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FROM GAMEPLAY TO MARKETPLACE: A CASE STUDY OF TCG VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Virtual communities play a crucial role as a tool for organizations to interact with their consumers, especially in niche markets that use social media as a major tool for interaction. This study examined how Malaysian SMEs that manage TCG communities use virtual communities to facilitate consumer engagement, content creation, and commerce. This study employed a digital ethnography approach that combined non-participant observation with interviews with 23 active members of two major Facebook groups for TCG communities to examine the relationship between social interaction, commerce, and identity formation. The results showed that engaging in commerce, such as buying, selling, and trading cards, contributes to content creation. Talking about gameplay and card values contributes to social interaction and market awareness. Active engagement contributes to social identity, which helps build trust for peer-to-peer transactions. The study reveals that participation, visibility, and value creation in virtual communities are both socially and commercially driven, providing SMEs with practical strategies to improve community sustainability, member loyalty, and economic benefits.

Keywords: niche market, virtual community, content creation, commercial activities, TCG

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of virtual communities as essential platforms for organizations has led to a significant shift in the way that businesses communicate with their consumers. Consumers spend more time on social media to search for online information, communicate with other customers about their experiences with products or services, and engage with organizations (Dwivedi et al., 2021). In Malaysia, 83.1 per cent of Malaysians have been found to possess social media identities and spend approximately 3 hours daily engaging in social media (Petrosyan, 2024). These changes in the consumption patterns of Malaysian consumers and the widespread adoption of social media have forced businesses to not only adopt new modes of communication but also attempt to foster a thriving virtual community. The high level of social media engagement in Malaysia, organizations, particularly those focusing on niche market products, have begun establishing virtual communities by utilizing platforms like Facebook to build relationships directly and connect with their target audiences (Dellarocas et al., 2010; Gummerus et al., 2012; Tsimonis et al., 2020). Social media platforms serve as dynamic digital spaces where a collective of individuals, bound by shared interests, exchange ideas, communicate and form lasting relationships through computers or other internet-based electronic mediums (Lizzo & Liechty, 2020; Plant, 2004).

Most research has mainly focused on the social aspects of virtual communities emphasizing factors such as social engagement among users, levels of user-generated content, and the development of community identity (Aydin et al., 2021; Hu & Chaudhry, 2020; Lim & Rasul, 2022; Lin & Lu, 2011). Studies have not explored the role of commercial activities and its relationship with content creation and user participation. Commercial activities are often treated as a byproduct or outcome of a successfully managed virtual community (Dellarocas et al., 2010). Commercial success is framed as the end result of a successful virtual community. This study addresses the knowledge gap by reconceptualizing commercial activities as not merely the end result of a successfully run virtual community but rather the main driving force that motivates content creation, user engagement and participation, which are indicators of thriving virtual communities.

The trading card games (TCG) market is used as a case study to explore the relationship between commercial activities to the management and development of thriving virtual communities as well as the role of TCG SMEs in the creation of virtual communities on social media. Trading card games (TCGs) are a niche market that is rapidly growing and reflects the symbiotic relationship between social and commercial interactions in virtual communities. The recent popularity of TCGs has been fueled by social media personalities, which has increased word-of-mouth marketing and consumer engagement (Duffy, 2014). In the TCG communities, the secondary market activities are embedded, presenting unique challenges and opportunities. This research utilized the digital ethnography method, including non-participant observation and interviews, to explore the relationship between commercial activities and member participation. This study provides valuable information to SMEs, particularly in niche markets, that content creation, not social interaction, is the key to the vitality of the virtual communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

ADOPTION OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

Virtual communities provide individuals with a unique digital environment where they can express opinions and feelings, ask and answer questions, and engage in social discussions with others who share similar interests. These spaces predominantly reflect a broader digital culture which values freedom and personal expression (Condruz-Bacescu, 2022). The egalitarian nature of these virtual communities has led to the rise of a variety of virtual communities spanning a broad spectrum of shared interests and collective engagement. Unlike traditional media spaces, virtual communities reduce barriers to participation by allowing individuals to interact regardless of geographical location, social status, or professional background. This accessibility has contributed to the widespread adoption of virtual communities across various industries and consumer groups.

Organizations especially small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) were quick to see the value of these virtual communities, as their businesses lacked the marketing budget to compete in the traditional media environment. Virtual communities offered SMEs cost-effective platforms through which they could directly engage with highly targeted audiences and cultivate relationships with consumers sharing specific interests. This was particularly attractive for SMEs operating within niche markets such as the trading card game (TCG) industry.

TCG businesses utilized the gathering of users within these virtual communities who shared a common interest in their products for various purposes, such as advertising, promoting communication and understanding between the organization and its customers (de Valck et al., 2009). Virtual communities were an effective tool for SMEs, not only did it allow these organizations to reach their intended consumers, but it played an integral role in cultivating brand loyalty and developing long-term customer relationships through sustained user engagement (Zheng et al., 2015). The development of customer relationships was built on the organizations leveraging of the inherent nature of virtual communities through engagement with quality content and personalized communication with the organization. The use of virtual communities enhanced the social capital of these organizations by fostering social interaction, reciprocity, trust, and shared vision; thus, boosting customer participation in value co-creation activities and encouraging knowledge-sharing behaviors (Zhang & Yu, 2024).

In the context of TCG communities, these dynamics are particularly significant because participation extends beyond social interaction into commercially oriented activities. Members do not merely consume content produced by organizations but actively contribute to the visibility and vitality of the community through buying, selling, trading, and sharing gameplay-related information. As a result, the adoption of virtual communities by TCG SMEs reflects not only a shift in communication strategies but also a transformation in how organizations cultivate participation, sustain engagement, and facilitate commercially meaningful interactions within digital environments.

DETERMINANTS OF SUCCESSFUL VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

However, despite their appeal, the long-term success of virtual communities is not assured. Traditionally, the success of communities has been measured based on user engagement, the amount of user-generated content, and the development of a community identity (Aydin et al., 2021; Hu & Chaudhry, 2020; Lim & Rasul, 2022; Lin & Lu, 2011). Retailer-owned and moderated digital marketplaces were found to be crucial in organizing interaction within their respective virtual communities by serving the commercial needs of their members, thereby promoting participation and content generation. As Kozinets (2010), argues, the vitality of

virtual communities is fundamentally dependent on active member participation and ongoing content generation. Without sustained interaction, virtual communities risk stagnation, declining engagement, and eventual irrelevance.

In such retailer-managed TCG virtual communities, participation driven by commercial motives is crucial for ensuring continued participation in these virtual communities. Retailers' ownership and moderation of the virtual marketplaces proved to be very important for managing interaction as they served the commercial interests of the participants, which in turn encouraged them to continue their participation in these communities. Unlike some other forms of virtual communities that depend heavily on social interaction and bonding with others to keep up their participation levels, these communities sustain themselves through economic interactions that compel participants to participate regularly in the online environment.

Customer engagement with other users and the organization is key to the vitality of the virtual communities (Eigenraam et al., 2018). In the context of TCG community, engaging content comes in a variety of forms; from the introduction of upcoming products, to the revealing of new cards and play mechanics, to the fluctuation of the value of specific cards, and the utilization of cards in gameplay. The vast variety of possible engaging content is seen in the multitude of TCG content creators that generate engaging content aimed at attracting views to their channels. The highly dynamic nature of the TCG ecosystem ensures a constant flow of new information and evolving market trends, creating continuous opportunities for members to contribute content and engage with one another.

Engaging content plays a pivotal role in engaging the members of a virtual community. These contents not only provide information to the users but they are also as Dellarocas et al. (2010), Gummerus et al. (2012), and Tsimonis et al. (2020), highlights an important component to relationship building between the members of the virtual community as well as to the organization. This is key in the development of not only a thriving but also a sustainable virtual community. As argued by Dwivedi et al. (2021), virtual communities are essential for organizations to engage with their customers, exchange brand and product-related information, and encourage consumer participation.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a multiple-case study design, targeting two SMEs in Malaysia that operate in the TCG market, as well as their Facebook groups. The selection of these organizations was informed by their dominance as the biggest and most active TCG communities in Malaysia, as well as their willingness to allow access to their communities. A purposive sampling method was employed to sample participants who were active members and experienced content creators in these communities (Campbell et al., 2020). Eligibility criteria required participants to have been active members of their respective Facebook group for a minimum of six months and to have demonstrably engaged in content creation, such as posting gameplay content, trade listings, or community discussions at least once a month, with most participants posting 3-4 times weekly, depending on the release period of the new products. New product launches would be a heightened increase in content creation and participation amongst the participants, with engagement ranging from 10 to 30 postings in a week.

Before sampling participants, non-participant observation was conducted to get a better understanding of the culture of each community, as well as identify the most active participants who were experienced in content creation. A total of 23 participants (22 males, 1 female) took part in the study, ranging in age between 19 and 48. This part of the process was to inform the researchers of the norms and customs, as well as to inform them of the community-specific language and terms used in order to not only be sufficiently proficient in

communicating with the chosen participants but also embed the researchers in the culture and norms of the virtual community.

The study employed a digital ethnography method, which incorporated non-participant observation and interviews. This method allows researchers to gain in-depth insights and understanding of the subject (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). In the first phase, observations were conducted among the communities, which helped the researchers gain insights into the behavior of the members. This ensured that participants with appropriate experience were selected for the study. For instance, observations were conducted to gain insights into the content creation, trading, and interaction behavior among the groups. This part of the study was conducted through non-participation observation that was conducted from January 2019 to December 2020. Field notes were taken by copying and pasting comments and responses by users on the Facebook groups daily. Thematic analysis procedures following Braun and Clarke (2006) were applied to the data collected, paying special attention towards recurring themes, notable comments and significant events occurring within the groups. In the second phase, participants were recruited through Facebook private messaging. This part of the study was conducted from January 2021 to December 2021. This method ensured that the participants were reached directly while considering the privacy factors. Zoom was employed for interviews, which allowed for extensive data collection. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among the participants to gain insights into their engagement behavior, content creation, and experience with trade activities among the groups.

The data analysis was conducted in an iterative manner, drawing on thematic analysis procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Observation field notes and interview transcripts were analyzed concurrently to allow for triangulation across the collected data sources. The observations and interviews were coded thematically to look for patterns in relation to participation, visibility, reputation, and commercial activity. This allowed for a very rich understanding of how TCG SMEs enable community engagement and the role of member participation in commercial activity. Coding was conducted by two members independently on being the lead researcher and a second researcher was recruited to assist in the coding of the data. Discrepancies during the coding were resolved through discussion and consensus.

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the research, with approval from the researcher's university's Ethical Clearance Board which scrutinized and reviewed the research process and procedures, including reviewing the interview questions, as well as the storing and disposal of collected interview data to ensure the privacy and security of the participants remained confidential.

FINDINGS

ENABLING CONTENT CREATION THROUGH COMMERCIAL ENGAGEMENT

To understand the TCG market, it is essential to understand that for a majority of retailers, the main source of revenue is the sale of sealed card packs. However, the TCG market is also dependent on the presence of a secondary market, which is present in a symbiotic relationship with physical retail stores (Abrahamse et al., 2026). The secondary market provides a platform for players to acquire individual cards that are necessary for constructing a deck, where a deck is a customized set of cards assembled by a player. Physical retail stores have historically been a source for sealed product acquisition and individual cards, providing a source of revenue for retailers. However, social media online communities have altered this dynamic by reducing barriers for peer-to-peer trading and improving market visibility. This increased the scale and ease of consumption rapidly (Weber, 2021), thereby benefiting players and entrepreneurial individuals who have leveraged these technologies to pursue economic opportunities. As a result, many stores have yielded ground for much of the secondary market to players and individuals who actively participate in card resale. Despite this change, it is a vital part of the nature of TCGs, and the store owners are aware of the need for the secondary market for the success and sustainability of their business. Ken (48, male) commented on this, stating, "The secondary market has always been around. The difference is that now players can find sellers they don't know easily online. In the past, they would need to actually know the person now they buy from online strangers."

The virtual communities examined in this study are managed by organizations that delegate a relatively high degree of autonomy to members while still maintaining control in the form of their own moderators. The organization grants their customers opportunities to engage in trading and selling activities within its designated Facebook groups. In order to understand the TCG market, it is important to highlight the fact that the primary source of revenue for most retailers is the sale of card packs, while the overall market is also heavily dependent on the presence of the secondary market, which is in a symbiotic relationship with the retail store (Abrahamse et al., 2026). This interdependence is largely driven by the nature of the game itself, which requires players to construct customized decks of cards composed of individually selected cards (Hodge et al., 2019). Hence, the secondary market allows the players to access the individual cards they require to complete their decks. Traditionally, the retail store was the primary source of access for the individual cards, as well as the card packs, which formed part of the overall revenue streams for the store. However, the emergence of the social media-based online communities has altered the dynamics of the overall market.

Although the two studied retailers have an online forum for the buying and selling of individual cards among their customer base, each retailer has its unique set of rules surrounding the buying and selling of cards. These differences in the regulations surrounding the buying and selling of cards are intended to reduce the risk of negative opportunistic behaviors by the sellers, as well as minimize the liability of the organizations in relation to the buying and selling of cards by the players themselves. Ken (48, male), the owner of the store, allows the players to drop off the cards at his store, perceiving this as an opportunity to make the store known to people who may not even know about the store. As Ken says, "It is additional work that my staff have to do to accept drop-offs, but I think it is a trade-off, as we could potentially gain a new customer." On the contrary, Mark (45, male) is more inclined to limit business relationships to online interactions within FB groups operated by the retailer but is adamant to keep business transactions separate from the operations of the organization. He states: "…we have an online space for them to buy and sell singles, but they have to arrange the collection themselves. …we have seen for ourselves some of the problems that can arise from acting as the middle person. Moreover, we do not earn anything from their sales." These practices demonstrate a more conservative approach to managing relationships between the retailer and its customers while avoiding risk and maintaining clear boundaries between business operations.

It is evident that retailers are aware of the importance of commercial activities to the participation and content development of members within these virtual communities. The members of these communities generally view these communities as specialized online markets, whose main function is to facilitate commercial transactions. As Zen (35, male) described, "Usually, my online posts are about buying and selling cards. It is a marketplace after all, and almost all the posts there are about buying and selling… if you are into TCGs, you will go there (Facebook group). Every player is in some group or another." This shows the way commercial exchange helps to drive participation and content generation. This study found that commercially driven interaction can be equally vital towards the sustainability of the respective virtual communities. This is because, by focusing on commercial exchanges instead of relationship building, the digitally moderated marketplaces were able to ensure the continued participation of their members towards the sustainability of the respective virtual communities.

LEVERAGING COMMUNITY INTERACTION FOR SOCIAL AND COMMERCIAL VALUE

Researchers observed that within these virtual communities, member discussions primarily focus on gameplay-related topics such as tournaments, deck construction, and updates to game rules. This, in turn, leads to conversations about card pricing and value, which reflect the nature of the TCG market, where card values fluctuate based on factors such as popularity, rarity, and competitive usability, forming a core component of the broader TCG ecosystem. These points are supported by the interview narratives, in which the importance of these conversations leading to a greater demand for certain cards was highlighted. As Yang (28, male) said, "Cards have value. Depending on the current meta, the price of a card can be quite high… especially when a deck wins tournaments, then you can see some cards shoot up in price." These conversations allow members to use the power of the community to reap commercial rewards from the creation of interest in certain cards. In this way, informational and commercial interactions are inextricably linked, supporting the virtual community as both a source of knowledge and a marketplace.

This can be seen in the interviews wherein the respondents were actively involved in the discussion, not just to share what they know but also to advertise the cards they plan to sell. This was seen as an opportunity to generate interest among other users and, at the same time, create a business opportunity for them. This was expressed by Max (35, male, who said, "I usually discuss the card and the deck with others to share my thoughts and experiences. Sometimes, people may be interested in the cards that I use. …I will let them know I want to sell off this card." Similarly, Min (35, male) mentioned, "Sometimes, we will share the card we use and how this card works. Some players might be interested in it. …I would directly ask them whether they wanted to buy from me." These two descriptions show the close relationship between knowledge sharing and business. The observed activities also support Dellarocas et al.'s (2010) theory that visibility and engagement are the primary drivers of activities in virtual communities. In the present study, the posts about card prices, card gameplay, and market trends serve as visibility-generating activities that make the community's attention focus not only on valuable gaming content but also on business activities. Instead of negatively influencing the cohesion of the virtual community, the business-oriented posts increase the engagement of the virtual community because the posts provide valuable information that the members of the virtual community value.

Consistent with the type of content sought by players, new members of the community are usually assisted by experienced players, with their behavior determined by the most visible and active posts within the community (Dellarocas et al., 2010; Kozinets, 2010). In relation to TCGs, not only has business activity become part of this process but also expanded from physical to online interactions. Experienced players use their knowledge of gameplay to create interest for certain cards they possess, which can lead to sales opportunities. As Jun (33, male), a veteran player, described, there is business potential in helping new players: "Sometimes, people might ask for guidance, especially new players. Then, I will share my experience with

them; you need this card and this card as a beginner player. …I will tell them if I have it; they can contact me if they want to buy it." This example shows how mentorship, or the sharing of knowledge, within the virtual community simultaneously represents a form of social integration and economic value, further highlighting the interrelatedness of commerce, visibility, and value creation within TCG virtual communities. An important difference can be seen between the way users interact with each other in the physical and online environments. While in physical spaces, the interactions between the members are generally centered on gameplay and social interactions, with commercial interactions being of lesser importance, in virtual spaces, commercial interactions are more prominent compared to social interactions. This implies that the TCG virtual social network structure creates an opportunity for community members to engage actively in discussions based on interests; this is also supported by the opportunity to engage in commercial interactions. This implies that the community members are actively involved in creating value through social interactions and commercial content creation; therefore, the creation of value in virtual communities should not be viewed as an outcome of social interactions but rather as an emergent process depending on the unique features of each virtual community.

Both retail owners and community members acknowledge that commercial activities are a core aspect of the virtual community. The secondary market is fundamentally tied to the well-being of the game and, therefore, to the viability of the retail business. As such, TCG virtual communities are not only social communities but also a marketing tool for retailers.

DISCUSSION

COMMERCIAL PARTICIPATION AND COMMUNITY SUSTAINABILITY

The content creation process in this TCG case study of online communities highlights that the process of participation, visibility, and value creation in online communities can be commercially oriented at their core. While the online participation process may not be limited to social interactions among the members, as suggested in the literature, in this context, the creation of visible content that can be economically significant for the online communities can play a critical role in maintaining the online participation process. The posts from the buyers as well as the sellers can be considered as a process of creating online visibility that can play a critical role in maintaining online participation. The online participation process can be considered from the perspective of the buyers. These postings function as a high volume of WTS (want-to-sell) postings to create a cycle of content generation that is essential for the virtual community. The negotiations and information sharing between buyers and sellers also enhance the engagement within the virtual community to a greater degree, adding value to both sides while contributing to the overall health and viability of the virtual community. These findings suggest that the process of user engagement, participation and content creation is not separate from the commercial activities of the TCG community. And while user engagement, participation and content creation remain crucial to the success and vibrancy of virtual communities, current research does not acknowledge the role commercial activities play in encouraging and facilitating current measurements of a virtual community's success.

Overall, the ability to participate in commercial activities within the TCG virtual communities set up by the retailers serves as a key motivation factor for members' content creation. For retailers, such sustained activity enhances the vitality and perceived legitimacy of the community as a marketplace, increases repeated visits by users, and strengthens the retailer's key role as the foundation of the community's commercial ecosystem. In doing so, commercially driven participation indirectly supports brand exposure, customer retention, and long-term community sustainability. This is in line with current existing studies that indicate key drivers for virtual community sustainability lie with maintaining engagement of its community members, along with the ability to produce content which would be able to not only appeal

to existing members but also be appealing and relevant to new members. This is one aspect of commercial content generation that plays multiple roles directly as well as indirectly in engaging members across different levels of involvement within the TCG community.

A notable consideration of commercial activities amongst retailers within the TCG community is the duality of empowering members to conduct commercial activities in the retailer's virtual community and the perceived negative impact it might have on the organization. This area of concern is mainly referring to the increased sales competition within the community that could supposedly impact the organization's business profits. However, findings in this study suggest that allowing members to conduct commercial activities greatly increases members' participation in content creation and yields positive intangible benefits for retailers and the community. The nature of Trading card games requires players to strategize and create custom decks, with some cards being limited in availability. By authorizing commercial activities, retailers enable a secondary market where players can buy, sell, or trade play cards, including rare cards that contribute to the game's sustainability. This creates a self-sustaining ecosystem in which cards circulating within the secondary market are originally sourced from retailers through the purchase of sealed products. The visibility of card circulation, pricing, and market demand within the secondary market further reinforces perceived product value among community members, which in turn stimulates continued demand for the products sold by retailers.

The results of this study show that by allowing members to participate in commercial activities in the virtual community, benefits are created for both the retailer and the members of the virtual community. Although researchers, such as Kozinets (2010), have argued that the key to the success of virtual communities is the participation of users in the community, the nature of participation in this study goes beyond the conventional nature of social interaction. Participation in this study is directly linked to economic activity.

PARTICIPATION, VISIBILITY, REPUTATION IN TCG COMMUNITIES

Positive social identity is considered to be particularly important for determining outcomes for business transactions. This is noted in various studies where virtual communities are seen to provide opportunities for peer discussions and building relationships among people with common interests (Kusuma et al., 2020; Peters & Bodkin, 2022). This is especially relevant for members within the TCG virtual community. This is because of the risk factor associated with business transactions on the internet, where people put their trust in the track record and reputation of the sellers. The participants also observed that buyers tended to transact business with those who had a good track record and a strong presence within the community. Highlighting the significance placed on regular engagement, information sharing regarding gameplay and cards, and participation as a strategy to raise their visibility, recognition, and credibility. These activities not only help to engage participants but also help to build familiarity amongst members, which can affect not only their purchase intentions but also strengthen community bonds (Peters & Bodkin, 2022; Zhang & Zhang, 2023).

The social identity of a seller not only indicates membership in the community (Dholakia et al., 2004) but also, in the TCG virtual community, is used as a determinant of trustworthiness and credibility, which is imperative for commercial success in virtual communities. In the TCG virtual community, social identity is used as a symbolic "business card" where individuals can use it to introduce themselves, differentiate their presence, and connect with others. This social identity is created and sustained through visible engagement, such as content generation and engagement, which is used to facilitate both social and economically viable outcomes. In this context, commercial activities provide a tangible real-world dimension that complements and reinforces a member's reputation across both virtual and physical settings. Successful peer-to-

peer transactions further strengthen perceptions of trustworthiness and credibility within the community. The presence of trusted members whose reputations are validated through real-world commercial interactions enhances the overall reliability of the virtual community, contributing to its credibility, sustainability, and long-term vibrancy.

For TCG retailers, community well-being is not measured by traditional social community engagement metrics. Rather, TCG virtual communities are characterized by a high volume of commercially related content, which is a core metric for community well-being and success. The presence of buying and selling is a measure of community participation and interest, which is a core metric for community viability for its members and retailers alike. It is such that TCG retailers place great importance on managing commercial activities in these communities by moderating shared content, thereby maintaining brand integrity, customer relations, and positive customer experiences (van Heerden & Wiese, 2021). The role played by the retailer in facilitating and legitimizing commercial interaction in these communities also plays a role in shaping these dynamics. As discussed by Rothaermel and Sugiyama (2001), virtual communities are not just about aggregating information and/or resources; they are also about aggregating people to meet their commercial needs. The role played by these platforms in permitting market-oriented participation in these virtual communities creates a virtual environment where commercial interactions are moderated and regulated by the retailer. It is in this sense that these commercial interactions are viewed as an extension of the premises of the retailer, albeit in a virtual environment. It is in this sense that the role played by the retailer in strategically managing these interactions in these virtual communities also creates an increase in product awareness, customer loyalty, and participation in the secondary market, thereby reinforcing the dual value of these virtual communities.

CONCLUSION

These mechanisms may include checking the seller's posting patterns, level of engagement, and the nature of interactions with other community members. This example represents the role of social identity as a trust-building factor to mitigate the level of risk in peer-to-peer business transactions. A seller's social identity not only represents affiliation to the community (Dholakia et al., 2004) but also represents trustworthiness and credibility in TCG virtual communities, which are key factors for business success in virtual environments. Social identity in TCG's virtual community represents a symbolic "business card," allowing an individual to express themselves, stand out from the crowd, and connect with other community members. This identity is created through visible participation in the community, creating content, engaging with other community members, and making valuable contributions to discussions to achieve social recognition and economic outcomes.

In conclusion, the study contributes to the body of knowledge pertaining to the study of virtual communities by revealing that commercially driven participation can be a stabilizing force that promotes engagement, visibility, and value creation over time. In addition, the study shows that, contrary to the belief that market-oriented interaction represents a deviation from the spirit of the ideal community, the TCG context represents the very essence of how community interaction is organized. The findings of the study offer valuable insights to organizations, particularly small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) that operate in niche markets, with regard to the management of their respective virtual communities. In spite of the popularity of virtual communities as a tool of communication with the wider audience, many organizations face the challenge of maintaining member participation over time. The study shows that the solution to the problem of maintaining member participation lies in the organization's decision to allow members to engage in commercial activities, as it will motivate them to participate. Despite the potential of the strategy to create competition, the findings of the study show that it has several intangible benefits.

Overall, this study makes a contribution to the virtual community literature by showing that commercially driven participation can act as a stabilizing force, which sustains engagement,

visibility, and value creation over time. Rather than being a departure from community ideals, market-oriented interactions within the TCG community setting represent a central mechanism by which community is organized and sustained. This study also provides practical implications for organizations, particularly small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating within niche market settings, on how to more effectively manage their virtual communities. Despite virtual communities being a prominent setting for organizational communication and audience engagement, many organizations face difficulties in sustaining participation among community members over time. Allowing community members to engage in commercial activities is a solution to this problem, which motivates participation among members. Although this may appear to create a problem of competition for retailers, this study reveals a number of intangible benefits.

One limitation of this particular study is that it mainly comprised male participants, while only one female participant was included. Although it is true that trading card games have historically been a male-dominated phenomenon, the popularity of TCGs has also ensured a greater degree of participation from women as well. More studies on a greater variety of genders and age groups would be essential to obtain a more comprehensive view of the virtual community phenomenon. This is because greater diversity would enable scholars to understand how differences affect participants' behavior while contributing to a virtual community, as well as how social identity is developed within a virtual setting.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declared that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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