP movie after the death of a significant character in which the characters mourning his death raise their wands into the air, glowing. As an analogue to this scene, people will request a "wands up" when someone passes away in real life, and then other members of the group will comment "/*" to symbolize the raised wand glowing at the tip.

Sympathy, support, and encouragement were all evident and abundant within the community posts and were perceived as beneficial by members. Overall, the HRC showed itself to be a place for members to feel social and emotional connections with other like-minded individuals.

Discussion

This study was designed to better understand the benefits and motivations among participants of a leisure-based virtual community. Current literature has demonstrated that technology has a place in park and recreation settings and can be used as a tool to provide personal benefits and to reach a wide range of people (Flores, Kuhn, 2018; McCool, 2017). For example, in a study of individuals who played Pokémon Go, researchers found that those who played the game were more physically active and spent more time outdoors resulting in stronger health benefit predictors (Kaczmarek, Misiak, Behnke, Dziekan, & Guzik, 2017). The findings and the technological setting of this study have implications for both theory and practice.

Implications for Theory and Practice

Self-Determination Theory, and its' three components, has been used to understand individual behavior related to innate human needs and resulting benefits to well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci 2017). Leisure settings can be an ideal place to address human needs as a result of the freedom of choice associated with most leisure activities (Lee & Ewert, 2019; Lloyd & Little, 2010). The findings of this study support this claim and extend current literature focused on face-to-face leisure settings to now include virtual leisure settings as places to meet human needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

Autonomy. Deci and Ryan (2000) defined autonomy as the need to be an agent of change in one's own life and to feel control over decisions we make and the outcomes we work toward. This first component was supported by the findings of this study as participants often

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took advantage of programmatic elements/events facilitated by the virtual community to make decisions and to work toward a healthier life. Additionally, community support and encouragement for these decisions was readily available from community members, further adding strength to the decisions members made. For example, participants often posted about starting a new exercise routine, signing up for their first race event, or a new health resolution to eat better. These posts received a plethora of positive responses from other community members who were either on the same path or who had been successful in the chosen endeavor and wanted to lend support and encouragement. The community norms encouraged members to reflect on their lives and make decisions to move forward in a positive direction. Additionally, the structure of the community itself was designed to support autonomous decisions. For instance, each virtual race put on by the HRC was considered separate from the one before and the one after. Members were, of course, encouraged to participate in all HRC races, however, all of the marketing materials (posts and videos) explicitly stated participants should participate when they were able and should feel no pressure to participate if, for example, finances were tight that month. This form of promotion not only encouraged positive participation and acceptance of all levels of fitness, but also left the ultimate choice to the individual, further building a supportive and loyal community. The findings support research which suggests that autonomy can be fostered within a social environment as long as individuals have freedom to make choices related to their participation (Lloyd & Little, 2010).

The findings suggest that leisure-based virtual communities are a viable setting to promote and encourage autonomy. In practice, the programmatic structure of the HRC has demonstrated one way to incorporate elements of choice into a supportive community structure. For example, the very nature of a virtual race not only gives participants the option to participate

or not, but gives participants the control over when and where they will complete the race

distance. For many members first entering the running world or for busy members with a family

and a job, having the option to schedule the race on their own time and in their own space is

empowering. An agency wishing to capitalize on this should look to build this level of flexibility

into their own virtual community, possibly in the design of community activities, discussion

topics offered, or even the chance to utilize the virtual space to connect in-person. The

autonomous elements of the HRC led members to feel control over decisions they made and to

feel supported in that choice and the eventual outcome.

Relatedness. Aspects of relatedness, or belonging, were prevalent within the findings.

Deci and Ryan (2000) described relatedness as the universal need to interact with others, care for

others, and feel cared for in return. As with Kerstetter and colleagues' (2008) study of the Red

Hat Society, this study found that members experienced emotional and social support as a result

of belonging to the community. Examples such as requests for wands up and the outpouring of

support resulting or the members' support of the trans member show that members feel confident

in their place within the HRC community and feel they can express themselves without fear of

judgment or censure, which provides evidence of feelings of relatedness and belonging within

the HRC community. The HRC, as a community, has fostered a set of norms that encourage

positive social support which has led to loyal and engaged members. The theoretical

implications of these findings lend support to the second component of Self-Determination

Theory. Additionally, this study supports existing literature which has found that social leisure

specifically has the ability to meet innate human needs and promote social well-being

(Kerstetter, et. al., 2008; Broughton, Payne, & Liechty, 2017).

Practical implications of these findings suggest the importance of promoting positive social interactions to the success of a virtual community. Park and recreation professionals seeking to establish virtual communities should consider ways to foster feelings of relatedness in their own programs and virtual communities. For example, agencies might consider providing opportunities for meaningful identity expression, establishing community policies that members are expected to be supportive, and utilize theming to facilitate positive relationships through shared interests. For example, the HRC frequently uses elements from the Harry Potter book/film series to theme elements of the community such as names of races, roles for member volunteers, or online activities. This intentional staging of the experience (Ellis & Rossman, 2008) highlights shared interests which increases social connections among members. One specific themed element within the HRC that has proven to be a stronghold of relatedness is the Hogwarts House subgroups available to members. These subgroups are self-selected and optional to join (autonomous) and give members an opportunity to feel connected with others who have also self-selected into the same group. This programmatic element fosters a sense of belonging and relatedness from day one of community involvement.

Competence. The last component of Self-Determination Theory, as described by Deci and Ryan (2000) is competence or mastery: the process of working toward bettering oneself and seeking to control our experiences and outcomes of that process. The findings of this study contained evidence of competence within participant posts as well as being incorporated into the programmatic design of the community. As an example, members often shared that they had beat a personal record on a race, run faster or farther than they had before, or achieved a perfect score on the latest Harry Potter trivia quiz. Participants also celebrated small achievements they experienced while in pursuit of larger goals. These examples show that participants were

striving to better themselves physically (as in the running examples) or mentally (as with Harry Potter trivia) in an effort to master their chosen domain. Additionally, the HRC community had been structurally designed to incorporate opportunities for competence and mastery. After each virtual race event members receive completion medals, badges of honor for walking/running/biking a certain distance and for supporting positive change in the world via the chosen charity partner for the race. Further, if members chose to participate in all virtual race events of the year they were awarded with a Perfect Prefect pin to show that they had mastered all races for that year. All of these examples and more demonstrated ways that the HRC programmatic structure had been designed to incorporate ways for members to strive to better themselves on multiple levels with multiple different opportunities to do so.

The findings of this study supported the competence component (thus all three components) and add to the existing leisure literature focused on Self-Determination Theory not just in face-to-face community interactions but also in virtual settings. In terms of practice, park and recreation professionals wishing to incorporate elements of competence into their programs and/or their own virtual community should consider following the model set forth by the HRC. Giving participants the opportunity to earn achievement awards (race medals) and to work through levels of growth and participation with a completion award (Perfect Prefect status) are just some examples of activities that support feelings of competence.

Beyond Self-Determination Theory and its' three components, the virtual setting as a place of social interaction should be considered valuable for facilitating beneficial social interaction because the physical location is irrelevant to participation, logistics and social costs to participation are generally lower than participation in a face-to-face community, and because virtual communities tend to be larger than face-to-face communities enabling individuals of

diverse backgrounds (e.g., age, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity) to come together to share a common interest (Sproull & Faraj, 1997). All of these aspects of a virtual community can be implemented and utilized in such a way as to benefit park and recreation agencies and to help attract a larger audience and grow membership.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

There are some limitations to the study related to the setting and the population sampled. The Great Hall is hosted on the Facebook platform and the data was gathered in English, the primary language of the community. Future research could benefit from exploring virtual communities that are not English language based and/or Facebook supported. Further, this study was limited by the methodology utilized during data collection. As Netnography is designed to observe virtual community interactions that occur online no behaviors were directly observed or measured such as physical fitness indicators or measures of mental health. Similarly, a recognized limitation of Netnography is that some community member will post less often than others or not at all. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that the available data may not be representative of all members of the community. Lastly, although the first author specifically looked for drawbacks within the data set in an attempt to counteract any researcher bias that might have been present, a very limited number of negative posts were found in the data. This is in contrast to some communication theory (Walther, 2011) and future research could benefit from exploring this phenomenon.

In terms of practical application, there are a few limitations evident in this study. First, if a park and recreation professional wanted to create a Facebook virtual community of their own they would have to understand that Facebook limits participation to individuals 16 years or older thus limiting the demographic of the target audience for such a community. Further, the study

setting, the HRC, as a 501c3 non-profit allocated a full-time paid staff member, time from both of the organization founders, as well as numerous volunteers to the monitoring and administration of the community. Therefore, park and recreation agencies seeking to create virtual communities need to plan accordingly in allotting resources to fostering the success of the virtual community. Lastly, the evidence and support of the elements of Self-Determination Theory (autonomy, relatedness, and competence) (Deci & Ryan, 2000) show that a virtual community can provide such elements via community structural design and event implementation. Park and recreation professionals could benefit from designing structural and programmatic elements into their own virtual communities in order to foster autonomy, relatedness, and competence and as a result, attract a larger membership.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of benefits and motivations among participants of a leisure-based virtual community in order to contribute to existing leisure literature and to contribute to park and recreation best practices. The findings of this study revealed that HRC members perceived benefits related to physical health and fitness, mental health, and social and emotional support. Additionally, the findings supported the three components of Self-Determination Theory with numerous examples of each evident within the dataset. By knowing the benefits and motivations among virtual community participants, park and recreation professionals can use this knowledge to better design and implement programs via a virtual community of their own in order to foster strong community bonds and a loyal membership base. A unique contribution of this study is that the findings highlight a virtual setting, as opposed to a face-to-face setting, as a vehicle for fostering experiences of autonomy, relatedness, and belonging.

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CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings and their Contribution to the Literature

The findings of this study when viewed as a whole contributed to current leisure literature and park and recreation professional practice in numerous unique ways. The findings demonstrated that a virtual space could be a place to build community, participate in serious leisure, and experience personal benefits such as improvements to health and fitness, as shown throughout the findings presented in all three manuscripts. Additionally, the findings demonstrate that there is a large population utilizing fandom as leisure and that this population values charitable contributions. Beyond these unique contributions, the findings also served to support existing theory. For instance, the findings detailed in manuscript 1 supported the four-factor model of Sense of Community; the findings detailed in manuscript 2 suggested that members of a virtual community were able to experience the six characteristics of Serious Leisure as they engaged in community activities; and lastly, the third manuscript detailed evidence and support of the elements of Self-Determination Theory- autonomy, relatedness, and competence. As a broad overview, the manuscripts and the study as a whole contained four common threads: aspects of building community, findings related to health and fitness, findings related to emotional support and encouragement, and, although not explicitly mentioned in each manuscript, implications for participants' offline reality. Future research should continue to explore the unique elements of virtual communities and the influences of technology on experiences of leisure.

Position of the Researcher

Being an active member of the study population was an interesting learning experience. I found that keeping a reflexive journal was not only helpful in tracking logistics and journaling

about the process, but it was even more helpful as a daily reminder that, as of the beginning of the study, I was no longer "just a participant" but also a researcher. Without this daily reminder I suspect that maintaining my role differentiation would have been quite difficult. For example, before the study began I would often post in the Great Hall and respond to other members' posts. However, once I stepped into the researcher role, the only time I posted in the Great Hall was for member check posts and updates regarding the study. It was the daily reminder of journaling that helped me stay on track with remembering not to post in the Great Hall or to respond to other members' posts. Additionally, upon reflection after data analysis, I found I could identify with and relate to the findings in terms of community, health and fitness, emotional support and encouragement, as well as offline implications. Basically, if I stepped out of my researcher role I found that I not only agreed with the findings, but had personally experienced most of them. However, there were aspects of the findings that I did not experience or identify with as strongly as some community members indicated. For example, I found that I did not personally identify with or find joy in the frequent posts pertaining to pictures of and information about snakes (shared symbol). Many conversational topics within the community were understandable from a research perspective, but I personally did not find interest in all of them. The process of reflexive journaling helped me to ensure the findings represented all members of the community and not only those perspectives with which I identified (Genoe & Liechty, 2016; Hull, 2017).

I would also like to acknowledge that the findings as presented in this document are overwhelmingly positive and that this is in opposition to some of the research related to Facebook and technology as a whole. For example, some studies have shown that Facebook use has been linked to feelings of envy and depression among users (Appel, Gerlach, & Crusius, 2016; Tandoc, Ferrucci, & Duffy, 2015). This study as a whole does have methodological

limitations. For example, the community is comprised of individuals who interact to varying

degrees within the community- there are lurkers who may never post within the community,

there are those who may have a different experience than those that do post and as such do not

feel comfortable expressing that sentiment in the community, there are those that may have

joined the community and decided it was not for them but did not unregister and are still counted

as members, or members that did not post for fear that their post would be deleted. The data

collection and analysis procedures attempted to address these issues as much as possible by

eliciting data via member checks, by intentionally searching for negative cases and

disconfirming evidence, by collecting the number of emoticons for each post to represent lurker

activity and those less active. After a great deal of reflection, introspections, and careful

systematic data analysis, I feel the findings fairly and accurately represent the data that was

available.

 Methodological Suggestions

Netnography, as a qualitative methodology, was instrumental in understanding the

experiences of the participants in the HRC. However, an unexpectedly valuable aspect of the

study methods was the member checks and the resulting elicited data. Due to the norms of the

study community, members not only responded to the member check with affirmations of the

findings (251 emoticon reactions), but they also volunteered anecdotes, explanations, and rich

detail that added greatly to the dataset. Following is a quote full of rich detail from a response to

a member check:

> For example, based on the feedback of this online group, people will get real-life tattoos,
>
> buy fitness devices, and plan their vacations. For many people, the group also keeps them
>
> motivated to be physically active and make progress on their fitness levels. I was already

a runner before joining, so for me this benefit is less pronounced. Personally, this group is of greatest impact to me in the winter, when I would typically be running less, if at all. Having medals to earn during the winter forces me to train a bit more than I otherwise would. For other members, though, the changes can be more dramatic. As an example, you'll sometimes see people posting that because of this group, they were inspired to sign up for their first real-life half marathon.

Although Netnography is often used with archival data sources (Bowler, 2010; Kozinets, 2015), researchers that have access to a study population should consider utilizing member checks to elicit additional data in order to improve the quality of the gathered data. Standard Netnographic methods combined with elicited data from member checks proved to significantly add to the richness and detail of the dataset.

A second aspect of the methodological design that proved to be vital to understanding the study population and the dataset was prolonged engagement in the study setting. Without the knowledge gained over this period of time interpreting the data would have been unmanageable. For example, much of the communication within the group used references to Harry Potter, references to unique HRC activities/traditions, and community specific acronyms that become familiar to community members over time.

Closing Remarks

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of participation in a virtual community (Hogwarts Running Club) and the meanings participants associate with membership in this group. Four common threads run through the entire study: aspects of community building, findings related to health and fitness, findings related to emotional support and encouragement, and implications for participants' offline reality. These common threads fit

within the theoretical perspectives and frameworks of Sense of Community, Serious Leisure, and Self-Determination Theory and throughout all three manuscripts to tie the study together adding to current literature, suggesting future directions of inquiry, and adding to the park and recreation professionals' knowledge base for best practice.

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APPENDIX: LIST OF CODES

1. Care of Magical Creatures- Sharing a Passion for Animals
2. Celebration of Achievement
3. Community Building Activity
4. Community Pride
5. Daily Conversation Prompt- Group Comradery
6. Discussion and Shared Passion for HP Books and Movies
7. Enthusiasm to be involved with- related to- affiliated with HP
8. Expressions of Gratitude
9. Generosity towards members (give away)
10. Group Comradery- Humor
11. Group Identity Expression- Companion
12. Group Identity Expression- Gryffindor
13. Group Identity Expression- HRC.WRC
14. Group Identity Expression- Hufflepuff
15. Group Identity Expression- Ravenclaw
16. Group Identity Expression- Slytherin
17. Group Identity Expression- TimeLords
18. Group Identity Expression- Villains
19. Group Identity Recognition in Public
20. Hogwarts Mystery Game
21. HP as a Family Experience
22. HP Merchandise Discussion
23. HP-ing Other Aspects of Life
24. HRC as Motivation and Encouragement
25. HRC is Family
26. Improvement in Mental Health or Willpower
27. Improvement to Physical Self
28. Joy in spreading HP outside of HRC
29. Member(s) Supporting Member(s)
30. Members meeting Members
31. Offline Reality
32. Parents Pottering their Children
33. Part of Something Bigger
34. Potential Injury due to HRC Participation
35. Request for Wands Up or Positive Vibes
36. Seeking information or advice
37. Self-expression, celebration of self
38. Sense of Belonging
39. Shared Emotional Experience- Commiseration
40. Shared emotional experience- Excitement
41. Shared Emotional Experience- Grief or Sadness
42. Shared Experience in Time (same time; different locations)

43. Shared Experience- Same Activity (different time; different place)
44. Shared Symbol System
45. Shared Terminology
46. Sharing Information
47. Sharing Personal Stories- Sharing Self
48. Welcome Post (Hogwarts Letter)