# Creating and Consuming Content: Exploring Member Engagement and Role Acceptance Within an Online Tennis Forum

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## Abstract

Technology continues to find new ways to influence how sport is consumed and experienced. Online forums, for example, offer fans the opportunity to spectate, debate, and celebrate their favourite sports, competitions, and athletes. Sport enthusiasts can use them to post information, ask questions, offer opinions, or share comments as they seek to communicate with like-minded individuals. We were interested in interpersonal dynamics within a popular international online tennis forum. We used systems theory to explore how posters sought to create and consume content in an inherently dynamic environment. Utilizing a netnography approach, we observed group dynamics within 19,782 messages posted to 54 discussion threads. We focused on daily discussions concerning professional tennis (players, matches, equipment). Results revealed how posters interpreted, critiqued, and debated events and forum practices. Social dynamics were often complex as posters sought to fulfill various emergent roles and goals within a simultaneously harmonious and adversarial environment.

*Keywords:* interpersonal dynamics, netnography, online tennis forum, roles, social systems theory

**Creating and Consuming Content: Exploring Member Engagement and Role**

**Acceptance Within an Online Tennis Forum**

It is difficult to ignore the presence of the Internet as we create and consume

sport and leisure (Spracklen, 2015). Online venues offer "anytime anyplace

connectivity" (Vandeen Abeele et al., 2018) where people can *play* (Marsh, 2010),

*produce* (Luvaas, 2013), and *create* (McGillivray et al., 2016); where they can seek and

share knowledge, express dissent and even engage in activism (Rowe et al., 2010). It

isn't surprising then that online participation has been on a rise over the past decade

(Internet Live Stats, 2017). More than half (58.7%) of the earth's 7.79 billion people

have access to the Internet (Internet World Stats, 2020) with an estimated 2.77 billion

social media users in 2019 (Hosting Facts, 2019). Of particular interest to this study, a

quarter (20.6%) of Internet users visited at least one online discussion forum during

2015 (Statistic Brain, 2015).

### Discussion Forums and Message Boards

Discussion forums/message boards are the focus here. While the number and

types of social media venues continue to expand, discussion forums offer a popular and

meaningful online space (Li & Bernoff, 2011). New forums, attracting thousands of

online users, are being created regularly (Rice, 2018). As their name implies, discussion

forums offer group members the opportunity to post items they believe may be of

interest to others. Group members are then encouraged to "start a debate, solicit advice,

share an idea, run a poll, or just participate in a conversation on your favorite subject"

(Safko & Brake, 2009, p. 145). Members' posts are organized into coherent themes,

known as threads, where other group members can find them. Once other members

view the posts, they may respond if they wish to do so. These forums have gained

popularity in contexts as diverse as educational settings and fan communities. They

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have been used to, among other things, solicit opinion or advice, carry out logistical

conversations, socialize or monitor events and patterns (Ruihley & Hardin, 2011). It

isn't surprising that online forums have millions of members around the world.

The strengths of online forums are perhaps obvious. They offer ongoing

discussion of topics suggested and selected by members (Macias et al., 2005). Someone

who posts on such a forum might reasonably expect that thousands of others, located

around the globe, could see their post. Given that these message boards are organized

around topics of mutual interest, that same poster can have some confidence that any

post might find an audience. Since online interactions are electronic, they can be

independent of time and location (Chayko, 2008). Such a forum places unprecedented

reach into the hands of users.

Wittel (2001) refers to resulting dynamics as "network sociality" where

participants can exchange in ways that deepen and expand interpersonal connections.

This seems particularly resonant at this time. As we prepare this final draft, the world is

coming to grips with the demands of the Covid-19 pandemic. With widespread social

isolation, there is a new urgency to understanding interpersonal dynamics as people

share and connect online. We seek to explore those dynamics.

### *Opportunities and Challenges*

Online environments pose an interesting setting within which to study

interpersonal dynamics. Forums/message boards, in particular, offer often dramatic

opportunities for leisure enthusiasts to enjoy the company of like-minded others. Unlike

many other forms of social media, they enable large groups of people to share and

debate perhaps thousands of topics. The resulting emotional proximity can build

feelings of association and trust thereby leading to increasingly open expression and

meaningful deliberation (Resnick & Kraut, 2011). This capacity seems to represent a

tremendous opportunity for sport and leisure enthusiasts.

However, challenges exist. Electronic environments offer a mixed blessing.

While users can connect with others, this connection can be tenuous (Wright & Street,

2007). As Norris (2002) warns:

> The Internet is a medium where users have almost unlimited choices and
> minimal constraints about where to go and what to do. Commitments to any
> particular online group can often be shallow and transient when another is but a
> mouse click away. Most purely online communities without any physical basis
> are usually low-cost, 'easy-entry, easy-exit' groups. To avoid cognitive
> dissonance, it is simpler to exit than to work through any messy bargaining and
> conflictual disagreements within the group. (p. 4)

As a result, though the message board format offers the capacity for widespread

sharing, it may also suffer from lack of engagement among members. It seems ironic

that venues intended to encourage open and interesting debate may suffer from

disinterest among users. We sought guidance from social systems theory to better

understand the dilemma Norris (2002) highlights.

Systems theory first emerged to help understand complex systems ranging from

grasslands and herd behaviours to coral reefs and pollution levels. Decades ago, social

scientists began to use systems theory to understand group dynamics. Katz and Kahn

(1971) were among the first to introduce systems thinking to social groups. At that time,

they laid out the three most persistent challenges facing any social system.

*Challenge 1:* The first challenge is that of **value creation**. To place that challenge into

an online context, sustainable online systems must attract members who actively

contribute to the larger collective (Akar & Mardikyan, 2018; see also Resnick & Kraut,

2011). As is the case with most social media, the opportunities afforded by online

forums rely entirely on members for content. After all, a forum is devoid of content save

that which is provided by posters. For the system to thrive, members must not only

consume content but also create materials that are of interest to the larger collective.

Without such content, social exchange, any online forum could falter.

The issue of value creation is perhaps the most fundamental challenge of any

social system. Yet it is typical that most members simply observe (called "lurking")

from their respective locations without posting anything for others to consume. This has

been a long-standing pattern. Decades ago, Baym (1993) reported that 10% of the

online community members were responsible for half of the messages she observed

within a newsgroup. Years later, Nielsen (2006) suggested that this pattern is

remarkably constant observing that 90% of online community users fall within the

"lurker" category and 9% contributing sometimes and 1% contributing the most. Others,

like McEnroe (2016) suggest the importance of more balanced contribution patterns.

*Challenge 2:* The second challenge is that of **member relations**. Any system requires

cooperation to support the larger collective. Multiple tasks are undertaken by

interdependent units interacting in ways that fulfil individual priorities while supporting

the larger system. Fulfilment of these tasks is central to the success of any social system

(Brin, 1999, see also Darnhofer et al., 2016) and is linked to both resistance (system's

capacity to resist disruption) and resilience (system's capacity to recover from

disruption) (see Fath et al., 2015).

In the context of message boards, the providers' role is largely one of providing

an electronic space. It is the members themselves who seek to coordinate efforts within

that space. Yet we know very little of how this coordination is carried out. The extant

literature has focused primarily on posters' contribution patterns (volume, post quality,

and/or expertise of the poster) but they offer limited insight to anyone hoping to

understand interpersonal dynamics within an online sport forum (e.g., Norman, 2014).

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*Challenge 3:* The third issue is that of **behaviour governance**. Social systems are constantly in flux as members negotiate and renegotiate their contributions to the larger system. While it is natural for individuals to pursue their own objectives, the system seeks to favour the needs of the collective (Fath et.al., 2015). To ensure that members' behaviours serve the larger collective, some direction and adjudication may be necessary (Katz & Kahn, 1971).

Some of this direction falls within the jurisdiction of staff members (called Moderators or "mods"). Mods are expected to monitor interactions within a typical forum to ensure that content meets ethical and forum-specific standards. However, their involvement is often more symbolic than substantive. It is unlikely they can monitor the millions of posts on popular websites. The task of behavioural governance may fall largely on other users (Wall & Williams, 2007).

### *Research Questions*

Several related questions emerge from these discussions. In terms of **content creation**, members must create a product that offers value for the larger collective. What is the nature of the content posters place on the tennis forum? What are they posting?

In terms of **member relations**, members must adopt "housekeeping" roles (Akaka & Chandler, 2011) that facilitate smooth operations within the collective. What roles are being undertaken by posters? What functions do these roles fulfill?

In terms of **behaviour governance**, members must constantly negotiate collective and individual priorities. What means are emerging to counter-balance individual and collective interests? The forum chosen for this study is devoted to discussions about professional tennis. Fans and leisure enthusiasts can be single-minded in their support of a favourite. What happens if their posts annoy or even incense

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opposing fans? What happens when posters seek to celebrate with allies but castigate

those who support rivals? Will others intervene? If so, how might these self-corrective

dynamics play out?

## Literature Review

### *The Relational Nature of Online Forums*

With the advent of the Internet, it was perhaps inevitable that online

environments would be adopted to create and support relational interactions. Venues

like online forums are inherently appealing for sport and leisure enthusiasts. They can

be practical, convenient (Chayko, 2008; see also Kang et al., 2014; Tanis, 2008; Van

Dijk, 2005) and fun (Sandvig, 2006, see also Nimrod, 2011). More than that, they are

often viewed as "safe spaces" (Norris, 2002). The text-based format removes "the

standard visual and aural cues of social identity" (Norris, 2002, p. 5) and members can

control the amount of personal information they share (Nippert-Eng, 2010). Many

authors speculate that online settings may encourage more open self-expression as a

result (Chayko, 2008, see also Nimrod, 2014; Prescott et al., 2015) and resulting trust

(Hardey, 2002, see also Henderson & Gilding, 2004).

Online environments also enable the sharing of sources ranging from newspaper

releases, member posts, player blogs, and videos (see Wang et al., 2012). Indeed, any

release, blog, or video may be posted and then viewed by thousands of readers who all

enjoy considerable flexibility in terms of how and when they might respond (Chayko,

2002, 2008; see also Ling, 2004).

These characteristics help forum members congregate around common interests.

A sense of the collective, what Jenkins (2013) labelled emotional proximity, may

emerge as a result. Such proximity helps create feelings of comfort, familiarity, and togetherness (MacQueen et al., 2001). Exchanges centering on communal concerns highlight salient issues and establish collective understandings. Through such means, association is created. Group members come to share a "feeling … of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). Emotional proximity can be strengthened as forum members share and debate (Nimrod, 2014).

These relational elements may contribute to members' sense of identity and role expectations within the larger group (Graham, 2007). These elements then encourage greater involvement within group activities (Resnick & Kraut, 2011) thereby tempering the possible disinterest suggested by Norris (2002). This issue is particularly salient for online forums. "People are the key to a thriving online community" (Preece, 2001, p. 35). New and interesting content is the lifeblood of any online forum.

Previous sport fan research has focused on online members' posting frequency (e.g., Kirkwood et al., 2019). This study focused instead on how roles might emerge among posters. Forum posts offer a complex dynamic as posters cajole, criticize, support, defend, and debate. Posters may request or offer aid; they may share but they may also censure. The fan literature suggests that dynamics between enthusiasts can be rough and tumble as they debate various aspects of their favourite sports. Whatever their intent, they are keenly aware that the online forum's success relies on their collective capacity to create an interesting and dynamic website. This requires that forum posters be as willing to provide information as they are to request it; to offer support as much as critique. As suggested above, systems theory offers some insight

into these dynamics.

### Theoretical Perspective - Systems Theory

Several traditions and communities of practice use social systems theory to understand how individuals interact within larger organizations/communities (Rabstejnek, 2012; see also Matheny & Zimmerman, 2001). Social systems theory suggests that members within a system interact through repeated cycles of behaviours (Amagoh, 2008). These behaviours represent the collective's efforts to "self-organize"; to find ways to deal with internal and external challenges (see Byeon, 2005, p. 226; Ferlie, 2007, p. 155; White, 2000, p. 167).

These behaviours are guided by conventions that emerge over time within the collective (Shoham & Tennenholtz, 1997). These conventions evolve in ways that guide participants as they navigate the space between individual gain and collective well-being. Some conventions can be agreed upon in advance (a provider might note that forum communications should be respectful, should not promote hate, and so on) but others are negotiated and renegotiated. For example, a provider cannot dictate when and how members post. This is not something that can be decided in advance. Conventions regarding when, how, and why posts occur may continue to evolve.

While many conventions may emerge, we were particularly interested in Bowen's (1976) notions of triangles. Recall that systems seek to counter-balance opposing forces through group members' interactions, negotiations, and behaviour patterns. The concept of triangles suggests one way through which counter-balancing might occur (Titelman, 2012). The need for a triangle or "third party" might emerge as members of a dyad struggle to find balance. In a forum context, for example, posters may be involved in a virtual argument over the relative merits of a professional player.

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In such cases, a third actor may offer the dyad new perspectives and insight. If the third

party cannot help resolve whatever issue is affecting the dyad, another third party may

step in. In this way, the system constantly seeks order and balance, and triangles of

actors help with that process.

Consider how this might play out on an online forum devoted to professional

sport. We noted above that forums have sometimes been characterized as "safe"

(Atkinson & DePalma, 2009, p. 183). As Atkinson and DePalma (2009) observe,

however, it may be difficult to find an online space that is truly free of risk. Sport offers

an emotionally charged context such that the resulting online social dynamics can

become rancorous. Norm violations are common within online spaces (McLaughlin &

Vitak, 2011) and online collectives often struggle with conflict (Wall & Williams,

2007). Conflict can be potentially within the system. When such stress is present, the

system will seek to rebalance. Members may agree to act as third parties as the notion of

triangles suggests (Wall & Williams, 2007).

Group members may adopt a variety of behaviours as they seek to manage

interactions. Roles assumed by members are of particular importance to social systems.

Roles represent "a particular set of practices that connect one or more actors" (Akaka &

Chandler, 2011, p. 244). Such roles may evolve and can emerge from the norms and

values that permeate any group or collective (Gleave et al., 2009).

Roles influence ways in which actors work together toward common goals.

Someone who wishes to share requires an audience (Parker & Ward, 2000). Someone

who has questions requires a source for information. An online forum both requires and

enables such dynamics. Members must play roles that encourage and support new

content. These efforts then serve the larger collective.

Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) characterize these activities as value creation. When members of the collective adopt such roles, they help create value for themselves and others. Through their efforts, those logging on to a forum can expect that new and interesting content was posted since their last visit. Those with questions hope to have answers. Those with something to share seek an audience. In this way, network connections emerge while trust and dependencies are created (Fath et al., 2015). This ongoing renewal then brings the forum to life thereby creating value for all.

With such renewal, members are more likely to engage in those roles that bring stability. These roles are interdependent and overlapping. If one actor adopts a new role, this change has implications for others (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). To monitor such dynamics is to explore the building blocks of any social system. These dynamics comprise the interactions that support that system. They help bring about and maintain balance. We were interested in relational dynamics among posters as they sought to direct and facilitate exchange within a spirited and potentially volatile environment.

To conclude, there are persistent challenges that face any social system. They relate to content creation, member relations, and governance. These challenges may be particularly pertinent within message board settings that rely entirely on content created by members. This is not unique among social media. However, message boards are inherently deliberative. Successful ones encourage debate that can be complex and potentially emotional. Member engagement seems a requisite for success. Members must be engaged enough to fulfill any roles that the collective requires. As these roles are fulfilled, members must constantly negotiate the sometimes inconsistent forces of individual and collective interests. We wanted to explore such dynamics.

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## Methodology

We utilized a netnography technique to explore online interactions on an

international tennis forum of *Talk Tennis*. Netnography offers natural and unobtrusive

techniques and has been used to understand online participation (e.g., Berdychevsky &

Nimrod, 2015, 2017). While some netnography efforts include a variety of data

collection techniques (like interviewing), the methodology encourages a range of data

collection strategies (Kozinets, 2020). We utilized an immersive approach by

monitoring hundreds of discussion threads and thousands of posts searching for key

themes (see Kozinets, 2020). We did not interact with the posters and relied instead on

publicly available online traces; those comments, messages, images, videos, memes,

hyperlinks, etc. shared among *Talk Tennis* members. We used these traces to determine

how discussions were produced, modified, and adjusted. We focused on the

interpersonal dynamics and interactions between forum posters. Consistent with the

challenges identified above, we were interested in three related issues: (1) content

creation, (2) members' relationship maintenance, and (3) behaviour governance.

### *Choosing a Field Site*

The choice of field site was informed by our research questions. We sought to

explore online interactions within a tennis context. We investigated a number of tennis

outlets, those focusing on not-for-profit tennis organizations, tennis events, and

professional websites. The goal was to find an interactive website, one with diverse

interests and active engagement (see selection criteria in Kozinets, 2020, pp. 226- 230).

We chose the online forum*, Talk Tennis,* because of its relative popularity, diversity,

and the sheer volume of exchanges. It is the oldest existing (since 1992) and most

established site of its kind, and promotes itself as the world's "most active tennis

equipment message board". It generates approximately 10,000 posts per month and 50,000-page views per day (Tennis Warehouse, 2016). *Talk Tennis* continues to evolve and gain popularity regardless of its age. Over a three-year period (Jan 14th, 2016 until March 16th, 2019) we observed a gain of 10,973 new members accounting for 46,888 members as of March 16, 2019, an increase of 75,552 new discussion threads and 2,986,762 messages, totalling to 574,824 discussion threads and 12.04 million posts (https://tt.tennis-warehouse.com/index.php).

Discussion topics encompass an array of interests from professional players, match results, and equipment, to tennis instruction. Its online format is remarkably adept at generating and organizing commentary of all sorts, providing a complete record of comments. While *Talk Tennis* adds new topics each hour making the discussions current, active, and interactive, offering a certain immediacy, it also contains conversations that take place over weeks, months, and even years, offering a degree of permanence. This 'virtual memory' can help sport enthusiasts reflect, monitor, and return, facilitating more informed and thoughtful exchange. Constant, detailed, and lively communication offers a vibrant culture of debate.

### *Anonymizing the Data*

*Talk Tennis* with it's thousands of discussion threads is available free of charge. This may help explain why the forum is frequented by hundreds of thousands of readers. We focused on posters, those who signed in and posted messages. Contextually, posters on *Talk Tennis* are notified that the online forum is considered a public space where posts are for the consumption (and use) of any reader. There should, the website suggests, be no expectation of privacy (see Talk Tennis at Tennis Warehouse, 2004).

As noted above, we undertook an immersive approach by using only publicly available data, not revealing private interactions nor sensitive information (see ethics process flowchart in Kozinets, 2020, p. 179). We collected data through observational means, there was no contact or interaction between researchers and forum participants.

We instituted a "cloaking strategy" when anonymizing the posters. Kozinets (2020) suggests that cloaking is appropriate when the risk of harm to the participant is low, data are not sensitive, and/or the population under study is not vulnerable. We judged these conditions to be present. Although posters on *Talk Tennis* tend to identify themselves using nicknames, avatars, and even imaginary locations, we also assigned pseudonyms to help maintain their anonymity. This protocol was consistent with ethical guidelines established by the Federal body responsible for research ethics (in the study's jurisdiction).

### *Data Collection*

Data were collected between December 14, 2015, and July 31, 2018, through direct copying from computer-generated communications on *Talk Tennis'* two most popular subforums, *General Pro Player Discussion* and the *Pro Match Results*. Within the former, the discussion revolved around "anything pro" while the latter was exclusively designated for matches including spoiler threads. Due to the sheer volume of posts, we employed three data reduction techniques. First, we concentrated on popular discussion threads. Popularity was assessed based on the volume of engagement. A newly developed thread, if interesting, can spark dozens of replies within minutes. We considered only those threads with 100+ replies.

Second, the thread must deal with professional events, and third, concern a

player and/or upcoming event. These screening criteria not only reduced the number of

posts but ensured that they dealt with the more emotionally charged components of the

tennis world. Being interested in interpersonal dynamics we hoped that such topics

would create considerable engagement. A reflective immersion journal was kept by the

principal researcher, noting what she encountered, what she collected, omitted, and how

she evaluated the discussion threads (see Kozinets, 2020). For example, the journal

included comments on unique and routine instances of poster exchanges, the contextual

information to help explain commentary, and research decisions (e.g., coding) offering

explanations of emerging themes.

### Data Analysis

This study utilized an inductive data analysis approach in which it sought to

describe, define, and detail the elements of the poster dynamic within a tennis forum

(see research approaches in Kozinets, 2020). We sought themes within the data to help

generate theoretical explanations of this cultural and communal phenomenon. We

focused on the post; the behaviour, and the interpersonal poster dynamics. The forum

was considered a social world and posts a social act (see Wittgenstein, 1958/1968).

A total of 19,782 messages posted to 54 discussion threads were observed

(collected) and analyzed. The data collection and analysis were treated as a

simultaneous process in that the posts were imported, indexed, and analyzed as they

emerged. The dataset was processed using three 'analysis operations' of collating,

coding, and combining (see Kozinets, 2020). Researchers moved freely from one step to

the next, revisiting the data and interpretations as needed seeking a hermeneutic

interpretation (Spiggle, 1994; see also Thompson et al., 1994).

We used manual coding because it is easy to perform in short conversational

exchanges of a forum post. For example, coding uses a variety of terms on information

sharing quest "cooperation", "buy-in", "willingness", etc. Attention to meaningful

instances (e.g., directing the debate) that were both unique and routine helped with

coding and combining related codes (see 'pattern codes' in Kozinets, 2020). We noted

posters' actions (e.g., images, videos, likes received), paid close attention to messages

(subtext, context, text, video, etc.), and journal notes to help understand the often

complex interactive and interpersonal dynamics of the online group.

### *Organization and Reporting of Data*

Findings are organized into major themes that help contextualize the posters'

interpersonal dynamics and provide answers to research questions. Direct quotes

including emojis, video links, etc. were used to illustrate and support identified themes,

describe engagement, and present interactions, meanings, and regularities in the data.

The representation of findings was grounded in theory and data; inferences were drawn

and theory provided structure for interpretation (see Creswell, 2007).

## Results

### *Content Creation*

Recall that a priority of any social system is that of product creation. In terms of

online forums, technology provides the means to create but members must find reasons

to share. So, what were the members posting? *Talk Tennis* posters sought to engage

others. There seemed an ongoing curiosity in the views of others and the forum was

filled with efforts to elicit. In effect, thousands were engaged in soliciting new posts.

This seems noteworthy. In terms of systems thinking, members ensure the forum

remains fresh and vibrant.

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We noted how adept *Talk Tennis* posters seemed at finding new and different ways to engage others. Some offered opinions ('When Rafa had his appendix surgery, I had a feeling he wasn't going to be as dominant.') while others asked questions ('There aren't too many players that look promising, but why do we have to rely solely on them?'). Responses could agree with the basic premise of the question ('I agree that the Fedal monopoly ended in 2007.') or argue the point ('I just can't say fed is done. He just can't beat one guy.').

The types of questions and topics were surely grounded in notions of excellence and achievement. These values pervaded almost every discussion. Topics like on-court success, abilities, tactics, and performance dominated. Indeed, thousands of posts sought to understand, predict, analyse, or commiserate over pros' performance. Members commonly shared detailed analyses, provided supporting evidence, exchanged informed opinions, and advised on all aspects of professional tennis. This post is demonstrative of such analyses:

> If Tomic had the work ethic of Halep...Saw him pass Nole with a slice last year ... Enormously talented but not enough heart…I remember commentators criticizing his attitude in a match against Ferrer where he looked disinterested from the start and unsurprisingly lost.

Our second insight related to the extent of content posters were willing to provide. We were struck by the depth of information that even a mundane post could elicit. One enthusiast posted a video of them playing asking others for guidance in stroke mechanics. Several responded with advice and others (who lacked expertise) posted videos of professionals demonstrating correct technique. These posts were often iterative in that the original poster might ask for clarification and several others would then offer additional insight.

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On another occasion, a poster compared the performance of professionals in key

tournaments. By way of response, a second poster sought to put the respective

performance in perspective. The depth of the response suggested a long-term and

intimate knowledge of tournament results and court surfaces,

> I'm talking on aggregate…We can at least compare peak displays of Nadal
> on HC [Hard Court] and grass to Federer and Djokovic but I can't return the
> favour for Federer and Djokovic against Nadal on clay, where the only
> meaningful display of comparable peak occurred in the 2013 RG SF
> [Roland Garros Semi-Final]. I understand that Masters are not worthless but
> have to use Slams as my main barometer.

This thoughtful and crafted response to an almost passing observation suggests the

posters' engagement levels often brought to these discussions.

We noted too that the general tennis environment (events, anniversaries, or news

reports) could trigger and guide posting patterns. This leads to a third insight to emerge

as we explored content creation. While message boards are often promoted for debate

(Dieleman & Duncan, 2013), we found many examples of them being used as a

communal space to enjoy events. *Talk Tennis* posters, watching a tournament on their

own, often reached out to others on the message board. This practice, called co-viewing

(Doughty et al., 2011) has been criticized as a distraction from the primary viewing

experience (Smith et al., 2019), but it seemed to enhance members' enjoyment.

*Talk Tennis* members sought to share the experience but also to discuss

emerging issues. During one match, for example, a poster was becoming concerned

over the group favourite's performance. They eventually became so distraught,

commenting: 'Let's cosmically link hands and PRAY!'. It was as if they were sitting in

the same room watching the event together, yet they were separated by perhaps

thousands of miles.

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During these conversations, posters often moved in and out of discussions ('I'm off to watch highlights\eat', 'Guys I can't watch live but eurosport 6:15 til 8 have extended highlights in the morning so catch up with you about 7ish.'). In these ways, they were able to make arrangements to extend the experience. As they returned, they were often greeted very personally and affectionately ('YOU'RE BACK!!!!!! *three smiley faces* I'm in.'; 'here are the highlights @posternickname. I know you will love this. *winking face*'). Approval, appreciation, and mutual support were evident.

This environment gave posters an almost boundless opportunity to engage, share, and enjoy tennis with others. In terms of systems thinking, *Talk Tennis* made a largely unrestricted set of actions available to members. Posters could utilize words, streamed events, still images, and video to structure and enhance their interactions. In these ways, the format encouraged participation.

In terms of the first research question, member participation (or product creation) was guided almost entirely by their particular interests in the sport. Those interests fueled content creation and consumption. *Talk Tennis* posters seemed happy to engage in almost any discussion of tennis-related matters. By turn, posters sought to inform, remind, share, and even reframe others' comments as debates unfolded.

The appeal was obvious. As we left the data collection phase, we observed that *Talk Tennis* contained 574,824 discussion threads with 12.04 million posts and was growing daily. Forum format seemed central to this success. Posters were invited to share any thoughts with fellow members, all of whom had a common interest in tennis. Readers could then choose from a virtual buffet of options. As a result, the system was permitting and encouraging ample activities and perspectives. In doing so, it helped reduce the space between the individual and collective advantage, easing the burden of negotiation. A convention of mutual acceptance seemed to emerge. A sense that "if I am

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interested, there are others who likely share that interest" was implied. This may help

explain the remarkable success of this and comparable forums.

### *Member Relations*

Recall that member relations are concerned, to some extent, with multiple tasks

that must be undertaken to ensure the survival of the larger collective. The literature

review noted the importance of roles and conventions to support the completion of those

tasks. We identified several salient role-related behaviours among *Talk Tennis* posters.

Recall that systems can be understood through the repeated member behaviours

(Amagoh, 2008). We characterize these behaviours in terms of dominant roles adopted

by key posters.

Three distinct roles seemed to emerge. While many roles are being fulfilled in

an online forum, these three were linked most directly to our research questions. We

characterized these roles as 1) *shapers* – those who directed the discussion; 2)

*shepherds* – those who kept the discussion on track; and 3) *sheriffs* – those who ensured

that rules and accepted proprieties were observed. Each is described here. As the

comments make clear, the patterns observed were influenced by conventions that

emerged organically from the members.

### *Role 1: Shapers Create Content*

We characterized any *Talk Tennis* member who started a discussion thread,

acted as an informant, and/or commentator as a *shaper*. *Shapers* were instigators who

encouraged others to engage. A typical *shaper* approach was to pose a question, 'What

are your comments on Nadal's loss to Verdasco?' Others then 'step into' the debate by

responding, by clarifying key points, by correcting others, and/or by further directing

discussions.

All served to shape the debate. For example, when one poster laid out an argument against a player, another clarified, offering an alternative perspective, 'Every one of those finals were against Federer or Djokovic The 2 he actually won were also against Djokovic. He's not a mental midget just not as good as the all time greats he's been up against.'

This approach was often enhanced by creating provocative titles: 'Be prepared Serena fans: Maria could beat Serena' and/or 'Stan Wawrinka to win Australian open? I think he can pull off the upset and take Novak out...'. These posts often sought to act as emotional triggers (we refer to them as 'sparks'), dealing with anticipated and actual match outcomes, accompanied by related criticisms and accusations. One poster, for example, asked for input on player's decline, 'Hey Fedal fans, can you pinpoint the moment when you realized your respective favourite was done?'. Note the perhaps intentionally incendiary aspect of the post ('your favourite *was done*?').

Such questions generated responses and ongoing interactions created more content. This technique is fraught with challenges, however. If the post lacks appeal, it can be ignored. If it is too sensational, it will be opposed, 'I would not have clicked this thread if it clearly stated he had retired from a match. The title was click-bait!'.

Whatever the approach, *Talk Tennis* posters offered the kindling that fueled the fire of debate. Without them there would be no content; they maintained and determined the forum's long-term success, creating opportunities for discussion and debate. The role of a *shaper*, in particular, helped this online collective stay engaged.

*Role 2: Shepherds Direct Discussions*

Whereas the *shapers'* role is one of creating content, *shepherds* sought to keep the discussion and those involved on track. For example, a *shepherd* suggested that those discussing male players in a thread devoted to women's tennis should return to the topic, 'Guys, can we leave Fed, Nole and weak eras out of this thread, please?'. By doing so, they delivered on the promise of the discussion thread's title. This post was immediately 'liked' by 9 others indicating support.

*Shepherds* may also attempt to move conversations along. For instance, a *shepherd* insisted the draw be posted before the discussion of possible implications: 'Enough of this chitterchatter. KAMAN ALREADY, GET ON WITH THE DRAW.' Here, a poster who took on the role of a *shepherd* was redirecting the conversation, reminding others to render it more reader-friendly.

The role of a *shepherd* may be difficult to carry out in this highly emotional setting. When heated debates emerged one *shepherd's* frustration was clear ('…read post #6 you idiot'). This *shepherd* was attempting to remind of the thread's initial purpose, simultaneously distracting the conversation, encouraging conflict by resorting to insult.

This scenario played out several times. While s*hepherds'* efforts were typically intended to keep others on topic, their involvement wasn't always helpful. For example, one *shepherd* became so frustrated with an offending poster, they became immersed in a debate between two others. The *shepherd* asked, 'Did someone **** in your wheaties this morning or do you naturally have the logical sense of a coked up chimp?'. At that point, the original offender asked the *shepherd* to leave the debate reminding, 'This conversation is between me and John (pseudonym). It doesn't concern you.' For obvious

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reasons, the *shepherd*'s intervention was unwelcome.

As this example suggests, contributions were not always helpful or welcomed. Their tone, approach, or content was viewed as problematic. When this occurred, the emergence of yet another third party, that of *the sheriff* was observed.

*Role 3: Sheriffs Ensure Rules Were Observed*

Many dynamics seemed informed by tennis sensibilities. The overall tone focused on the importance of fair play, sportsmanship, and performance. Discussions were largely cooperative. Consider this exchange,

Poster 1: Anyway, a minor argument never hurt anybody. All good?
Poster 2: Yeah I'm good. I have no problem with you.

Within this exchange, posters sought common ground, shaking 'virtual hands'. In such cases, there was an understanding that the *Talk Tennis* system was comprised of interdependent members and that decorum was paramount.

We found, "third party" members felt it necessary to remind others of decorum issues. We label these third parties as *sheriffs*. *Sheriffs* often denounced posts and members they believed had violated the rules and standards of the collective.

The need for *sheriffs* was perhaps obvious. Highly partisan debates could become rancorous, creating a sometimes volatile and combative environment of deeply personal comments. *Sheriffs* were often quick to highlight wrongdoing if perceived as important to the balance of the forum. As one poster commented, 'Don't be an assh0le. You can disagree with people without being an assh0le. Assh0le.' While the approach used is colourful, the intent emerges from a desire for decorum. Members are free to disagree but should do so respectfully, and if not, that same respect will not be

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forthcoming.

The concept of *sheriff* is consistent with the notion of triangles. When two

parties are at odds, a third party may be able to assist in stabilizing the dyad dynamic

(Dallos & Vetere, 2012). This creates a self-correcting system with a series of

interlocking relationships trying to maintain balance in the face of conflict and

upheaval.

Several *sheriffs* sought to diminish rhetoric problematic for relational stability.

This is consistent with systems thinking. For example, *sheriffs* might call for rule

enforcement if posts are regarded as inappropriate, establishing civility and respect.

When a poster was critical of another noting ('God, this guy is an awful poster. Jeez,

why aren't you banned already?'). A third poster stepped to defend the victim:

> I don't need you to tell me about him - or his antics. My question was and
> remains: What has he said **on this thread** to deserve that? … He didn't say
> anything that could be remotely interpreted as obnoxious (prior to your
> post).

In this case, the *sheriff* is being chastised by another *sheriff.* The resulting dynamics

could become complex. However, there were many instances of considerable agreement

over censure. Notably, one poster declared that 'No man should ever be coached by a

woman. EVER. It's not in our mentality to be led by a female.' This declaration was

considered so problematic that censure was immediate. Posters intervened, condemning,

and discouraging the rhetoric, further debating traditional masculine ideals within

cultural norms. In such ways, group values, practices, and priorities were made explicit

and supported.

Our third research question related to governance. As *sheriff* behaviours make

clear, *Talk Tennis* offered a mixed bag. Posters were generally happy to celebrate and debate common interests but also became intolerant of those who failed to share their loyalties. This intolerance led to acrimony and conflict. In such cases, some direction and adjudication seemed warranted.

### *Member Governance - Direction and Adjudication*

Efforts at governance were pervasive. From its outset, the message board was dedicated to professional players and events. This stated purpose fulfilled a governance function as it created basic parameters for discussions. We were more interested in the members' own efforts at governance. Interestingly, all three roles we identified were, in some way, intended to guide and govern member actions. *Shapers* were constantly generating materials that would both direct and encourage conversations and content. This offered the least obtrusive form of member-directed governance. The result was generally effective. Members were happy to respond to almost any question or debate.

However, the very nature of *Talk Tennis* (discussions of professional tennis) could ignite rivalries among fans from different camps. Posts could be supportive but equally toxic toward the opposition. They could be spirited and light-hearted when cheering mutual favourites but acrimonious and belligerent when rivalries emerged. The interactions could appear peevish over small issues,

> …you accused me of bringing Djokovic into our discussion, when in fact it
> was you who mentioned Djokovic first. I didn't even allude to him -
> expressly or implicitly - before your post (quoted below) …

Criticism and debate, sometimes harsh and unforgiving, could stir up confrontational reactions toward both, athletes ('Djokovic would chop that coked out alcoholic into dog food.') and the offending poster ('Why do you have the urge to

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constantly talk about something, you clearly know very little about? You have the nerve

to disregard one of the best players of this sport opinion…all that just because you are

Federer fanboy?!'; 'Congratulations, you're a clown!'; and/or 'Are you really this

dense?'). In such cases, insults might be enhanced by emoji's and motion GIFs

reflecting various unpleasant bodily functions (e.g., a cartoon character throwing up)

and/or acts of violence (e.g., the Hulk smashing a person).

While some of the disagreements were brief, others were more extended,

involving dozens of posts that Johnson and Roloff (1998) labelled as 'serial' episodes

(see also Bevan et al., 2007). In many cases, posters' frustration and upset were so

profound, they would resort to rhetoric inconsistent with the ethical standards that

dominated the forum.

As systems thinking suggests, such conflict is considered problematic (Kerr,

2013; see also Rabstejnek, 2012). When behaviours became troublesome, *shepherds*

and *sheriffs* often stepped in. *Sheriffs'* efforts to guide, if not control, member actions

are particularly noteworthy as we discuss governance. For example, when a poster

offered a racist comment, another (adopting the role of the *sheriff)* highlighted the

grievous and objectionable nature of the comment asking ('Why do the mods refuse to

ban racists like this?'). This prompted the instantaneous reaction of 14 others to 'like'

the response, supporting the *sheriff's* stand, thereby clarifying the forum standards.

When the original offender persisted, many others sought to fulfill the *sheriff's*

role by pointing out their objections. Responses like ('speaking of unevolved' and/or

'You know that is not true') emerged until finally, a *shepherd* stepped in to end the

conversation ('Don't feed the racist trolls people…'). No further posts of this nature

occurred. Inappropriate behaviour was adjudicated by several members, fulfilling the

governance requirements. These efforts to self-police helped regain relative stability

within the collective.

## Discussion

Passive online settings like message boards face some daunting challenges. Most

problematic perhaps, is the issue of content, relying entirely on the whims of members.

While posters may be engaged, will others share their enthusiasm? Some may be

tempted to go elsewhere. As Norris (2002) so aptly notes, other opportunities are a

simple mouse click away.

Yet we observed a thriving message board that was growing day by day with

millions of posts. Why? The quick answer seems to be "potential". We liken a forum

like this one to an empty lot in an urban setting. With the active involvement of users, it

can become a space where neighbours garden, where children play, or where events are

held. In such spaces, the potential seems unlimited.

*Talk Tennis* seemed analogous to this hypothetical empty lot. It became a space

where members introduced ideas, where rules and norms surfaced, and where the

collective created something meaningful. In brief, the forum seemed to thrive with the

fulfillment of three conditions. Those who seek to create spaces within which members

thrive might consider each in turn:

1) *Shared Interest* – Enthusiasm for tennis fueled forum activity filling it with millions

   of posts whose nature and extent suggest an abiding devotion. Such comments

   encouraged discourse that supported the collective. The responses were astonishing.

   A neophyte, using video, may ask for instructional guidance. A concerned parent

   may seek advice for their child's racquet. An enthusiast may muse about the best

   (or worst) case tournament scenarios. Whatever the context, members took turns

   offering aid and insight, suggesting the power of shared interest.

2) *Flexibility* - The online environment then, it seems, must be flexible in offering an attractive space for shared interests to be explored. Message boards offer the capacity for topic browsing (Holtz et al., 2012) and deeper user engagement when interests are piqued (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). Users can visit and re-visit topics, and in doing so, derive meaning and enjoyment from the experience. This format seemed effective in ensuring that content in *Talk Tennis* was forthcoming.

3) *Self-corrective Mechanisms* - Systems theory suggests ongoing interaction between self-interest and prosocial behaviours within any social system. In *Talk Tennis*, lines between self and other were often blurred. Members pursued their interests with considerable confidence that some others may be equally engrossed. In this way, the individual and collective well-being were served simultaneously. However, enthusiasm could create interpersonal challenges with impassioned posts finding both friends and detractors. High levels of engagement coupled with diverging perspectives can both unify and divide (Hammer, 1998). Passion can create tensions, pushing posters together, and pulling them apart. It seemed inevitable that in such a setting, self-corrective patterns would emerge.

When *Talk Tennis* posters disagreed, they adopted roles consistent with the principle of counterbalancing forces. When the desire for individuality or autonomy appeared inconsistent with ideals of the collective, online dynamics seemed intent on restoring the balance. Posters adopted roles of *shapers*, *shepherds*, and *sheriffs* as part of their search for balance. The roles supported the functioning of the online tennis forum system.

**Future Research**

First, *Talk Tennis* seemed largely motivated by enthusiasm for the sport.

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However, increasingly, social media are being used to promote political and commercial

agendas (Weeks et al., 2017). As a result, there is more pressure on monitoring and even

controlling online content. To what degree would such interventions be successful in

existing, thriving online communities, such as *Talk Tennis*? Who and what seems to

mobilize others on the forum? Can a debate be opened in ways that change the

collective's understanding?

Second, *Talk Tennis* posters intervened individually and/or collectively when

another deviated from norms and procedures deemed acceptable. As Dawson (2004)

suggests, this is not unusual in online settings. Members expect and appreciate that the

rules, norms, and dynamics that dominate their community should prevail. The

pervasive commitment to etiquette in *Talk Tennis* was noteworthy with posters less

tolerant of comments inconsistent with mores dominating the sport. To what degree do

sport sensibilities influence sport-related online dynamics? Would the same standards

for debate emerge on a different forum? Would attention to etiquette be as dominant?

Future research could explore how posters might balance and mold conversations in a

variety of settings to help enhance our understanding of in-group dynamics within

online social systems.

Third, members' roles, behaviours, and relationships may evolve to deal with

disruption (Holten & Brenner, 2015). For example, the novel coronavirus pandemic is

sweeping the globe as this report was submitted for publication. Given widespread

social isolation, travel restrictions, and sport cancellations, it is likely that demand for

online venues may increase and evolve. How will the debate unfold in the absence of

professional sporting events? What poster roles might emerge to deal with this changing

landscape? One could consider the nature of the evolving demands, member reactions,

and behavioural patterns that result within the social system under dramatic change.

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In conclusion, online settings such as *Talk Tennis* have a tremendous capacity to

provide companionship, information, technical advice, and entertainment. The variety

and depth of thousands of comments and narratives can be profoundly appealing to

posters and readers alike. This study provided some insight into ways tennis forum

posters sustain that basic appeal. We encourage further efforts to better understand the

transformative effects of technology on sport experience and consumption.

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