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Research Topic

Brand Community Management and its role in modern business. A study of online video game communities and their effects on brand engagement and performance.

Bachelor Thesis

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Bachelor in International Management

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I dedicate this thesis to my late best friend, Tiernan Cloud, who had eagerly expressed his interest in reading this paper when finished and attending my graduation, both of which, unfortunately, are possibilities no more.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the role of community management, using examples and insights from the video game industry, which is sometimes referred to as the birthplace, or at least the leading player in the implementation of this role. This paper, therefore, uses an ethnographic approach to obtain insights into what community membership and management can entail, and what its nature is in the online gaming world. Community management's implementation and usefulness in other fields of business is currently limited, due to a general lack of understanding of the role and its highly adaptable applications. This thesis uses research to create a better understanding of how community management can benefit brands and companies that pursue, alongside providing an insight into community membership itself.

The findings of this paper reveal patterns of community management applications throughout literature and primary examples, highlighting its positive effects on brand loyalty, engagement and trust. It is also revealed that community management, as a practice, works best in connection to other roles, such as community representation and development.

Community management was found to play a key role in receiving valuable customer feedback for the development and betterment of products. Community members were revealed to be highly motivated on sharing their opinions and discussing with other members, with knowledge that their feedback is likely to be heard by a company, in most cases, due to the existence of community managers in such environments. This helped see why community management plays an important role in online video game communities, and why more businesses nowadays are hoping to implement it in their daily practices. For such businesses, this paper also helps find differentiation between community management and social media management, both of which were commonly mistaken for the other, due to their use of similar communication channels.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The first chapter of the thesis introduces the background of the study, presents thesis objectives, main research questions, and provides the thesis structure. This chapter justifies the chosen topic and allows for a consistent thesis paper.

1.1. Background

Although the Internet has not been around for hundreds of years, with the World Wide Web being invented in 1989 by British scientist Tim Berners-Lee, it has, without much doubt, reshaped the way people learn, communicate and even live in its considerably short existence so far (CERN, n.d.)[1]. Digital information sharing saw a big increase following the emergence of Social Media, with Internet users more freely sharing information and knowledge on topics such as health, politics, news, everyday life, etc. By 2015, over 65% of all American adults were active social media users (Perrin, 2015). This meant that nowadays, it has become easier than ever to create and maintain interactions, regardless of location. For the business world, this also created a new way to obtain customer stories and create new communication channels. Most communication made on social media is visible to all, making it an impactful, and highly important channel for businesses in any field, holding the power to make or break its online success (Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins & Wiertz, 2013).

With so many social media channels available, it can become challenging for a company or brand to find the best one for their communication goals. The search for the best way to interact with consumers has brought many businesses into exploring online communities (Demand Metric, 2014). An online community, in this case, is an online network of individuals, connected by a shared interest, which for a company could mean, one or many of their products or brands. (Preece, 2000). According to a study conducted by DiMauro and Fish (2015), 86% of participating firms believed that having branded online communities benefited overall core business operations, while 85% also saw a subsequent increase in customer trust. This newly developed interest and benefit found in and around online communities created a need for a new job position - online community management. Unmanaged online communities, alongside those that do not align with a company's internal values and goals, face a much higher chance to serve no purpose or simply fail (DiMauro & Fish, 2015). In its early stages, community management started blossoming in the world of MMO, Massively Multiplayer Online, computer and video game communities. Shortly after, community management started to quickly spread into other genres of gaming. The video game world then served as a perfect breeding ground for the global future growth and demand of the job position, as with multiplayer games, users tended to retain their interest not just for the product, but for the people they got to enjoy it with (Wera, 2008). A community manager's main purpose then became to manually and continuously work on maintaining and building

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[1] CERN. (n.d.). *A Short History Of The Web | CERN*. [online] Available at: https://home.cern/science/computing/birth-web/short-history-web, accessed April 2, 2020

customer engagement. Community research by Algesheimer, Dholakia & Herrmann shows that in any industry, participating in a branded community can lead to an increase in customer loyalty and purchase frequency (2005). This can often make online communities seem less different from regular social media marketing channels, however, members of branded online communities are more strongly attached to a certain brand, and feel a higher purpose in being a member, whereas regular social media channels mainly provide casual, not-as-frequent engagement (Algesheimer *et al*., 2005).

In the world of video and computer games, online communities have become well known for their power to create a sense of belonging for their members. It comes as no surprise that a video game's main purpose is to entertain, but it has become evident that after a game is finished, many fans would later find new, continuous entertainment in having that be an experience shared with others. Online game communities can serve many video game companies not only in helping maintain loyal customers and increase sales but in acquiring valuable customer feedback and new ideas. A community where people feel welcome and at ease is one that can provide an environment where customers feel comfortable sharing feedback and criticism in regards to what they are passionate about. In many gaming communities, whether simply forum-based or more elaborate, community managers serve as a bridge between the customer and the company, having to create and host events, communicate with members, transmit new information, etc. all while posing as a face to the company they represent (Wera, 2008). Valuable relationships created between video and computer game publishers and their online communities have now become an industry norm, forming a new business model, with many emerging video game publishers basing their operations around expected future community interactions (Burger-Helmchen & Cohendet, 2011).

1.2 Thesis objectives

The thesis objectives are to study online gaming communities and to conduct research on the topics of varying online communities in the video game industry, their environment and effectiveness, the hypothesised importance of community management and its effect on brand engagement. The intention of this thesis is to, firstly, provide a better understanding of online community management, especially in the video and computer game industry, and secondly, to evaluate the effectiveness and importance of managing an online community for a business or brand. This thesis will provide an insight into how online communities function from an insider's perspective and what are some ways they are maintained while highlighting the current importance of community management in online video and computer game communities. Using a mixed research method, this paper will answer several research questions as to draw patterns and conclusions based on primary data.

<u>1.3 Main research questions</u>

How can video game companies benefit from managing their virtual communities?

Sub-questions: - What is the purpose/role of community management in the video game industry? - How does community management affect the performance and engagement of brands who pursue it? - Which is the benefit of giving your brand a voice that can directly connect to your customers? - Does online community participation encourage brand loyalty? - What are the challenges of community management?

Structure of the thesis

This paper is organised into five main chapters, in some cases covering contextual sub-chapters, as follows:

Chapter One: Introduction
This chapter covers the introduction to the topic, touching on why it is relevant in today's business environment. The introduction provides an overview of the emergence of online communities and their subsequent management in firms. The chapter also states the research questions and objective of this paper.

Chapter Two: Literature Review
Chapter two consists of a literature review, which based on conceptual and theoretical literature, addresses the existing gaps and possible connections of the main topic, covering topics on online community emergence and management. The topic is then backed by empirical research, providing evidence of online community effectiveness and possible added benefits to businesses and firms.

Chapter Three: Methodology
Chapter three covers the methodology used for the primary research for this study. The methodology explains the data collection process and the specific approaches to research used in this paper, all while evaluating the perceived validity of the data acquired and methodology used.

Chapter Four: Findings
This chapter covers primary findings made through mixed method research, combining observations and insights, answering research questions raised in Chapter One.

Chapter Five: Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations
This chapter summarises primary findings, comparing them to findings in literature covered in Chapter Two. It also provides conclusions to the paper and topic, alongside recommendations stemming from them, and limitations of the thesis.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The following literature review presents previous findings retrieved from conceptual, theoretical and empirical literature and research, helping draw a better picture of the current situation and understanding of the thesis topic.

<u>2.1 Conceptual and theoretical</u>

Understanding community in the virtual world

What connects people and pushes them into building communities, is very much the primal need to belong. No wonder in the online world, people, connected by similar wants, needs, beliefs or interests, feel a connection, and a pull to stick together. Similarly to a regular community, a virtual one can be described as a way to extend one's social bonds, and even in the earlier days of the internet, chat and bulletin boards would serve as virtual counterparts to a café visit, or a night out in town (Vaughan, 2019; Rheingold, 1993). In the dawn of the virtual and online world, Oldenburg (1998), even argued that the friendliness people initially sought in these physical spaces, due to modern and rapidly changing consumer habits, such as drive-in and takeaway culture, could only now be achieved online. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) study how community behaviour shifted throughout the rise of online communication. Traditionally, a community created outlets for a connected way of thinking shared by its members and lacked by those who are outside of it. This meant that community members often shared attitudes, outlooks or simply interests, and created an environment possessing the power to build a sense of belonging in involvement. Continued contribution to a community was also believed to then create a sense of responsibility for its members, helping create strong social bonds that could not be easily broken. The virtual world allowed communities to no longer be restricted by location and helped broaden the definition of community from merely a physical space, into a shared identity of people located anywhere in the world. Apart from being simply limited by location, Rheingold in his book "The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier" (2001), argues that online community creation and involvement allows handicapped and physically challenged people to be accepted and understood for their thoughts and ideas, rather than their appearance and social skills, or lack thereof. This idea elevated the importance of online communities, as it helped see the advantage of choosing to communicate your interests in the virtual world, which originally seemed farfetched to some. However, some researchers, such as Calhoun (1991), disagree with such statements, claiming instead that a community requires direct communication and physical bonds. Nonetheless, online communities, just as physical ones, represent individuals with shared interests most commonly, with the main difference between the two being their primary channels for interaction, in which case, virtual community members, as the name suggests, mainly connect through electronic communication (Dennis, Pootheri & Natarajan, 1998).

As previously mentioned, the desire to join a community is close to being a basic human need. Individuals feel a motivation to join groups, which can provide them with valuable

information sources and channels, and even rewards in regard to achieving their goals (Watson & Johnson, 1972). In a way, the same can be said for communities online, which were originally created and primarily used for information sharing purposes (Jones, 1995). Hagel and Armstrong (1997), stress that one of the main advantages of information sharing within a virtual community, is the way it originates. Most content in online communities is user-generated, which also serves as the backbone of an online community's longevity and success, with a circular process allowing increased content generation to attract new members looking for desired information or entertainment. Online communities are often formed around interests such as travel, health or entertainment, as well as brands that might represent these interests to their customers. This creates a pool of information and sources for marketing research, as well as new opportunities for increased brand loyalty, engagement and advertising (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; Kozinets, 2002; Bickart & Shindler, 2001).

Community Management

Increasing awareness of online community importance in the business world, created new attempts and efforts to harvest information from these communities correctly, and allow it to be used for effective communication between companies and consumers. This resulted in an emergence of new community management roles, helping ensure continuous growth of engaged virtual communities, which in turn, helped sustain and encourage brand awareness (deWinter, Kocurek & Vie, 2017; Michlmayr, 2009). Online community engagement does not equal or always require the commitment to one certain brand, however, they can reflect consumer habits and become social marketing tools if managed correctly (Kim, Cho, Qualls & Han, 2008). Although applicable to most fields of business, community management is often associated with MMO (Massively Multiplayer Online)[2] game communities, in which community membership serves as a vital part of the gaming experience itself (deWinter, Kocurek & Vie, 2017). There is a lot that can be learned from the video game industry in regards to community management, helping differentiate it from social media management, which it is sometimes mistaken for. DeWinter et al. (2017) in their community research, have found that most game community managers were originally fans, fan page or forum administrators and other community members themselves. Very seldom did community managers actively seek out this exact job position, but were rather much more likely to have gradually achieved it through their own community participation. This gives community managers in gaming an advantage of better understanding their customer, as in many cases, they might have been one, or still are themselves. Bacon (2012) emphasised that effective community management requires a deep understanding of specific community culture and a high level of trust, which is most commonly found in community members themselves. Wera (2008) saw community management in the video game industry as a new way of communication, one that goes so far as to shift the way games are published today. It is becoming an industry standard to allocate resources and manpower for community efforts following any software release. Community managers, in this case, bridged the gap between video game publishers

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[2] MMO - Massively Multiplayer Online - an online video game with a large number of players on the same server.

and their consumers and fans, allowing for direct communication, idea sharing and strong ties between communities and their preferred brands. As a community manager himself, Wera (2008) emphasises the fact that the position and its applications are still relatively new, and most methodology and research surrounding it can be referred to as advice, rather than solid evidence. Nonetheless, the benefits of community management are hard to deny, even with limited empirical research available, having the term gain more and more fraction with increasing numbers of online communities and new job positions, especially in the video game industry, where it initially saw its boom (Kim, Choi, Qualls & Han, 2008; deWinter, Kocurek & Vie, 2017). The gaming industry has become a major part of the entertainment business and the online world, producing iconic characters, highly successful and profitable products and receiving much attention due to high levels of innovation, part of which can be accredited to community management standards in the industry, and how it is used to create and sustain highly useful knowledge, new resources and added value (Burger-Helmchen & Cohendet, 2011). One of the most important things that businesses in any field looking into community management can learn from the gaming industry, is that online communities can be powerful tools, but they can exist whether they are managed or not. Community management does not create communities, rather, it helps them grow and flourish, in a sustained, prosperous way, benefiting both the consumer, or player, and the company in the long run (Wera, 2008). Community management is a relatively young and new job position, moreso outside of the video game world, and it seems as though there still is no one perfect definition for it, or one community manager who is doing everything perfectly right, although being a couple years ahead, the gaming industry can be looked at as a leading example (McGee, 2011).

2.2 Empirical

Community effect on customer engagement and involvement

An empirical study by Islam & Rahman (2016) links online community involvement with improved customer engagement, resulting in higher levels of trust and word-of-mouth marketing for brands. This research finds that there is an evident circular process, in which community involvement results in increased customer engagement inside said communities and directly with a brand, which in turn, translates into higher activity levels inside online communities. The research stresses the importance of monitoring online community activity, for the benefit of increased communication and customer relationships, alongside using the resources found in such communities for marketing and the overall success of a brand. Research focused on brand loyalty and engagement online by Zheng, Cheung, Lee & Liang (2015) found similar results, showing a strong relation between community participation and increased customer loyalty. This particular study also found that one of the main motivators and drivers for engagement inside online communities were perceived or expected benefits, whether physical or not. Similarly to the previously mentioned study, an interconnectedness between interaction, engagement and loyalty in online communities was found to be true in the studied population. Islam, Rahman & Hollebeek (2018) with their study, validate many previous

findings in confirming brand loyalty as a consequence of customer engagement, stemming again from community participation online. This study also suggests using a managerial approach in regards to online communities, and harnessing resources found inside them, as well as maintaining a balance of user autonomy, effective communication and brand image reflection. Community research done by Wu, Fan & Zhao (2018) sees similar results explaining the correlation between customer engagement and community commitment, by also bringing up important points regarding how this relation can actively grow stronger when members inside of online communities are sustained for long periods of time. As previously described by Jones (1995), one of the main motivations for joining a community is the search for information, however, research finds that many members feel an obligation to stay for the community spirit, showcasing a high level of commitment, which translates into behaviours influencing brand loyalty (Wu et al., 2018).

Motivations behind joining and staying in an online community

Hammedi, Kandampully, Zhang & Bouquiaux (2015) study the previously mentioned motivators, such as shared interests and knowledge sharing, which facilitate new members joining an online community, as well as help explain how such members are retained. The research found that after the initial stage of joining, community users tend to feel identified with either someone specific in the community, which can serve as a block for such users leaving, whereas other members choose to stay for the community as a whole. This also plays a major part in the balance of varying levels of social activity, which the study found much higher in members sharing a community identity, rather than those sharing strong bonds with particular members instead. Either way, this particular study revealed that friendship and social interaction play a definite high role in retaining online community members for longer. Dessart, Veloutsou & Morgan-Thomas (2015), in connection with the previous study, find that community member activity is positively influenced by strong alignment with the brand, meaning shared values and overall brand relatability, resulting in a stronger shared identity among users. Moreover, Apostolou, Bélanger & Schaupp (2017) compare their community study findings to research focused on the influence of knowledge sharing in online communities, and find that not only is it one of the main attraction points in any virtual, both branded and unbranded, community, but also one of the main sustaining factors of such communities as well. In this case, members not only see a benefit in finding information provided by other users, but also, have an outlet to share information they could potentially be knowledgeable about or even experts of themselves. The same study also finds that many human factors such as simple satisfaction of particular interactions and perceived and received benefits, which could be both physical and virtual rewards, as well as perceived social benefits, additionally help sustain community members on common occasions. Commonly, most studies focused on community engagement find that the most prevalently underlying strong factors tend to be trust and satisfaction, just beside knowledge and rewards (Dessart, Veloutsou & Morgan-Thomas, 2015; Apostolou, Bélanger & Schaupp, 2017). Dessart et al. (2015), throughout their empirical research, also find that the highest engagement and member retention exist in communities with a high level of brand communication and a strong relationship its customers have, or at

least feel like they have with it. The research therefore presents a drawn up conclusion, stressing the importance of adequate levels of management in such online communities, which even though can commonly appear organically, meaning, without help from outside the community base, could also effectively be taken into the hands of the company or brand itself.

A loyal community for brand success

Similarly to research and claims on changes in loyalty influencing behaviour presented by Wu et al. (2018), Molinillo, Ekinci & Japutra (2018) found a highly positive effect and a considerably co-dependent relationship between trust, satisfaction and brand loyalty. Moreover, this research tested a hypothesis claiming that a similar relationship can also exist between brand commitment and equity, which was therefore accepted based on empirical evidence grounds. The study places stress on the interconnectedness of equity, loyalty, satisfaction and trust, which in turn can help assess and improve current and future overall brand performance. Watson, Beck, Henderson & Palmatier (2015) find strong links between customer loyalty and brand performance, with increased loyalty having recognisable positive effects on profits and revenues. This study also finds reason behind using current and expected customer loyalty to forecast future brand and company performance. Such research also presents evidence supporting claims that customer spending sees notable positive growth after said consumers join online communities related to a brand or product, with social bonds and word-of-mouth impact playing a major role in increased return of investment for a business (Manchanda, Packard & Pattabhiramaiah, 2015). Moreover, Giovanis & Athanasopoulou (2018) find that high levels of customer loyalty and brand commitment, can result in major changes in consumer price sensitivity, allowing for companies to charge loyal customers more for their products, resulting in higher profits received from the most devoted consumer base. Similarly, Khoiruddin, Wahyono & Wijayanto (2017) found that loyal customers of a brand or company were generally much more likely to purchase more, which can be facilitated by increased interaction. This hypothesis was also heavily supported by research done in the banking sector, where customer satisfaction and loyalty were closely related, as were customer loyalty and the potential of making additional purchases, on top of ones already expectedly made by ardent consumers (Belás & Gabčová, 2016). Not only was brand commitment, but online communities themselves alongside their membership, found to be facilitators in increased consumer purchase frequency, alongside research showing correlation between online community engagement and continued community member intention of purchase and future use. Therefore, online communities, and their interconnectedness and circular interdependence on and with communication, trust, satisfaction and loyalty, are likely to play a part in perceived successes of businesses and brands who pursue it (Apostolou et al., 2017). This allows more and more industries and businesses to continuously see the added value and possible benefit of effective online community management. Alas, even with limited evidence and research available, it should not be overlooked that much about community management is still fairly unknown.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1. Research Methodology

Methodology

In order to effectively study and research the information needed to evaluate the subject and pursue the findings based on the research questions presented, three main types of research methods were used and taken into consideration in regards to this paper.

- The conceptual and theoretical foundation on the topic of online communities and community management. This was approached by reviewing existing literature related to said topics both directly and indirectly, in a literature review covering the community transition into the virtual world, the subsequent need for their management, and what that has entailed in recent history so far.
- Virtual ethnography, covering auto-ethnographic approaches, in which the researcher becomes part of a community to observe it, contextual interviews and questionnaires and an otherwise more interactive, human approach to online community research (Hine, 2008).
- A mixed method of research, using mostly qualitative methods, yet combining them with small-scale quantitative studies to further validate results. Although highly qualitative, this study involves respondent percentages of primary surveys, as to help answer the raised research questions when appropriate (Creswell, 2014).

Data collection and analysis

This relatively under researched topic, of which descriptions and opinions vary greatly in and throughout existing literature, required a very interactive, highly experiential approach to data collection. Seeing how limited existing quantitative research on the topics is, and keeping in mind the small scale of this study, a more qualitative approach was undertaken, centred on observations, interviews and questionnaires of those closely related to the field. The ethics forms are signed, and available upon request.

Based on a predominantly qualitative method, the research focuses on behavioural and experiential patterns and observations, self-ethnographic and online ethnography frameworks and studies, alongside primary contextual interviews and survey findings. Secondary sources and data therefore are analysed in connection to the primary findings made in this study.

Online ethnography covers a mixture of methods used mostly for qualitative research purposes online, most commonly in regards to communities, investigating social interactions within them. Online ethnographic studies, also referred to as cyber or virtual ethnography are done by combining several different parts of research, including, but not limited to: self-ethnographic research, in which the researcher is or becomes a community member and observes their personal experiences, observational studies, in which researchers observe communities without being their direct members, and

participant research, done with specific interviews, questionnaires and surveys, and activities in which the researcher follows and observes the actions of particular community members (Hine, 2008). In virtual ethnography fashion, the author therefore selected to focus research on an extended circle of communities, highly focused on one particular online game community with more contextual information gathered from several other video game communities online as well. In the case of this paper, much attention was paid to one particular online community, in which the author had placed themselves in for observational purposes. This study therefore is based primarily on the online community of the Assassin's Creed franchise community, published by Ubisoft, alongside observations and studies made in communities of other brands and franchises, published by several video game companies, on a smaller scale, suing websites such as Twitter (https://twitter.com) and Reddit (https://www.reddit.com).

Therefore, the main sources of primary research were two consensual interviews with industry professionals, an anonymous community questionnaire, of which respondents had chosen to participate voluntarily and without monetary gain, and ethnographic author observations, based on community membership experience. Community questionnaire respondents were found through the author's extended community circle, using the reach of social media channels, one of which, Reddit, was used only after receiving moderator approval.

Autoethnography

Self-ethnographic research in the virtual world is heavily focused on becoming part of an online community for a certain amount of time, and documenting one's personal experience (Hine, 2008). In the case of this thesis paper, the author therefore documents their own previous experiences of being in a video game community online, of which in this case, they have been part of for over six years, by the time this paper is being written. Due to the nature of such research, biases that might have led to certain experiences and observations can be present, alongside the author's lack of credibility as a non-licenced researcher in this specific field. However, autoethnography, just like online communities themselves, according to Hine (2008), is heavily based on social and human interaction and its studies, making it a very human approach to qualitative research. In the case of this study, it is a fair enough approach, offering a detailed insider view into what online community participation can entail. It is important to mention, that just like most human experiences, community membership and its effects vary from person to person, which is why the author's personal experiences and observations will, therefore, be compared to primary community membership questionnaire results of over 100 anonymous community members, who have agreed to partake in the research without monetary rewards, and two contextual interviews from field professionals, a community manager and a community developer from the video game company Ubisoft.

The heavily social background of online communities makes it so that it is, at the end of the day, a highly subjective field in theory. Many researchers looking to study virtual communities might find themselves in a crossroads between being a member and an

observer, but in some way, this exact type of phenomenon can produce the best ethnographic results, highlighting the true nature of the observed communities (Boelstoff, 2006). Just like people, no two online communities are the same, but to observe them all in such a way would be close to impossible for just one researcher. This is why primary research in this thesis is, therefore, compared to secondary studies when possible, and generally focuses on the extended community circle of the author.

In online ethnography, it is of high importance to differentiate between the different levels of information and perceived data, parts of which encompass that which is directly seen, felt and heard by the observer, and how the observer feels about their experiences, allowing them to observe and interpret their involvement in detail (Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis, 2015).

Methodology Evaluation

It is important to note that the nature of the qualitative, behavioural research used in this paper does not assure an entirely accurate depiction of the current situation regarding online community management, as there is room for bias, both in documenting personal experiences, and in surveying and interviewing individuals who are likely to be emotionally connected to and invested in certain communities or brands. The lack of having one shared definition of community management throughout literature and in many presently existing companies, might also jeopardize results, as there is no definite way to know whether the primary research continuously covers the same specified topic of interest.

Community involvement and membership can also serve as a possible bias in regards to the previously mentioned virtual ethnographic studies, meaning the data cannot be treated as solid evidence for investigating the claims it addresses. Community research generally serves as a great insight into the consumer and member habits in online communities, however, the historical lack of empirical research done in such fields further proves the difficulties of doing such research. A mixed method used in answering research questions in this thesis, also creates some gaps in framing primary findings in a specific theoretical framework. Nonetheless, online ethnography, most commonly used throughout the research done for this paper, helps make assumptions and draw patterns, based on author, community member, and field professional experiences and observations, later relating them to existing literature findings.

Chapter 4: Findings

The following chapter covers the primary findings made through varying mixed research methods covered in Chapter 3: Methodology, answering research questions raised in Chapter 1: Introduction. This section outlines results retrieved from ethnographic observations made by the author of this paper, contextual interview insights and community questionnaire results, drawing patterns and connections between findings, alongside new information learned.

4.1. How can video game companies benefit from managing their virtual communities?

Primary research findings have established perceivable benefits in pursuing community management. Interviewees have revealed seeing increases in customer loyalty, engagement and frequency of feedback. Community members have felt more engaged with a brand after joining their respective communities and discussions online. Depending on different motivations and goals, different approaches to community management were established to be undertaken, and the field itself was evidently seen as highly fluid and adaptable. Community management was also revealed to be a highly hands-on process, requiring such managers to constantly look out for new information, discussions and trends evident in their managed communities. However, challenges were also evident, with misunderstandings in what community management can entail and how in many cases, it cannot function just by itself. Community management was also found to be a highly creative field, demanding continuous communication and engagement using various methods, such as community activities, posts and events, whereas other roles connected to community management, such as community development, focused on growing communities using statistics and data acquired from community participation.

Contextual interviews have revealed some of the main benefits of community management to be increased communication and feedback, improved crisis management, player retention, customer loyalty and engagement. These positive attributes were also seen as keys for retaining a brand's image, alongside improved gaming experiences for players, additions of community requested elements and add-ons and building proactive communication strategies[3]. Such interviews have also acknowledged the value of using community managers and their effort in times of crises, most commonly ones involving a brands image, in cases of misinterpreted information or statements, disappointing products, server downtime and more. From an observational point of view, knowledge of having community managers actively engaging in an online community, can create a sense of having the ability to be heard by a brand, in regards to feedback, opinions and discussions. Having community managers appear in discussions and generally available for contact, can therefore give community members more purpose in voicing their concerns and opinions online, adding to the generally expected discussion with other community members. In the video game industry, in which the main products are the games themselves, retaining

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[3] Appendix B

customers during downtime is of high importance. Based on author observations, community members, as loyal fans, would commonly purchase newly released video games from their respective community brands on release, or even before it, through pre-orders. However, this meant that after finishing to play these games, community members would, therefore, have to wait for new releases, which were customarily almost a year apart, and so retaining such consumers and keeping them entertained and engaged with a brand with no new products available, was seen as an important role of community managers as well. Community participation, as previously described by deWinter et al. (2017), can in some ways serve as an extended way of play and the experience of a video game, yet managing such communities has shown to cause even greater benefits for both the communities, and the brands intertwined with them. These sentiments, and more, were therefore studied on a sub-question basis, covering the different sides and perspectives regarding virtual communities and their management possibilities.

4.1.1. What is the purpose and role of community management in the video game industry?

Firstly, mixed research has revealed that community management, especially in the video game industry, is now closely related and interlinked with other community roles such as community development and other representative positions, which can work in complement to one another. Personal interviews done with industry professionals working inside and in close proximity of online communities, revealed that many of these roles, alongside community management itself, vary greatly from company to company, and even between company branches[4]. One of the main roles of a community manager was observed to have still remained to place focus on maintaining and increasing customer engagement, as previously described by Wera (2008), although some primary insights have revealed that current community managers in the video game industry focus highly on listening to their community first. From an observational perspective, alongside insider information gained from contextual interviews, it is evident that community managers in gaming tend to be highly invested in the communities they manage. Algesheimer et al. (2005) in the earlier days of community management, saw little to no difference between social media management and community management, apart from the different levels of engagement the two can provide. Part of this still stands true in comparison to the research done in this paper, with perceived high community engagement levels due to the closeness community managers generally tend to have to their respective communities in the video game industry. As a community member, one can encounter community managers on a daily basis, as they tend to be a part of their respective communities, close to, or just as much as their regular members are. This also touches on several claims, previously made by Bacon (2012), establishing a solid foundation for assumptions that many community managers get into their current positions by being or having been a member of a community first. In the case of this paper, this was proven contextually true based on the experiences of industry professionals, who have gotten to work in the field

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[4] Appendix B

following their own community membership, with an agreement that this knowledge of online communities and their previous participation, has served as a vital part of well functioning community practices and a personal level of understanding commonly required for the role. Due to the highly adaptive and interactive nature of the field, community management does not have one singular definition, in many cases, varying on the type of business, product or brand, although Wera (2008) has arguably defined it rather accurately, describing community managers as individuals, serving as a bridge between the community and the company itself. This bridge then allows for smooth, on-time communication with the fans and consumers, although a community manager's main role still remains being the one to properly listen, rather than developing strategies for marketing or communications. This implies that social media management and online community management are, therefore, not the same, as community managers generally do not work on creating detailed marketing strategies and promotional campaigns as much as social media managers perceivably do.

The term community management itself, implies the existence of two main parts: an online community, and the management of it. However, primary research has proven that defining it as so would not be entirely accurate. In many video game companies, such as the highly popular company Ubisoft, of which several employees were interviewed in the context of this research, community management is, or commonly can be, part of a larger structure, involving several processes for effective functionality[5]. For these structures to be viable, and for community management to be of value to a company and the other positions and departments related to it, such as community development, marketing and public relations, highly interactive communication channels have to be established within communities themselves, as well as the company that decides to make use of them. Primary questionnaires and interviews have revealed that there is evident variation in understanding what an online community is in the first place. Interviewed community role professionals therefore almost unanimously defined online communities as conglomerates of passionate fans, of a brand or product, or in this case a particular video game, attracted to joining such communities for a sense of belonging and to allow oneself to create and share content and knowledge with others alike. On the other hand, a survey of various community members revealed that each community member generally has different motivations behind joining an online community, and agreeing on one thing that makes someone a community member would thus be counterproductive, as answers varied from simply being a player of a particular video game, to active engagement and participation in discussions, events, sharing fan created content, theories and more, on a daily basis[6].

The fluidity of community management can also be an effect of how different video games can be, and how the communities for them function. In the case of online games, relying on server availability and up-to-date information sharing, community management can involve real-time problem solving and even damage control. As community managers were acknowledges to commonly be most easily accessible link to a company from a community member perspective, this can also mean that

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[5] Appendix B
[6] Appendix A. Figure 7

community managers serve as both a face to the company and the first respondent in cases of emergency communication with a community, required and highly useful for crisis management and the retention of a good reputation for any company. This close link community managers have with their respective community members allows video game companies to produce content and products in alignment with the needs of their customer base, with community managers interacting with fans and collecting data on a highly frequent basis. Being aware of consumer needs was revealed to be a particularly paramount part of community management practices. Proper and effective communication with online communities established by community managers, can consequently allow community and other developers in the video game industry to also prepare proactive communication strategies, helping avoid crises ahead of time, alongside meeting customer expectations, or even exceeding them when possible. For game developers, this communication was revealed to be of high importance, as it is commonly lacked without the proper use of community management, which was also affirmed to be a facilitator of increased consumer trust and long-term retention.

4.1.2. How does community management affect the performance and engagement of brands who pursue it?

Based on information acquired through a small-scale contextual ethnographic survey of online community members, the mass majority - 81.5 percent of respondents, saw an increase in personal engagement with their online community's respective brands following them joining said communities. 33 percent of participants reported a strong increase, whereas 48.5 percent, almost half of all participants, believed the increase in engagement was solely moderate. Nonetheless, observations have shown that community members felt an increase in engagement, due to factors such as improved communication, alongside feelings of belonging, being informed and involved in community activities and with the brand itself. Interestingly, 18.6 percent saw no difference in engagement, and in some cases, with 6.2 percent of respondents reporting as so, a decrease in engagement after joining an online community. This was observed to have been tied to feelings of not being heard enough in regards to new products not meeting community expectations, beside the close communication online communities provide, sometimes revealing faults in online company communication, alongside arguments and disagreements apparent in online community discussions, which in some cases, push individuals away from pursuing continued community participation. These findings go in correlation with what have been found to be some of the main roles of a community manager, with listening to the community and establishing effective communication channels being some of the main priorities of individuals in such roles and companies utilising them.

A questionnaire on what engagement entailed for surveyed community members, has also exposed that players and fans have felt more engaged with a company after joining a specific game community, following the obtainment of the many benefits online communities can entail, such as the ability to share opinions and discuss with others, and in some cases, even the knowledge that your opinion is likely to be heard, due to the existence of community managers online. Some respondents have said that a

feeling of belonging to a community, has consequently made them a more loyal, high profile fan of their respective community brands, whereas others have mentioned how active communities have encouraged them to stay engaged with a brand during times when no new products are being released, in which some individuals would otherwise move on to a different brand or franchise. A feeling of being heard, in regards to customer feedback, was also revealed to be one of the facilitators of increased engagement of research participants, further proving the importance of active listening and proactive communication, commonly achieved by online community managers and their own community participation efforts[7].

4.1.3. Does online community participation encourage brand loyalty?

As mentioned in Chapter 3: Methodology, a primary ethnographic survey was used to better understand the environments inside online communities, and to compare author observations with mixed data based on community member perceptions and experiences. A primary survey, in this case, has revealed that, although not commonly the primary motivator for retained membership of an online community, a sense of loyalty to both the brand and the community have had an impactful effect on such motivation, with 36.1 percent and 32 percent of respondents agreeing on the existence and importance of such loyalty in online community membership and participation, in regards to the brands and communities themselves respectively. Moreover, 68 percent of respondents agreed that due to personal membership in their respective communities, such participants were more likely to prefer purchasing products from a company or brand closely related or interlinked with their online community of choice, over other brands, of which they were not community members of. This was especially evident in long-time members of online communities, in which case over 60 percent of respondents, who have been online community members for five or more years, fully agreed that online community membership has had an effect on their purchasing habits, having many of them favor particular brands of which they were community members of. Contextual interviews with professionals in community roles have affirmed this from a corporate perspective, further acknowledging that using community management efforts to improve or retain brand image and encourage communication and active feedback from the community, have had positive effects on customer loyalty and retention. An evident correlation between consumer trust and loyalty was also established through primary research, highlighting the importance of addressing different issues and news on time, as to build on a good company reputation, which was revealed to be possibly facilitated with the use of community management and development roles.

From an autoethnographic standpoint, it is evident that online game communities do commonly emerge surrounding a specific game, or in this case, brand or franchise. One of the main motivators to join and stay in such communities then becomes the possibilities for discussion and knowledge sharing that are evident in daily online

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[7] Appendix A. Figure 8

community participation[8]. In some cases, sub-communities emerge, covering news, fan creations and more, therefore both strengthening the overall game community, while also potentially creating specific outlets and niche fan sites, which allow more players to join the online community in a way most comfortable and enjoyable to them[9]. Based on author observations, such sub-communities can allow for continued community member retention for brands, as evidently, members feel a sense of loyalty to their close-knit community and therefore sometimes continue being members and supporting a brand, even if their interest in it has decreased in time. Contextual interviews have shown that retaining such community members is also of importance, with active communication in times of no new products being released, helping entertain fans and encourage them to purchase new products on release. Almost 30 percent of community questionnaire respondents (27.8%) have reported friendship with specific individuals in a community to be a motivator for their continued membership and retained activity in an online community, whereas over half of all respondents, 51.5 percent have acknowledged the essence of being a community member itself to be a strong motivator for continued activity[10]. From an observational point of view, these strong community friendships tend to emerge from participating in sub-community activities, for example, interacting or moderating specific fan sites or pages, fan run events and competitions, discussions on region or interest based community circles and more[11]. Participation in such sub-communities was ebservently generally not exclusive, meaning that their members were commonly active members of the overall brand community and other sub-communities as well. Players were observed to prefer communicating with other fans from their regions, due to the ability to discuss in one's native language and generally share opinions, shaped by similar perspectives and backgrounds. Nonetheless, most observations have shown that online community participation was typically not limited by location, language or age.

4.1.4. Which is the benefit of giving your brand a voice that can directly connect to your customers?

Primary research has identified that in businesses outside of the gaming industry, community management was sometimes mistreated and mis-referred to as social media management, and in many of these cases the lines between the two were blurred. Social media management, however, is highly focused on creating viable marketing campaigns using social media channels, whereas in community management, many of the same social media channels are more likely to be used as pools for direct knowledge and communication. It is important to note, that although Van Looy (2016) has acknowledged social media management's usage of communities as tools for communication, these communities commonly mean social media channels such as LinkedIn and Facebook, rather than user-generated communities based on interests, used in community management. Contextual interviews made during the process of the research for this paper have validated that, by itself, community management does not

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[8] Appendix A. Figures 5 & 6
[9] Appendix C. Figures 1 & 2
[10] Appendix A. Figure 5
[11] Appendix C. Figures 1 & 2

precisely give companies and brands a direct voice, per se, contrary to what is frequently believed to be true. Community management in itself is much more likely to serve in the character of a helping hand and a supportive shoulder, one that listens to their community and transmits that what they hear to ones responsible for responding adequately. Not only were many community managers members perceived to have been members of certain communities prior to getting their role, they were almost customarily community members as part of their day-to-day work. Community developer insights have revealed that, on the other hand, such development focuses more on building communities and using evident, data backed reports, alongside qualitative observations and knowledge made and collected by community managers, to create strategies for increased community engagement, retention and even internal marketing. In some companies, the two roles were seen to be interdependent on one another to cohesively coexist and create the best community outcomes. However, interviewees agreed that community management and development practices vary greatly from company to company, which with the observation of how fluid the field still is, could come as little surprise, also meaning that in particular cases, community management can imply more things than evident from primary research undertaken for this study. Evidently, interviews have also affirmed that in businesses outside of the video game industry, such practices were even more likely to vary.

Nonetheless, as previously mentioned, community managers tend to communicate with community members on a daily basis, therefore still having a voice in communications between a brand or company and their online communities. Interviewees have agreed that communication is a vital part of community management, both with community members and individuals in other interlinked roles. It was revealed that community managers and representatives, due to their closeness to communities, might generally appear as the main voice of communications coming from a specific brand or company, although it was highlighted that many community manager efforts have to go through processes of being approved by several other departments, such as marketing and public relations. This finding further acknowledged the importance of adequate community management implementation, rather than just choosing to assign such a role to existing employees with no proper structure in place.

4.1.5. What are the challenges of community management?

Primary interviews have shown that just like many other fields of business, community management has its own set of challenges, some of which can be overcome, whereas others become part of the management process itself. As it has been revealed by interviewees of this study, community management practices require clear communication and a high level of trust, which could be achieved by community manager participation and involvement in their respective communities. The active social performance required for community roles was observed to sometimes perceivably eliminate the barriers between employees and community members, the process of which was previously reported as a key element of community management. However, continuous communication and collaboration between community managers and fans could sometimes pose a threat in regards to disclosing confidential company

information, which in some cases, community members could grow to expect throughout their activity online and previous communication with the company or brand. This has shown to create challenges in balancing levels of transparency in community communications. From a manager's perspective, not all community questions and requests from members and fans can be answered and fulfilled in fear of exposing confidential information, in turn creating challenges in meeting customer expectations and maintaining the trust that has been previously built with community members[12]. Community questionnaires have also shown that members generally expect and enjoy communication with the brand, with it being revealed as one of the main motivators for retained community engagement and activity. Insider perspectives also reflected how in some ways, serving as a face to a company can be challenging for specific individuals, as community members can, in some cases, direct all of their personal feelings, whether positive or negative, at community managers, possibly making community management a mentally exhausting role on varying occasions.

Moreover, as mentioned beforehand, interviewees of this research have stressed the importance of having well defined, separate community roles, especially in regards to community management and development. Management was therefore proclaimed as a way to maintain existing communities, whereas development focussed on growing and expanding them. This has shown that in order to achieve effective community management implementation, all of its interlinked processes should also be taken into consideration. It was also noted that while community management generally addressed creative approaches to communication and interactivity, community development, on the other hand, was heavily data based, requiring specific tools to create measurable sentiments and solidify and validate work done by community managers. This data therefore could be used to improve the communication and engagement inside communities, alongside improving products, in this case, the games and a brand's, franchise's or company's image itself. Moreover, community management was seen to have been used and incorporated into everyday processes based on different motivations, such as profit, player retention and satisfaction, with the establishment and dedicated focus on the main drivers and motivators that have led companies to pursue community management serving as both an opportunity and a challenge. Differentiating between roles, motivations and goals was therefore agreed on and observed as a key element of successful community management.

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[12] Appendix B

Chapter 5: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

5.1. Summary

Community management is a relatively new, highly fluid concept. Its applications are perceivably most common in the video game industry, in which most research for this thesis has taken place. Community membership has been described as a very human approach to information and knowledge sharing, and with the digitalisation of today's world, many communities have moved on to live and thrive online (Vaughan, 2019; Rheingold, 1993; Oldenburg, 1998). In the virtual world, many communities have started to form around personal interests, in time, consequently generating new communication channels and opportunities for brands, especially those creating, releasing and publishing goods, services and software, aligning with the needs and wants of members participating in such online community activity. User-generated content, published in online communities, therefore, creates grounds for community representatives, managers and developers to step in, as to possibly harvest valuable feedback and build on customer trust and loyalty in the long run (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; Kozinets, 2002; Bickart & Shindler, 2001). As described by Wera (2008) and DeWinter et al. (2017), community management first saw its initial success in the video game industry, especially in regards to online multiplayer games, players of which would commonly obtain newly-found interest and interactions by sharing experiences, knowledge and user-generated content online. The research in this thesis has revealed that in the time of this paper being written, community management still had its most stable grounds and implementation in the video game industry, in which community management had now taken on many different roles and forms of approach. Nonetheless, contrary to Wera (2008) describing one of community management's main focuses as growing an existing community, which with primary findings, was found to now more commonly be a role of community developers, whereas community managers used their efforts to maintain and engage with a community's existing size.

Community membership itself and motivations behind joining them have experienced shifts, previously described by Jones (1995) as to spawn from the attraction to easy knowledge sharing with individuals sharing similar interests, it was now found to entail many various motivations for consumer engagement and retention. DeWinter et al. (2017) have previously acknowledged that for many game fans, community membership can commonly become an extended experience of a particular game or franchise, therefore helping retain current and attract new players and fans and allowing for new possibilities in communications, engagement and use of customer feedback. Primary research in this thesis has shown that knowledge sharing and discussion still plays a major role in community member retention, although customers and fans are now also highly attracted to joining communities and continued activity and engagement in them, for the communities themselves and the brands interlinked or affiliated with them.

Despite community management's historically undefined nature, its practices have shown to have positive effects for brand loyalty and increased engagement, as well as

building consumer trust and retention. This goes in correlation with findings made by Islam & Rahman (2016) and Zheng et al. (2015), with perceived strong links between community membership and participation, and factors such as consumer trust, engagement, loyalty and increased activity, which could in turn be used for the improvement of customer relationships and even tranformed into marketing tools by other departments. As previously described by Watson et al. (2015) and Molinillo et al. (2018) such factors are heavily interlinked with brand performance and increases in customer spendings and forecast profitability as well. Having a bridge between communities and brands was also revealed to allow for real-time customer feedback and collaboration, used for product development and in complement with processes in many other different departments and fields. This, therefore, allowed for assumptions in seeing positive brand performance effects achieved through community management efforts.

5.2. Conclusions

Findings in this thesis have revealed and highlighted many of the positive effects of choosing to pursue community management. It is important to note, though, that understanding exactly what it is and what it could mean for a specific company or brand is key. Community management was revealed to work best in complement with other roles, especially ones specialising in growing communities and using data tracking to create viable strategies to best make use of online communities and their member participation, such as community development, for example, whereas community management itself was found to be best used for listening and communicating to and with an online community. Commonly compared to social media management, community management can be very much different, although it uses many of the same communication channels. In businesses outside of the video game industry, this comparison of the two was found to be a common mistake. Community management, first and foremost, requires a community, and as previously described by Dessart et al. (2015), such communities, although commonly born out of initial community membership itself, and not created by brands, can see great value in being professionally managed.

Online community members were found to feel a strong sense of loyalty to their respective communities. For brands, both in the video game industry and outside, this phenomenon can create extensive opportunities, and acquiring awareness of the existence of such communities is the first step for these opportunities to arise. Generally, there were many different understandings of what online communities are and what community management can entail, but these differences in understanding, were seen to have spawned from how different online communities can be. Understanding such differences and finding the best ways to communicate with consumers and fans of specific products, or in the case of this thesis, video games, allows community management to remain a highly social, human process, which was also revealed to be one of its main positive traits.

<u>5.3. Recommendations</u>

In order to successfully understand and implement community management, an observational approach should be considered, similarly to the way research was done for this thesis. The video game industry was found to be one of the leaders in successful community management implementation, and for businesses considering community practices for its positive possible outcomes, it could be looked at as an example. Differentiating between different community roles was found to be key, and although heavily based on social activity and human interaction, community management was found to not be as effective without data tracking and strategy creation. These findings, therefore, allowed community management to be seen from a different perspective, with it being a highly useful position, interlinked with many different roles and departments, and serving as one of the key elements for community success.

Defining the motivations behind choosing to pursue community management and its other interlinked roles was also found to be of high importance. Whether such motivations are profit or customer satisfaction, they have to be well defined in order to establish the right tone and channels for communication, especially for community managers themselves. These motivations can sometimes be dictated by the product or brand itself, for example, as found in this thesis, online video games with microtransactions generally have different community management than more creative, single player games. From a perspective of a business outside of the video game industry, this example shows how even with seemingly similar products, the distinction and general plan of approach to community management processes has to be carefully made beforehand. This thesis acknowledges and highlights how complex and flexible community management can be, and how different understandings of the topic can also shape perceptions and applications of it, although findings show that this trait of community management can also sometimes be its crowning glory.

As previously mentioned in this paper, there is no one perfect definition of community management, and, therefore, no one perfect way to pursue and implement it. Just like many other successful processes, it might require trial and error, but its positive outcomes are evident, and the video game industry, alongside communities researched for this thesis, prove that to be true.

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Appendices

Appendix A - Questionnaire results

<u>Figure 1. Main online communities of questionnaire respondents</u>

(Optional) What online community would you say you are primarily a member of?
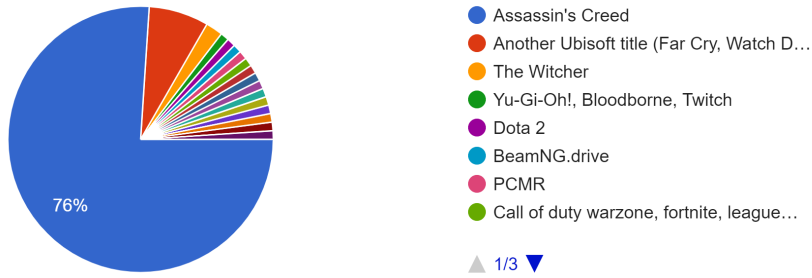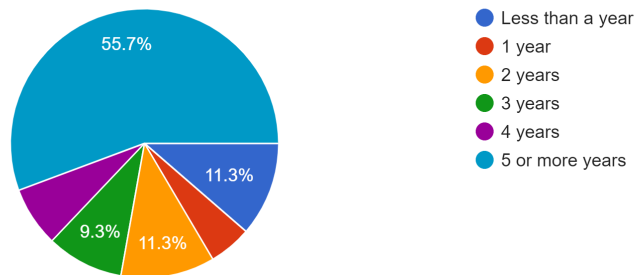96 responses

- ● Assassin's Creed
- ● Another Ubisoft title (Far Cry, Watch D…
- ● The Witcher
- ● Yu-Gi-Oh!, Bloodborne, Twitch
- ● Dota 2
- ● BeamNG.drive
- ● PCMR
- ● Call of duty warzone, fortnite, league…

▲ 1/3 ▼

<u>Figure 2. Questionnaire respondent community membership length</u>

How long have you been a member of your online gaming community of choice?
97 responses

- ● Less than a year
- ● 1 year
- ● 2 years
- ● 3 years
- ● 4 years
- ● 5 or more years

Figure 3. Community membership effect on brand engagement

How would you say your engagement with a brand or company has changed after joining their respective online community?
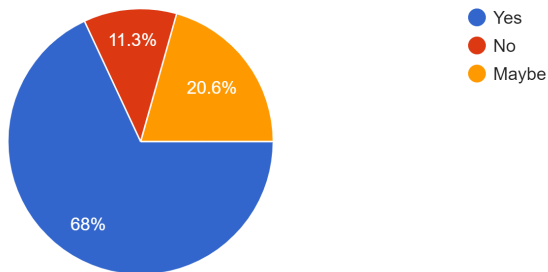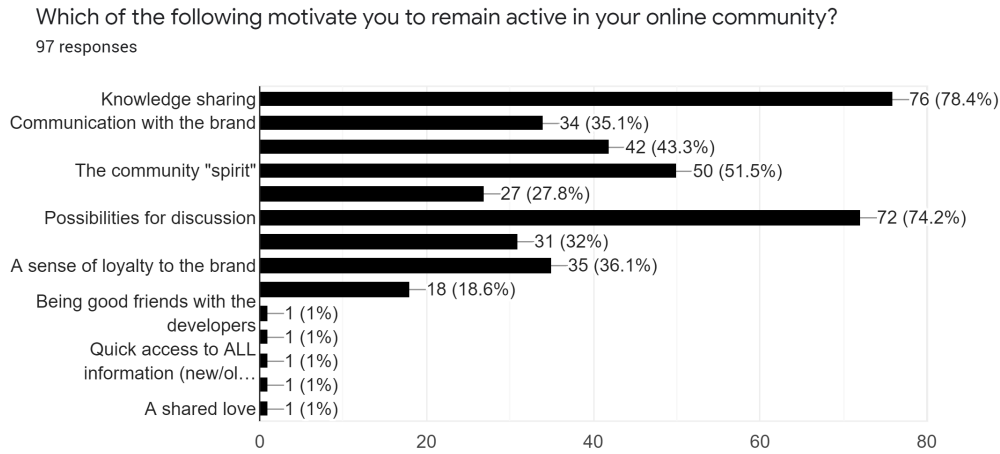97 responses

- ● Strongly increased
- ● Somewhat increased
- ● Stayed the same
- ● Decreased

48.5%
12.4%
33%
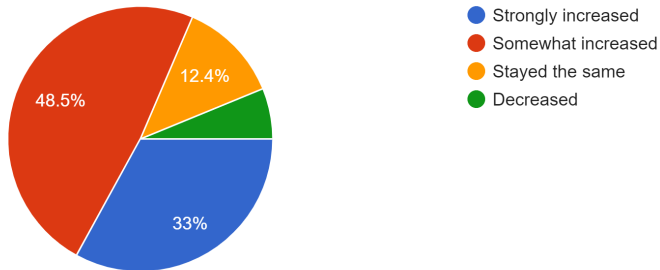
Figure 4. Community membership effects on purchasing habits and brand loyalty

Would you agree that you are more likely to purchase products from the brand or publisher of which you are a community member over others (of which you are not a community member)?
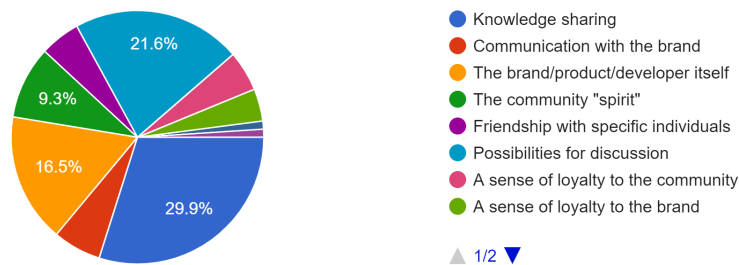97 responses

- ● Yes
- ● No
- ● Maybe

11.3%
20.6%
68%

Figures 5 & 6. Retained community membership motivators

Which of the following motivate you to remain active in your online community?

97 responses

Which of the previously mentioned motivators, would you consider to be the strongest?

97 responses

Figure 7. Community understanding of membership

Being able to relate to different people who have played the game and understand their experiences and ideas
Communicating about games and news with other people
Engagement in conversations and mostly complaining about stuff
Being able to share my thoughts and opinions on the franchise with others.
I Play the Game.
Sharing my passion for this gaming brand with other community members

social media, engaging with other fans and employees
I spend time on the Discord server/at the forum and interact with people there
discussion on reddit
Contribution
I visit the board several times each day to answer questions people may have and to participate in discussions.
Interacting with players
Establishing networks of players to engage in the various in-game activities-- recognizing when I interact with the same players in activities
I actively participate in discussions with other members of the community.
The developers are involved with their players, that and I talk to people about it quite often.
I actively participate in the game discussions on Reddit and the Discord Server and also post in-game photos of various games including Assassin's Creed on Twitter
Willingness to help stranger that are at a lower level when they need it, and just hanging out with people with the in game chat having fun and talking about the game and other non game related stuff
My interaction with core influencers and activity in community pages.
Deep love for the games and a desire to discuss them with others
Posting my thoughts on certain games and what makes an AC game good or bad in terms of how Assassin-y it is.
Participating in discussions, or at least a constant online presence. Merely lurking the forums is not enough to be a community member, you have to participate.
I have extensive knowledge of the games and help to answer questions and get mine answered via online forums.
Being involved in posts and interacting with other members of the community
Answering and debating with people on the Assassin's Creed subreddit
Passion for the franchise
Forums and following the progress of development

Played all the game, follow the latest news, regularly post / read on r/assassinscreed
Interest and Interaction
Because I am a fan of the franchise
I like the franchise and the story interests me.
I'm in the subreddit and I play the games.
Run a Fan Community, Contribute regularly - Recognised as an Ambassador by Ubisoft
My contributions and consistent interactions to not only the brand but the community around it.
I really love to share my passion for Assassin's Creed with other members of the Brotherhood.
The interactions and discussions with other community members and their valuable feedback.
Engagement
I contribute to discussions, follow them on social media, cosplayed from said franchise, and in general love the franchise
I'm more of a consumer rather than a contributor within PCMR. I feel more connected to the community through my own passion for PC and the core values of the community. I am more active in the more fast paced channels such as Discord.
I feel to belong to a certain community so it is good to be understood and to share our point of view or the same hype about a certain game/publisher
Having the opportunity to express my love for the games, recognizing and being recognized by other community members, and being dangerously charming.
I feel to belong to a certain community so it is good to be understood and to share our point of view or the same hype about a certain game/publisher
I used to hang out on AC Initiates and got to know who the "principal players" in the community and community management are. I enjoy reading (and interacting with, though I'm mostly a lurker) people discussing the games and theories. I like how it's actually a rather close core community and I'm able to keep track of news and developments.
Past engagement with the community
My passion for AC
Almost Daily participation in Discussions, Impressions, and anticipation of products

Following and participating in discussions concerning the game
Being an ambassador (for Trials), it's about involvement, communication and interaction; from general gameplay to giving advice and encouragement.
Joy and competitiveness
Engagement/dialogue with others who share the same interest/passion for a certain game, franchise, or platform.
Following and contributing to the conversation of the gaming community whether it be news, rumors, fan made projects or anything else.
Knowledge of the brand
Regularly answering new player's questions & speculating builds.
INTEREST
Love of the game and its narrative and themes.
I have been active online discussing the franchise since the first games with other fans.
I make fan content that is displayed on social media and I participate in discussions about games/characters.
discussing and sharing opinions with the community.
Engage in discussion and theorizing about stuff
Checking up constantly, trying to help out with tips and news
Contributing OC, participating in community discussions, collecting.
Played every game take interest in the lore
Playing the games and participating in online discussion
Contributing to discussions
While I mostly lurk I sometimes participate in discussion. Also u consume at least two hours of community made content every day
Daily updates, posting and commenting
Forum moderator
Knowing most of the lore.
Being able to enjoy and discuss the game. Be it with friends or fellow fans.
Its my favourite game and like to learn more like the lore behind the games and speak to other fans about it

Played every game some more than once
I enjoy it to the point I'm willing to spend plenty of my time on it.
Interaction and discussion of single or multiple topics surrounding one gaming series.
I like the games and look up stuff online to read fans talking about the series
Visiting online forums and contributing to discussion
Playing the games and being invested in them, and discussing/making content about them online
I have played most of the games in the franchise and mostly kept up to date with new developments
Discussing information/opinions/theories with other members, following news and staying up to date with the brand, contributing content to the community.
Browsing news and discussion for the series
I keep up with AC news and the lore interests me. I've played almost every game (only missing some of the earlier ones) and it's been a huge part of my entertainment and life for about 7 years, since AC3.
Sharing the same interest for the game and participating in discussing it with other fans, playing games and just overall being invested in the franchise.
How much most of us care about this game.
Common passion, regardless of the amount of community interaction.
Continued investment and interest in the series as a whole
Being apart of the community
Participating in support of the games and community discussion
Being able to interact with other people interested in the same topic
interacting in discussions with other members (helping, listening to opinions, etc.)
Being active in discussions, whether it's posting or commenting. Even the act of liking a post means you're involved some way in the community.
I think just loving the game and wanting to share it with others is more than enough to be a community member.
Having played and enjoyed the games, wanting to find like-minded people to discuss the games with

Joining
Keep up with the news. Read theories/debates/art. Get excited for the new game with other people :)
Interacting with other fans
Interest in discussions
I enjoy the series
follow the news on reddit, youtube and occasionally comment

Figure 8. Community sentiments on engagement

I'm more informed about company and games thanks to community
I'm looking into a lot more of the transmedia and extended universe of the franchise.
I don't know how to explain that very well but, for my case, I'm sharing photos of my Cosplays and VirtualPhotography of Assassin's Creed Games. And having more and more followers who love your work you do for the licence, gives you motivation to do more content for them about Assassin's Creed. Even if I do first for me, but you want to do more content for the community too. And even if I love AC, if nobody noticed my work, if I didn't share my work with the community, maybe all of those new things I want to do now because I'm this community, I wouldn't have done them.
much more communication, feedback, discussions ... I feel that I am a "true/real" fan or part of the fandom more when I engage with others than when I only play alone (even when I play all the games and can be called a "real" fan, it just feels different when you are part of a community)
Become more interested in similar titles from Ubisoft
I became interested in Ubisoft Club challenges and the like, as well as other games of the franchise that I haven't played yet.
I had no interest in Ubisoft games before joining the dev team and the Assassin's creed community.
I always thought that Assassin's Creed was an unknown thing that not much people play or even know about, until I found out about the sheer size of Assassin's Creed's community.

As mentioned before the devs really encourage discussion and like to have feedback, I involve myself in that process via Reddit mostly.

I pre-order the games now instead of waiting for a couple of months. I also engage with the brand/company on Twitter.

I'm not an internet person, I have a very minimal online presence and posting history. Prior to joining the online community I was still a fan, now I can keep up with the theories, events and release buildup

With the release of newer more radically RPG focused games like AC Origins and AC Odyssey, many new fans flocked to places like the Assassin's Creed subreddit. From what I've seen and experienced, many of the RPG fans (both old and new fans of the series) seem to be quite aggressive and intolerant towards those who dislike the newer games. Around the time of Odyssey's release and the months upcoming it was nearly impossible to criticize the game without it's fans mass downvoting the posts or comments. Soon after Odyssey's honeymoon period ended, things started to calm down and criticism of the game was easier to put out without being silenced. However, the community became heavily divided and fractured after Odyssey, with both sides capable of being quite ugly towards each other. Such a divide and some personal experiences of the ugliness soured my engagement as both a customer and a fan.

The push towards RPG mechanics made me realize that Ubisoft was heavily homogenizing their latest releases and since I already played a few of them that I didn't really like, I saw no purpose in playing and purchasing their other games. Why should I buy a game that would give me a fairly similar experience to that of which I already own, but with a different coat of paint?

Conversing with people who share a passion about your passions only strengthens the experience.

After joining the community I only became more invested in the brand.

I have played some other ubisoft games because of it

Well I could keep up with the news and fan theories, as well as the parts of the games that I somehow skipped over

I started to look more into AC lore.

Became more interested in the books, or the other games in the franchise, for example.
More opportunities, need to communicate to organise projects
After joining the online community my playtime, overall engagement, and money spent on the brand went way up.
I felt the courage to reach out more and was able to receive messages as well. Also had the possibility to get to know people that otherwise wouldn't be possible.
I was always following up with the news and updates since day one. So the engagement pretty much stayed the same.
I now am not shouting into the void, I'm actually conversing with other members and participating in the community discussions/activities
Since it's not tied specifically to a gaming company but rather a platform, I feel like my connection and passion for PC gaming overall has increased. I feel stronger about what makes PC gaming great thanks to this community.
Being in a community helps to understand more about the general license and you are more aware about the news so if you want to debate on a certain topic you need to increase your engagement about the brand to follow
Interest in video game franchises, especially turbulent and sometimes-boring ones like Assassin's Creed, can easily rise or fall. But engagement in a community keeps me interested for longer, even (or especially when) we feel negativity towards the game. I think communities often become the more important part of your love for a game, and it really becomes a part of your life, as you're always engaged with actual human beings on the other end.
Being in a community helps to understand more about the general license and you are more aware about the news so if you want to debate on a certain topic you need to increase your engagement about the brand to follow
Initiates was the main driver that got me from "just" playing the games to actually diving deep into the lore, and aiming for higher completion % of the games. The Reddit marathon is a great way for me to replay the games with a much better focus on the story (instead of getting distracted by every single side quest).
It has decreased mostly because I enjoy the recent games less
I cannot possibly engage more with it

I started disagreeing with the direction that Ubisoft was taking Assassin's Creed in and so I became less and less involved
Mostly because of the course the games have taken
It's given me a higher profile within the community and with the developers (who have now become good friends). I get insights into what's in development and knowledge on some of the future plans.
Spending more time together, planning strategies, gettin better team, synchronising.
My involvement has increased mainly due to Reddit. Whereas before I really only talked to people in my friend group about these games, through Reddit I am able to discuss with an online community of people all over the world.
Prior to joining the community I would follow news from different sources but once a member I would go to the developer and publisher themselves as well as their forums and questionnaires
I feel encouraged to pay more attention to the mechanics.
YOU FIND OUT MORE THAN WHAT YOU KNEW ALREADY
Odyssey was horrible and nearly destroyed the brand for me. It gave no respect to the customer, the fan, or the lore.
It made me appreciate the brand more and associate it with a core part of my identity as a consumer since a significant part of my (online) social interactions revolved around it.
Even though I'm a huge AC fan and enjoy the games, I always view the company itself with a grain of salt (as in, their bottom line is always profit), so I don't really engage directly with it.
I don't really care for the company necessarily, I just enjoy the games
For example with RDR2, seeing memes and jokes WHILE playing gave the playthrough such a unique feeling and after the main story engaging in discussions and finding discovering hidden quests, locations and items/weapons...etc

I was already nuts about AC before joining any communities like the subreddit, former initiates, etc. It has, however, opened me up a lot more to discussing theories about future games, the lore and other things I don't have anyone else to talk about as none of my in-person friends are really that into the series.
Reading reddit, watching videos
Being able to discuss the games with players and developers gives a unique sense of community and comradely around the games
I'm more informed and invested
I enjoy league a great deal more when I get to vent my frustration with my teammates online
Since becoming a forum moderator, I spend many more hours on the forum and interacting with other members of the forum.
I loved the community until odyssey
I still buy every game more or less at launch
It is easier and more efficient to keep up with the news regarding destiny being a part of the community.
The name holds significance, caused by interactions and discussions within the community.
I haven't really altered my appreciation of the games from the online community. In other words, if I never talked or read people talking about Assassin's Creed on the internet, then I would still like the games.
I get updates and learn more about the brand
Being part of a community makes me much more aware of any news and products related to the brand. Sometimes it also allows me to give feedback to the company.
Once I played my first AC game (AC3) I began purchasing the other games and whenever a new one would come out I'd play it. I had joined the AC subreddit and became a frequent member there. I'm not entirely sure if I answered this the right way, if not I apologize.
There's a lot more fresh takes and ideas on the things I like. My love for the franchise grows the more I know about it and seeing other people sharing the same excitement makes me more excited for it.
I've come across new information.

I've used Ubisoft's supplemental services and bonus content for games (such as apps and websites like Assassin's Creed initiates) as well as following news about the company.

it's like a little hobby, so no real big deal

It's complicated. From my time in the AC community, I have definitely grown in my feelings towards AC and Ubisoft but it varies on specific features. For one, I have become more cynical of Ubisoft's practices with Odyssey and the few people have seen from Watch Dogs Legion. They look like cash grabs drawing people in with mindless game features that will only work to make the game more gratuitous. However, I am still an advent fan of AC in general, despite my distaste for Odyssey. I am very much excited for Valhalla and have a strong opinion in favor of most other AC titles. So in short, I like parts of AC and I like parts of Ubisoft but at the same time there's almost an equal number of things I don't like about them as well. So it's hard to say whether I've moved one way or another.

The AC games already got me addicted but when I'm not playing them in my free time I'm browsing the /r/assassinscreed to learn and think more about the games.

I am more aware of things the franchise offers, and insights and opinions that I would not have known about had I not joined the community, which makes me more likely to participate in discussions

Reddit let's me know more about the game outside of playing it.

I have become more aware of news regarding ac and the differences in marketing and development between different titles of the series

i am more of a lurker than anything

Appendix B - Interviews

<u>Interview transcript 1</u>

O. C. - Community Manager (Star Player Program) - Ubisoft (Newcastle)

Interviewer: This is now being recorded. Firstly, could you shortly introduce yourself?

Interviewee: Yeah so I am a community manager for Star Players at Ubisoft and I have been a community manager before as well.

Interviewer: And how many years have you been in the field now?

Interviewee: I started... How many years ago now? Like, five years ago? I think so, yeah.

Interviewer: Okay, and was that in Ubisoft as well, or did you move from a different company?

Interviewee: No, it was actually in Germany, I used to work for a publishing company for two years there, and then I moved to Ubisoft. I was first a community representative, which is, at Ubisoft, at a regional level. After that, I became a community manager for the Star Players.

Interviewer: Oh, I see. So, the community representative role, was that for a particular game?

Interviewee: A community representative, in this case, is actually, for all games in your region. At Ubisoft, the structure is different, because we have the community representatives, community managers and then community developers. So the CR, or community representative, is on a regional level, so since I was one for Poland, I was alone for all the brands.

Interviewer: Okay, so now in your current community management role, how long have you been in it?

Interviewee: Let me check my LinkedIn for that actually. I was actually talking to someone a couple of days ago and couldn't remember how long ago I started. I've totally lost track of time now. I started as a community manager in 2015 for a German publishing company, spent two years there, and then I moved to England when I was still working for them, but I was a freelancer. They changed my contract so that I could

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move here with my boyfriend and still work for them. I started to work at Ubisoft in 2017. Wow, that's so many years ago.

Interviewer: It is! Okay, great. So you have been a community manager for quite a long time now.

Interviewee: Yes. It has been a while.

Interviewer: So, from your perspective, could you simply explain community management to me?

Interviewee: Well, community management, in my opinion, because it's actually different for each person, but, community management is basically managing the social media, managing the forums and keeping the whole community around your game together. On all the platforms. It is also very important to listen to the community and to forward the feedback to the developer teams. So, I think that the main focus is, basically, to listen. That's what I would say. It also depends on the game and the stuff you are working on, because, when I was working in this publishing company before, it was absolutely different. The community management there and what we have here with Ubisoft. For the publishing company, it was purely pay-to-win games, and you could totally say that it was more damage control, managing the damage and the whole mess that comes with pay-to-win games, than here in Ubisoft. Here, you work with those games too, but also normal games, like Assassin's Creed, and you can focus more on actually entertaining the community and being more creative. That's why I think it highly depends on the company and the games you work on.

Interviewer: So, on a day-to-day basis, what would you say is your main role?

Interviewee: Well, normally, your day, doesn't matter in what company and what brand you're working in, you start the day by scanning the social media to see what happened and what is going on, you go through the comments, forums and see if there is anything in a critical state. This is the beginning of your day, to be honest. Later on, and also I want to put more focus on this, it depends on the brand you are working in, because, when I was a community representative, I could see more of each brand, because obviously I was working on all of them, so games like Rainbow Six, the guys working on it have a lot of work, with social media and managing the Twitter and Reddit in this case. So, they have more work on this and also, because of the type of game it is, there is way more damage control. Everything can happen in a game like this, like, one day you can come into work and find out that the servers are down, and then you need to prepare a report on what happened and the proper messaging, so you need to be

focussed on this. On normal brands, it would be more, I don't want to say relaxed, because everyone needs to work the same way, but you have more of actual community work, well, more creative community work I would say, then you can think about articles to write and work on that for the rest of this day and the next day; you can execute a contest, also pick the people during a contest you run or something like this. So, in that publishing company I worked in, I had more flexibility on it, especially, as I have said, it was an absolutely different world in that company, I was even doing events in-game and making assets to the game when I had never done that before. It was just an absolutely different world because it was a publishing company and most of our developers were in China. That was also a very different world, because here, at Ubisoft, most of the time the meetings are with people based in either Paris or in Canada. That is actually another thing, you have a lot of meetings, you have to be on a lot of calls, frontline calls and daily calls.

Interviewer: So, a lot of communication then, right?

Interviewee: Oh, yes, it's a lot of communication between the teams. I can't say how it works in other companies, but in Ubisoft, there are different departments, and it's not like, what you see on social media, is one hundred per cent written by community managers, because a lot of communication is coming out from the marketing department. For example, if a community manager would like to make some push for, I don't know, something purely community-related, like a cosplay contest or something like this, it has to be approved by the community developer, and the brand management, and PR, and so on. So there are a lot of steps that have to be taken for something to happen in your community, and it basically depends on the company, I guess, because I don't know how it works in different companies, I know how it works in Ubisoft. And there are a lot of steps.

Interviewer: So would you say then that you are closely related to the marketing department, or no?

Interviewee: I would say that when it comes to the communication of the brand, the only way to do it is basically through and with the marketing department. Most of the things you see on our social media are from the marketing department, of course, you can see the stuff from the community, but it has to go through someone to be accepted.

Interviewer: We mention the terms online community and community a lot. Could I get a description, from your perspective, of what you think a community is, especially in regards to video games?

Interviewee: It is basically just the fans of the game, the players themselves I think. When I have interviews for different companies, they ask me why I want to be a community manager, I always say that it's because I was a player and I was a part of a lot of communities, and I always wanted to do something around it. I think this is what drives all the games because it's more about the community. You can have players, of course, you can have people who are playing the game, but without communities, which are present on social media and other platforms, well, the game would still exist, but it for sure would not be so successful.

Interviewer: Yes, that makes sense. Since you have mentioned the importance of online communities and community management, what would you say are the main benefits of having community management as a practice?

Interviewee: I think, well, without community managers, companies would lose a lot of feedback. The community managers are there to actually listen to the people, and this is the problem with a lot of companies because if they will not listen to their community, they will make a lot of mistakes. I think because of community managers since they are so close with the community and because they are always present on all social media, they always see what people are writing, there is this very important link between the community and the developers. Otherwise, this person making the game, they have no idea of what is going on, so they can add this one thing to the game, release it and think it was a great idea to add it, but they will never find out if, for example, it backfired. With community managers, you have the upper hand; they create contact between the community and the developer. I would also say that sometimes, community managers get so close to the community that they actually are like "white knights" of the community. They really want to protect these people, because, most of the time, especially in Ubisoft, the community managers taking care of a brand are also huge fans of that brand. For example, Assassin's Creed. All the people who are working on Assassin's Creed as community managers, they used to be, and they are still, huge fans of Assassin's creed, so they will never let or at least try to not let the developers, or whoever is above, destroy something in the game that would make the community upset.

Interviewer: So from what I can tell, community management is mostly prevalent in gaming companies, but there are other companies now, selling products like cars or perfumes, and these companies are now trying to also use community management, by purposely building communities on and around a specific brand. Do you think that when community managers work with communities online they usually come into already built communities, or do they also work on building them?

Interviewee: From when I used to have interviews with other companies, not strictly just gaming ones, I think they know that they have people around a product, for example, let's say some cleaning product. They know they have people who are buying it and so on, and building a community. I think it is important because you need to build a strong online presence, which can bring in more people and you need to actually manage these people. So yes, I think it is important because you can see many pages for even phone companies and they have huge communities and community managers. Even when I'm on LinkedIn, I can see some advertisements for community manager positions in a flower shop and I think "how?". I see the job description, and it involves managing TikTok, managing Snapchat, and I just don't know how that works for a flower shop. But you need to come up with how you can actually attract people to it. For companies like this, community managers are almost social media managers, so the line for such companies is blurring a little bit, community managers become community managers/social media managers. I think that community managers are still most present, yes, in gaming companies and the gaming network.

Interviewer: Looking at it from a different perspective, do you think by having community management, companies, especially in gaming, see benefits in brand loyalty and overall performance?

Interviewee: Oh, of course. There are a lot of benefits. In my opinion, if you have good community management for a brand, you can see, especially if you are working with reporting; for example, we do reports on the sentiment; if the community is managed and informed well, if everything is communicated to them well, even if there is, for example, long downtime in a game, no matter what will happen, with good management the damage will not be so high. It has a huge benefit from this perspective. If you manage a community wrong and do a bad job with damage control, it can really damage the business. We've had a lot of examples, even in different companies, that, if you will not address issues and you have not communicated clearly, this will damage the reputation of the company and you can lose a lot of trust.

Even today, I was reading on Twitter, that the company Blizzard just suddenly released information that they will be trying to hire 800 employees, and they were so proud of it, they made a post about it, but, because of the fact that a few months ago they actually fired a lot of people, they wanted to do something good and post this positive thing, but it actually backfired on them. And even I think to myself "Are you serious? You want to hire 800 people, but what about these people you fired two months ago?". So that's the thing, it can damage the reputation of the company a lot if you do not have good management in this.

Interviewer: What you've said now touches on a question I really wanted to ask you. What are the main challenges and what should one avoid when it comes to community management?

Interviewee: I think that the biggest challenge for community managers is that you are on the front line, you are the one getting all the heat if something happens. You need to have really thick skin, to not let it get it to you. At the very beginning, when I just started to work as a community manager, in the first publishing company, obviously, the games were pay-to-win, so there was a lot of hate and you were the target in many cases. People message you asking "Why didn't I get the credits?", "Why are you trying to scam us?" and so on. In the beginning, it was really hard for me, because I was taking it very personally, and it was a mistake. Some people were even trying to "dox" me, hacking my accounts, trying to get into my accounts, even my "Pokemon Go" account, for example, and changing my passwords there. It was the start of all this for me, so I was shocked, I was sitting at home thinking of what to do next. I think that is the biggest challenge - you want to help people, but sometimes they don't understand that you are not there to do the damage, and anything happening with the game is not your fault, you are there to listen to them and collect the stuff they all say, like "Oh, this is not working". You do this job to get these comments and actually go to the higher-ups and tell them that people are upset. There are many people I know who are still struggling to understand this, but at the end of the day, as a community manager, you are doing good, you are trying to do good. That is what should be thought about, everything else that happens is not our fault, and random people online should not be taken too seriously. These are just people behind screens, and yes, you should listen to them, but when they are saying something nasty, you have to remember that it is not your fault and you are not responsible for it. That is the biggest challenge for me.

Interviewer: Would you even say you can serve as a face to the company then?

Interviewee: Yes, because, even now, at Ubisoft, we had some problem with the game Rainbow Six, and the community representatives for that game are getting a lot of nasty messages to their mailboxes and DM's on Twitter or Reddit. Obviously, this isn't the fault of that person, it can be annoying, but in cases like this, you have to just say "Hey, I got this message", especially when it goes so far as to be a death threat, you have to report it, but with some other stuff, you just have to say that it is not your fault. Yeah, that would definitely be the biggest challenge.

Interviewer: You've mentioned before, I believe, that you were a community member prior to getting a community job position, right?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: And is that then what attracted you to it most?

Interviewee: Oh yes. I think it was because the community managers were doing a really good job. Looking back at it now, it was back in the days when I was playing a lot of World Of Warcraft and later League Of Legends, I was doing cosplay from both of the games and so on, and because the community managers were really close to the community - sharing the pictures, doing contests, online and outside, for example, at Gamescom, I felt like I was part of those communities, I knew a lot of people through the community, through the cosplay of the game, so I thought that it was something I wanted to do. I am not smart enough to know coding or go into game development, I am more of a person that is creative, less of a brainiac. These are the things I would like to do, I thought, writing articles for the games, managing the community, helping the community. I really think that the good job from those community managers made me want to be one.

Interviewer: That is really interesting! You mentioned part of this before, with the flower shop, but being a community manager in gaming, would you see a necessity or benefit for companies in other fields to use it? Or do you think it is best used in gaming?

Interviewee: I would say that it would be useful, yes. I think it makes you feel, even with the flower shop example, a community makes you feel like you are part of something. Even with this, if you see that someone cares about what you are writing, and are replying to you on social media, as community managers do, it makes you trust the company more. It really helps companies build more trust with their customers.

Interviewer: I see, thank you for that answer. We have covered a lot of what I originally wanted to ask you, so is there anything you would possibly like to mention, an important detail I have missed or any tips for community management implementation?

Interviewee: I don't think so... Actually, I don't know if this will be helpful, but there is a huge difference between AAA companies and simple publishing companies since I had the chance to work with both. Before the german publishing company, I actually worked for another, this time, mobile company. There is a huge difference, and many more challenges, in companies that involve a lot of money. When you have an AAA company with single-player games, where you don't have so many micro-transactions, I think it is a bit easier for the community manager, even stress-wise, because in companies with many microtransactions and live games, like those mobile ones, it becomes more challenging. The company, in that case, is looking more for money and profit, and there

is a different type of focus. Even for social media managers in companies like these, it can be hard. It was hard for me, I just wanted to be a community manager, I wanted to talk to all of these people nicely, I still needed to stick to the company and be corporate and money focused. It's different, different community management for mobile games and published games, and companies like Ubisoft, when actually the player is important. Of course, the money is important too, everywhere, but I think it's more about the finished product, feedback and the impact the game is doing, instead of how much money that game is making.

Interviewer: Alright, thank you for that. I believe this has covered my main questions. Thank you so much for taking part in my interview. I will now stop the recording and close it off.

Figure 2. Interview transcript 2

E. C. - Community Developer (Assassin's Creed Valhalla) - Ubisoft (Montreal)

Interviewer: Firstly, could you please shortly introduce yourself and tell me your current role?

Interviewee: I'm [redacted], a Community Developer at Ubisoft. My main role is to strategize how we can grow and foster our community, which includes working with various teams and key community advocates to achieve this goal.

Interviewer: Would you mind telling me how long you have been working in the video game industry?

Interviewee: I've been in the video game industry for 7 years.

Interviewer: What is the main difference between community management and development in your opinion?

Interviewee: While community management is about maintaining the growing community through various engagement methods, I believe that community development focuses on how to create and grow the community from its current size. For example, community managers will listen to the needs and wants of the community to ensure that the community is heard, while community developers will take that listening and figure out a way to put it into actions, so we can grow the community bigger and better.

Interviewer: How would you define an online community?

Interviewee: An online community is a group of people that is passionate about a particular subject – may it be brand, a specific product, or a function – who want to be and feel a sense of belonging with others who share the same passion. They will communicate with each other through discussions and sharing of their creations. And thanks to social media, these methods have become easier for groups to form an online community.

Interviewer: What, for you, is community management's significance in gaming?

Interviewee: Community management is an absolute essential in the gaming industry for player retention and growth. Players are smart, and can decide very rapidly if a particular video game meets their wants and needs. But also, especially when video games involve multiple players, whether a player stays with the video game or not can ultimately depend on the online community and how well it is managed. There are two significant pillars to community management listening and activating.

Imagine yourself as a new player, wanting to connect with other players who you may want to talk to and play with. To do so, you'll want to join a community. You'll join and it will become very clear whether that community is a place that proves a place where people are heard and a community manager is listening. For example, if a community is toxic, it can discourage the player from joining the community in the first place, and feel isolated from playing the game alone (especially true if their real-life friends don't share the same interest). This will ultimately end the player's desire to stay with the game, ending with the player moving onto another game. Community management where both tools, as well as people, are there to listen can help improve existing toxicity, and or turn it around to make the community a positive and welcoming place for all.

The other pillar is activating on behalf of the community and the game. For example, if a game needs improvements and bug fixes, there needs to be frequent communication and transparency as to where the developers are with the progress. Community managers have a key role in ensuring that there is both constant communication between the developers and community, thus deepening the trust between the two and activating on this feedback accordingly. Being able to first listen can help us work on proactive communication as well, especially if we anticipate the community's needs and wants ahead of time. And when we activate and bring solutions that improve the game experience for players is when the trust grows deeper and the community will be more likely to stay longer with the game.

Interviewer: What are the benefits of community management and its practices that you see from your experience? (Would you say increased customer loyalty is one? Is overall brand performance?)

Interviewee: Definitely improved player retention and increased customer loyalty. The better community is managed, the better brand image it can also create. It could also help to improve the product or brand to be better via community feedback, which is another important aspect of community management!

Interviewer: What would you consider to be the main challenges of this field?

Interviewee: The level of transparency – how transparent can we be with our community? There are internal decisions that are made that we sometimes cannot share with the community due to a variety of reasons. When we present certain changes made, and sometimes without conveying them, the community may receive a disconnected answer that is not satisfactory. Of course, we will always try to share as much as possible with the community, but sometimes when answers cannot provide the reasons why, it's harder for the community to understand. This may cause frustration from the community, which can impact the trust. We try to be as transparent as possible, but it can be challenging to manage the community's expectations on what we're able to speak to and why or why we aren't able to be as transparent – it's really a fluid topic, there are no hard and fast rules but it's about building trust and that goes both ways.

Interviewer: Were you a community member yourself prior to your current role? What has led, or attracted you to it?

Interviewee: For sure! I've been a community member of things like League of Legends and Korean food blogging on Tumblr. These days, I'm more of an Animal Crossing community member though! To be honest, I never thought this would be a job for me 7 years ago, but I really started appreciating this role when I attended PAX Prime back in 2014. I attended a panel called Trolling 101, which taught me a very valuable lesson; even if the community is voicing negative opinions and feedback, it's really because they care. If they really didn't care, they would leave and never engage with us. That stuck with me for the longest time, and it really helped me to become more compassionate about community frustrations. It led me to learn more about the job through experience, and ultimately, made me realize the importance of community.

Another thing that really attracts me to this role is figuring out how we're going to strategize, and determine why with data. I'm a data based person, and I want to be able

to justify why we're heading the way we are, and how we can measure the success of it. I would say that while trusting your instincts is important, justifying your decisions via data is just as important, if not more. It's like coming up with a hypothesis and proving it right (or wrong!), and make decisions based on that. I guess my psychology degree wasn't such a waste after all!

Interviewer: Are there any other details that you would like to mention, any suggestions for community management implementation?

Interviewee: Firstly, I want to stress the importance of data tracking on community sentiments and discussion points. You can roughly guess how the community is feeling and what the hot topic is, but to solidly determine those values, you need to have good data tracking. Investing in good tools to measure this is so important.

Second, because there is a difference between community management and development there is a strong need for separate roles. Management itself is a big role, and so is development. I'm really lucky to be at Ubisoft where this division of roles is clearly defined, as it helps me to focus on the growth part One cannot live without the other either; you cannot only maintain a community, but cannot only grow a community either. If possible, both Community Managers and Community Developers must be in place in the video game industry.
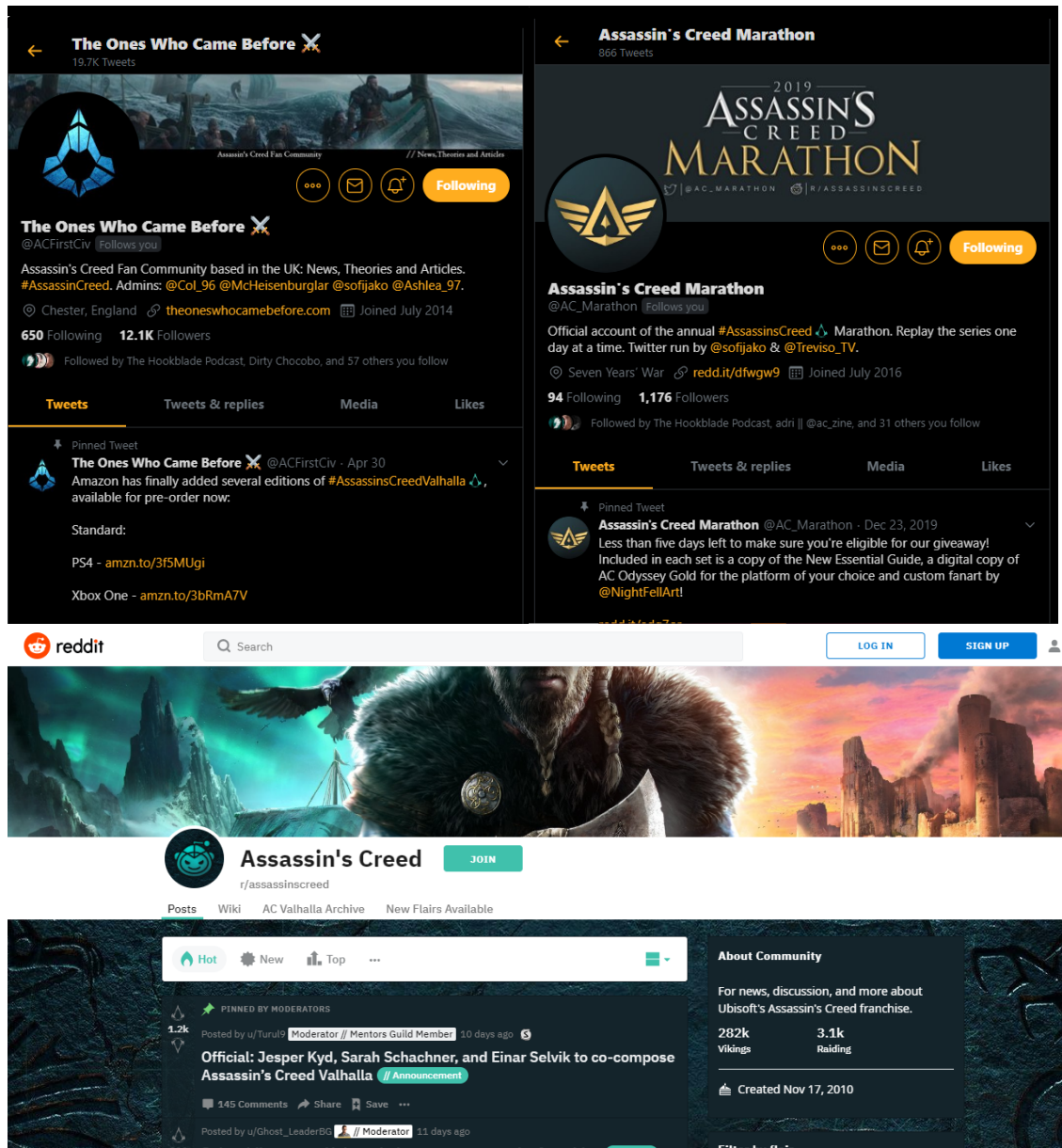
Interviewer: Thank you very much for your time and answers.

Appendix C

This appendix is part of ethnographic research, showing screen captures from an observed community, with consent. The author is a member of all captured communities.

Figures 1 & 2. Examples of sub-community efforts

Ethics Review

GBS faculty members should review the work of all student research projects for compliance with international ethical standards in research. All students must use the consent form (or an appropriately modified version) in the appendix if they plan to do interviews or otherwise gather data from research subjects as part of their research.

If a faculty member feels that a project may raise ethics concerns, they should ask the student to complete this ethics review form and submit it to a member of the academic team at their local campus for review.

Ethics Review Application Form

Researcher's name(s)	**Sofija Korotajevaite**
Email	**Skorotajevaite@gbsge.com**
Course instructor / Supervisor	**Roberta Giannini**
Program	**International Management**
Course name (if applicable)	
Project title	**Brand Community Management and its role in modern business. A study of online video game communities and their effects on brand engagement and performance.**

Research objective	An ethnographic study of online communities. Obtaining insider perspectives on online community membership.
Research questions	- Do you consider yourself a member of at least one online community, centred on a specific game brand, franchise or developer? (Optional) What online community would you say you are primarily a member of? - How long have you been a member of your online gaming community of choice? - What do you personally feel makes you a community member? - How would you say your engagement with a brand or company has changed after joining their respective online community? Please elaborate on the previous answer, if possible. - Which of the following motivate you to remain active in your online community? - Which of the previously mentioned motivators, would you consider to be the strongest? - Would you agree that you are more likely to purchase products from the brand or publisher of which you are a community member over others (of

	which you are not a community member)?
Research methods Which research methods will be used?	**Contextual ethnographic questionnaire for online game community members.**
Research site Where the research takes place?	**The research is done in different communities, reaching their members mainly through social media sites like Twitter, and, with moderator permission, Reddit.**
Participants Who are the proposed research participants?	**Online game community members. The first questionnaire questions outline this requirement and therefore the study only addresses those who fill out the main requirement. On ethnographic grounds, this study is centred on the author's extended community circle, therefore placing some focus on community members of the Assassin's Creed brand, with community developer and member approval.**

Research procedures How is the data to be collected from these participants? Could the data collection process harm the participants in any foreseeable way?	**Data is collected anonymously through Google Forms. The questionnaire features multiple-choice questions and two optional open questions, giving participants a choice to stay as anonymous as possible.** **The data is therefore not directly linked to any of the participants and could not be used to harm anyone in particular. The author also emphasises the confidentiality of the form, and addresses its use in the author's bachelor thesis only.**
Procedures to ensure anonymity and confidentiality	**No requirements to fill out any personal information; no email collection. The questionnaire is anonymous unless someone decides to personally reach out to the author after completion.**
Risks and benefits of the research for participants	**The only risks are filling in something wrong and changing your mind on your answers later, in which case respondents can reach**

	out directly yo the author. There is always risk of leaks and hacks in regards to virtual research, but this is out of the author's hands.

Researcher signature

Advisor (course instructor) signature

Date: May 21, 2020