

Walk or Talk?

Investigating the Transfer of Communityship Values in the German Game Influencer Industry

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Abstract

This single case study investigates how employees (e.g., managers, producers, creatives, content creators, hereafter influencers) and stakeholders (e.g., followers of influencer channels) of a German-based game influencer management agency operate as polycentric communities in an offline (organizational; interaction between employees) as well as online (influencer channels, interaction between influencers and followers) context. Utilizing Ostrom's Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework, more specifically knowledge commons, this study examines the transfer of organizational values between offline and online communities. This paper includes the first study of two studies that together address offline and online communicative community governance in the German game influencer industry. The impact of value-driven leadership on organizational communityship values among employees is delved into through in-depth interviews. For example, which rules, routines, roles, and mindsets are essential in developing a value-driven and responsible employee community and how are these elements introduced, practiced and/or evaluated through different actors? Additionally, this study investigates if and how these organizational communityship values and their organisational rules, routines, roles, and mindset are transferred by influencers through communicative practices in their online communities with their followers. Through comparative analysis, this study identifies how the game influencer management agency governs their offline and online communities as part of a dynamic and multi-layered process.

Keywords: communityship, knowledge commons, online communities, influencers, gaming industry

Introduction

This study employs the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework (Ostrom, 2009, 2010), more specifically I apply the IAD approach to knowledge commons (Cole, 2014; Frischmann et al., 2014; Hess & Ostrom, 2007; Strandburg et al., 2017), to investigate a specific case within the German Game Influencer Industry. Knowledge commons refers to the community-led governance of sharing, and sometimes even creating, information, science, data, knowledge, and various intellectual and cultural resources (Frischmann et al., 2014, p. 14). By applying this framework, I delve into the essential polycentric processes underlying individual and collective value-based governance within the industry.

A polycentric system has multiple governing bodies, operating at various levels without being hierarchically related and focusing on self-organization and mutual adaptation (Ostrom, 2010). These polycentric processes can also be identified in the German game influencer industry, a vibrant and rapidly growing sector within the broader gaming ecosystem of online and offline video gaming (Statista, 2023). In this industry,

influencers play a crucial role in shaping the gaming landscape, connecting with audiences, and driving engagement with gaming content, such as reviews via YouTube and life gaming streams via platforms such as Twitch. According to Abidin (2015) influencers can be identified as internet users who reach significant followings on social media platforms by sharing written and visual narratives of their personal lives and lifestyles. Through active interaction with their audience in both online and offline settings, influencers monetize their platforms foremost by integrating 'advertorials' within their posts or social media content. In recent years many studies have addressed the 'dark side' of the social media industry, influencers and their practices, such as addiction (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021), promoting online gaming (Haenlein et al., 2020), parasocial interactions with human influencers (Abidin, 2015) and virtual created influencers (Stein et al., 2022) stressing how followers form personal (one-sided) attachments to influencers. Moreover, a growing number of studies also address the well-being of influencers as content creators, for example, anxiety as a negative side effect as well as a valuable tactic to share content on social media (Hund, 2023; Lehto, 2022). This raises the questions how organizations operating in this industry are developing value-based community practices and how they might translate these values to their large followings online. Essentially, influencers in this industry are more and more managed by or integrated into larger organizations that build organizational communities with influencers, so called *influencer management agencies*. Game influencers are engaging with their followers (users that are interested in online or offline video gaming) through online communities on platforms such as YouTube, Twitch, TikTok or 'X'. Therefore, organizations that are working with game influencers are also responsible for governing their online communities.

To understand these governing mechanisms, in particular which rules, routines, roles, and mindsets come into play, a single case study was conducted looking into community practices of a German influencer management agency (hereafter GIMA). GIMA combines artist management and creative agency services and externally recruits or trains influencers inhouse, with the aim to provide a permanent contract for internal influencers or to collaborate with external influencers based on a project fee. Influencers, that are employed with the company are also supported by various teams in the areas of creative concepting, video editing, project management, event management, innovation, merchandising etc. Essentially, they are supported on the level of relationship-, reputation- and legal management, brand partnerships but also with crisis management. All actors are part of an organizational community of practice, jointly developing and governing rules, roles and agreements

in content -development, -production, -distribution and online community interaction. In knowledge commons research (Hess & Ostrom, 2007; p.53) specific actors are identified such as *users*, ‘appropriating digital information at any point in time’, *providers* who ‘make content available’ and information managers or *policy makers* who ‘be a voluntary and self-governing community of insiders’ contributing to, using, and managing a knowledge commons in our case digital information and creative works/content. These actors are also identified at GIMA, where creative content is developed, produced, shared and governed by members of this organizational community (in close relation) with members of their online communities.

As Ostrom’s work often refers to the tension between bottom-up, self-governing institutional arrangements and top-down control (Bustamante et al., 2022; Frischmann et al., 2014; Hess & Ostrom, 2007) this study investigates how these actors within the organizational community are developing and governing their organizational community, including the information and knowledge that circulates within and outside of the organization (their online communities) but also effects its continuity, mutual trust and safety. To connect these two worlds I refer to earlier work (Schulz, 2018, 2021) using the inside-out (organizational driven) perspective in online community communication and the evaluation of specific community practices. This perspective addresses how organizations are engaging with citizens in co-creating community processes and resources but aim to control these as providers of resources such as online content.

To identify and understand the circular and evolving character of the organizational as well as the online influencer communities, conceptual questions were developed supported by the IAD framework for knowledge commons (see figure 1) as proposed by Frischman et al. (2014, p.26). Specifically, ‘to engage with the particular narratives of the community’ and to understand ‘how people interact with rules, resources, and each other’ (Frischmann et al., 2014, pp. 25-27). As the authors propose, this adaption of the original IAD framework by Ostrom (2009) serves as a reference for data collection and helps structure the analysis of information gathered from interviews and additional desk research.

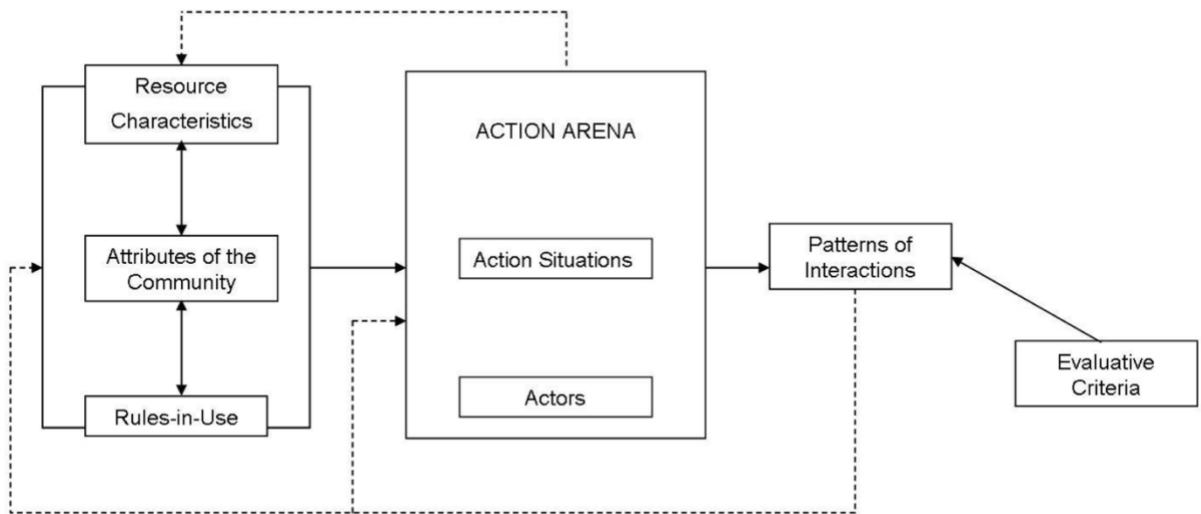


Figure 1: IAD framework for knowledge commons: Adapted from Frischman, Madison, and Strandburg (2014, p.26)

Table 1 provides an overview of the framework for reference and the underlying conceptual questions as part of this research, again adapted from Frischman et al. (2014) and rephrased to the extent of this research. As the background of the environment (influencer industry) has already been discussed in the introduction it is excluded from this overview.

Knowledge Commons	Conceptual question(s) based on Frischman et al. (2014)
1) Resource characteristics	What resources are pooled and how they are created or obtained? What are the characteristics of the resources? Are they rival or non-rival, tangible or intangible? Is there shared infrastructure? What technologies and skills are needed to create, obtain, maintain and use the resources.
2)	Who are the community members and what are their roles?
a) Organizational Community Members	What are the degree and nature of openness with respect to each type of organizational community member and online community members? What are relevant practices between the organizational and online community.
b) Online Community Members	
3) Goals and Objectives	What are the goals and objectives of the commons and its members, including obstacles or dilemmas to be overcome? What are the history and narrative of the commons?
4) Governance	What are the relevant action arenas and how do they relate to the goals and objective of the commons and the relationships among various types of organizational as well as online community members? What are the governance mechanisms (e.g., membership rules, resource contribution or extraction standards and requirements, conflict resolution mechanisms, sanctions for rule violation)? Who are the decision-makers and how are they selected? What are the institutions and

5) Patterns and Outcomes

technological infrastructures that structure and govern decision-making? What informal norms govern the commons? What benefits are delivered to members and to others (e.g. innovations and creative output, production, sharing, and dissemination to a broader audience, and social interactions that emerge from the commons?) What costs and risks are associated with the commons, including any negative externalities?

Table 1: framework for reference and the underlying conceptual questions for researching organizational communityship as well as influencer-driven community building, adapted from Frischman et al. (2014).

This paper is structured as follows. First, through qualitative inquiry, based on semi-structured interviews and additional desk research, I will present a thematic analysis, integrating the IAD framework for knowledge commons and its related questions. Based on the identified themes and patterns an overview of essential community value-based practices of GIMA will be presented and discussed.

Methods

Introducing the GIMA case

This qualitative single case study is based on sixteen semi-structured interviews (with fourteen employees and two company founders) of GIMA in Germany. According to Siggelkow (2007) case study can include three important uses: 1) motivation, showing why a phenomenon is important or using a real-life situation as appealing example, 2) inspiration for new ideas, and 3) illustration to make a conceptual contribution. Performing a single case study presented the chance to demonstrate the utilization of the IAD framework in a novel and significant domain of research and industry that has not been previously explored in the existing literature concerning knowledge commons. GIMA was chosen because this agency recently entered the market (in 2018) and grew into a full-service agency in influencer management and creative content production, employing 80 professionals with various backgrounds such as: creative concepting, artist management, influencer marketing, production, editing, HRM, finance, and project management. Additionally, this company has developed a novel approach in building interdisciplinary teams that work together in a community-like setting to develop online concepts and content (e.g. text, images, live or pre-recorded videos) and manage and support influencers who share this content addressing online and offline gaming with their communities on social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitch, TikTok, Instagram, and X/Twitter.

Selection of interviewees, interview guide and planning

Interviewees were selected with the support of the company, aiming to meet employees from various departments, roles, work experiences and backgrounds. Priorly, interviewees were provided with an interview guide outlining details of the study such as aim, topics to discuss, data treatment and confidentiality. Additionally, at the beginning each interviewee was informed about the secure handling of data and ensuring respondents' anonymity.

The interview guide covered a range of topics, starting with familiar and overarching subjects such as the individual's position within the company and their professional as well as personal use of social media platforms. Subsequent questions delved into specifics regarding responsibilities, policies, core beliefs, and engagements within the organization, including interactions with online community members.

The interview guide was developed in close relation with the IAD framework for knowledge and included two central topics, with additional sub questions. First, *organizational communityship*; explores how organizational community members of GIMA translate individual values into communityship values for the organization. Questions emphasized essential rules, routines, roles, and mindsets, for example, for the development of a value-oriented and responsible employee community and how these elements are introduced, practiced, and/or evaluated?

The second topic examines, *influencer-driven communityship* (circular communication between influencers and their online community members). Questions addressed if and how rules, routines, roles, and mindsets of organizational members, specifically influencers were transferred through interaction and communication in their online communities, if/how community members provide feedback and how this feedback influences the way in which the company shapes the communication with both communities?

The semi-structured interviews with the employees were conducted between December 2022 and June 2023. After analysis of this data interviews/evaluations of the findings with the founders took place in March 2024. Each interview had a duration of approximately 60-90 minutes. A total of sixteen interviews were conducted, with fourteen conducted with employees and two specifically dedicated to evaluating findings with the company founders. Interviews were conducted at locations convenient for the interviewees, such as their workplaces or home offices (two interviews were held via Microsoft teams).

Table 2 presents an overview of the roles (as described by the interviewees), gender, age and reporting pseudonym of the participating employees and founders.

Interviewee	Role	Gender	Age	Pseudonym
1	Artist Management	Female	25-34	P1
2	Project- and Campaign Manager	Male	25-34	P2
3	Production Manager	Male	18-24	P3
4	Producer	Female	25-34	P4
5	Junior Artist Manager	Female	25-34	P5
6	Artist Management	Female	25-34	P6
7	Creative Concept developer	Female	25-34	P7
8	Merchandise Joint Venture	Male	25-34	P8
9	Senior Concept Developer	Male	25-34	P9
10	Production Services Lead	Male	18-24	P10
11	Content Creator/Influencer	Male	25-34	P11
12	Influencer	Male	25-34	P12
13	Project Manager Influencer-marketing	Male	25-34	P13
14	Influencer	Male	25-34	P14
Additional interviews to evaluate findings				
15	(Former) CEO and Founder	Male	35-44	P15
16	Content Creator/Influencer and Founder	Male	35-44	P16

Table 2: Overview interviewees

Transcription and analysis

The interviews were transcribed by two student assistants who had entered into a confidentiality agreement prior to the beginning of their work. This agreement was established to guarantee confidentiality and secure deletion of all data once the students had completed their tasks. Upon transcription and anonymization, the data was transferred to Atlas.ti for thematic analysis, exploring the data set to uncover patterns or themes for new insights (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Initially, two overarching themes were deduced based on the interview guide topics, ‘organisational communityship’ and ‘influencer driven communityship’ and their related sub-questions. This was followed by two rounds of inductive coding, where four interviews were independently coded by two coders and the codes were jointly reviewed, refined, or merged. After these evaluations, a final codebook was developed and utilized by both coders for the fourteen interviews, including three top-level codes (demographics/community characteristics, organizational communityship, influencer driven communityship) and twenty sub-level codes to identify rules, routines, roles, and mindsets in- depth.

The interview data was analyzed including multiple briefing sessions to ensure validity and reliability. Both coders independently wrote additional memos to summarize their findings using specific quotes from interviewees to illustrate these findings. These memos and quotes were compared to identify matching and additional themes in line with the research.

Moreover, the findings from the fourteen interviews were discussed with the founders of the company to receive feedback and add additional insights on the findings. Additional further desk research was conducted to collect information from German-based websites and YouTube channels that shared industry insights, information or interviews with employees from the company. Four central themes were deduced from the analysis (Role-modelling, Feedback Culture, Work-life Balance, Innovative Topics and Education) and integrated in a revised interview guide to conduct two additional interviews with the founders. The received feedback and insights from additional desk research were used to evaluate the findings.

Data storage and use of AI in this study

The data collected in this studied was stored in a safe password protected university environment, only accessible for the research team.

The author used a corporate version of Copilot (*Microsoft Copilot*, n.d.) to translate the quotes from German to English. The author used the following prompt to translates quotes from interviewees: ‘Produce a concise translation into English while retaining the context’. Additionally, experimental evaluation memos were produced using the Atlas-ti ‘AI-summary’ ¹function (without using prompts) to summarize the interviews and uncover potential insights, that may have been missed during coding. However, no new themes were identified based on this approach.

Both ATLAS.ti and Microsoft Copilot safeguard research by ensuring that the data is encrypted and not used to train OpenAI and Microsoft language models.

Findings

Four central themes have been identified during the analysis of the interviews: *role-modelling, feedback culture, work-life balance, innovation and education*. The following section will integrate these themes

¹ This function guarantees safeguarding the interview data through various protection approaches. See <https://atlasti.com/ai-data-security-and-privacy>

organically with the IAD framework for knowledge commons as presented in table 1. I start with a general introduction of the resources developed and shared by the company, followed by an overview of the organizational- as well as online community as portrayed by the employees during the interviews. Next, I will discuss important objectives and governance mechanisms that are part of the resource management of employees and the engagement with online communities. Finally important outcomes and patterns are discussed such as the benefits and risks that include interaction between organizational members as well with regards to online community members.

Resource characteristics, content creation and – production and distribution

Main resources created by the company are various types of online content. For example, the conceptual development, creation, production, editing, and sharing of online videos. These videos foremost include game (industry or event) reviews and announcements, gameplay or interaction with other game influencers. Often, influencers produce video content day to day, recorded at the company studio or at their home office. This content is distributed via different platforms for example Youtube or TikTok. YouTube is used as the main outlet to share videos via a main channel (to test and review games) and a more informal sub-channel (for special announcements and meetups with other internal or external influencers) at a fixed time and day. Another approach is to share livestream videos via Twitch. People following these platforms and channels can contribute by commenting (after a video is published or during a live stream). Main resources created by the online community members are comments, direct messages, e-mails, and textual content moderations via live chats in live streams. These resources are foremost non-rival and intangible.

Community

Community roles and practices

Openness, transparency, and treating each other as equals are essential values discussed by the interviewees—both internally at GIMA and externally within their influencer communities. The team is often referred to as a 'family.' As P13 states:

“It's a very familial atmosphere, which I find beautiful. However, we don't lose sight of the professional aspect. We maintain our goals, strive for excellence, and ensure that

our quality remains high. I think it's a well-balanced approach."

To develop and create content, influencers work via various approaches and in different constellations with other experts. In a *large community approach*, an influencer operates on a senior level creating content for an online community with hundred thousand or millions of followers who watch and contribute on a regular basis. These influencers collaborate with a diverse team of creatives, producers and editors supporting the influencer in close contact with a team of senior and junior artist managers. In a *small community approach*, an influencer operates on a junior level creating content for a smaller but growing community, supported by an artist manager and creative staff. Often these influencers independently operate in different roles to create, edit and publish content, supported by an artist manager and with the option to engage with an experienced influencer to share ideas, evaluate or ask questions. In a large community approach, an influencer is supported by a team of experts. However, in a small community approach, the influencer handles much of the work independently. As the community grows an influencer will also earn additional income. An influencer can use these earnings to outsource additional tasks, such as editing, to other team members.

Online community members

Online community members can have various roles, such as viewers (passive, without liking, commenting), participant (through liking, commenting) or as moderator (supporting the influencer by moderating comments, making announcements in chat).

Influencers and artists managers work together with moderator teams consisting of community participants who volunteer or are recruited by the influencer or his/her artist management team. In channels such as YouTube or Twitch it is possible to grant administration rights to selected participants to moderate or flag comments as part of a specific channel, but also to ban other users from the channel if they misbehave. Often moderators work in teams, creating channel guidelines in close alignment with artist managers and/or influencers. These guidelines may address what is (un)acceptable and can cover various topics such as hate speech, violence, copyrighted material or 'backseat gaming' (offering unsolicited advice, tips, or instructions to an influencer currently playing a video game by a participant). As P5 explains, these roles are on a voluntary basis and their moderators mostly connect via digital media with the influencers and their team:

"... these are mostly people from the community who have distinguished themselves

on platforms like Twitch. They were present in every stream, very active in the chat, and even without being moderators themselves, they often reminded other viewers of the rules. We have a moderator now for P14, who is relatively new to the role, but even before becoming a moderator, she used to say, ‘Hey folks, please no backseat gaming.’ These are moments where either established moderators or our team approach people and ask, ‘Wouldn’t you like to join us?’

Influencers and their team may also meet offline with their moderators and community members at industry specific events such as the ‘gamescom’, ‘the largest European game convention for game enthusiasts and business platform for the game industry’ (gamescom’, n.d.). As moderators are offering unpaid support, they often receive gifts, such as tickets for events, merchandise, and other game related items. According to P15, in general moderating teams are working on a voluntary basis and experience this as an honorary role as external contributors.

Interdisciplinary background of the organizational community

As table 2 shows, most interviews were conducted with individuals in organizational or management roles, creative roles, and four influencers in different stages of their career (two with large and two with small communities). A significant portion of the employees are so-called career changers, even among influencers. They started their careers in other industries or graduated from non-industry related studies (e.g. sociology, history, management science or law, political science, public relations, tourism, insurance). Additionally, several interviewees have a degree in industry related areas such as film-editing, event management, marketing, video journalism, or multimedia design. Notably, a significant number of interviewees participate in (online) gaming as a recreational activity. Frequently, this engagement begins during early childhood or is influenced by family or friends. P13 highlights:

“My father used to play computer games in the past. Not social media, but more like LAN gaming at home with friends—before widespread internet access. I practically grew up in that environment, playing games with friends. It was a lot of fun. While my family encouraged physical activity and social media use, they also emphasized balancing it with school and friendships.”

Often employees have a supporting role, next to their main role in the company. Supporting roles can involve responsibilities such as project management, supporting an artist manager, and educating others about specific topics, based on a specific expertise. For example, editing content, learning about Twitch user groups, discussing innovations like AI-produced content and virtual influencers, or addressing societal issues aligned with company values. Employees receive additional time to work on such topics, practice new skills and share insight, for example by organizing a forum discussion as P7 informs:

“We’ve just initiated this, [...], and we’re currently organizing the first forum. It’s essentially an after-work forum for anyone interested. Each forum will focus on a specific topic. The first topic will be the basics of gender identities. The second forum will likely discuss why it’s crucial for us to be aware, in our client pitches, that our influencer constellations need to be as diverse as possible. This way, we can represent diversity outwardly. It’s essential to acknowledge that it’s not just the same six gamers who have been around for ten years.”

However, often employees learn on the job to operate certain work processes. New employees sometimes find it challenging to learn specific skills due to time constraints, as P4 explains:

“Definitely, and overall, there was a lot of self-improvement. I’ve developed significantly, but formal training opportunities were limited. It was mostly learning by doing. Attending a seminar specifically for production skills was always planned but never materialized. Having a team lead who ensures such opportunities would be crucial, I believe.”

Additionally, taking initiative is crucial but also rewarding, as P4 adds:

“...specially the continuous learning process—almost with every production, there’s something new to learn. But in terms of significant experiences, for me, it was primarily about a high degree of independence. In this job, self-reliance and initiative are crucial. Waiting for others to solve problems leads to disaster. Everyone needs to stay vigilant every day, ensuring everything functions smoothly and solving challenges as effectively as possible. It’s a significant level of personal responsibility and initiative, but it’s also rewarding.”

For many respondents, private and professional aspects come together, especially on social media platforms such as YouTube, Twitch, Discord. TikTok and Instagram are used for relaxation and unwinding. X (Twitter) is used for networking and staying up to date but is also being questioned as the tone has become harsher (e.g. polarizing content, shitstorms, etc.). Notably, most of the interviewed influencers use social media only sparingly for personal use, as P13 reflects:

“I primarily use social media for professional purposes, but I still have a few moments or hours each day when I use it briefly for personal reasons.”

It is also noticeable that all respondents have a critical understanding of social media platforms, developed strategies for dealing with content on these platforms, and possess a critical understanding of their role in (co)producing and engaging on social media privately and professionally. They also reflect that they might prioritize this more. As P8 explains:

“Personally, I consider the sources I look at. For instance, if I come across a YouTube video from an account with only a hundred subscribers and around 500 views, I assume that this might be not legit. However, I do pay attention to accounts with a certain reputation or a substantial following to narrow down my choices. Still, I don’t go as far as researching citations and references immediately. So, I can’t exempt myself from the need to prioritize this issue, which likely applies to many topics and individuals.”

Additionally, employees often stress that everyone has to decide on his/her own how they would go to practice digital literacy, such as fact-checking and persuading others to do so as well. P5 reflects:

“...when I hear about scandals or incidents—like TikTok users getting hacked and their addresses exposed (which happened in the USA with several journalists)—I take note. It’s an alarm signal for me. However, since we work only with adult creators, and all my colleagues are adults, it’s ultimately a decision each responsible adult must make for themselves. I don’t want to interfere with anyone’s choices. After all, anyone with an Android phone has given their data to Google, and iPhone users have done the same with Apple. So, it’s always a personal decision.”

Goals and Objectives

Feedback culture

Regularly the interviewees discussed the importance of feedback culture and mentoring as part of their organizational community, within the team, one-on-one or on eye-level with the CEO. Providing open feedback across various levels of the company is actively promoted and practiced as P6 stresses:

“...always love to share this because I’m currently involved in many job interviews, and I adore the feedback culture here. You can give feedback to anyone, regardless of their role or whether they’re above you in the organizational hierarchy. You have the freedom to provide honest feedback and express your own thoughts. Additionally, there are weekly meetings with the supervisor where you can pour out your heart, share everything you want, and express how you feel. I’ve never experienced this level of openness and zero tolerance for gossip in any other company.”

Or to further develop teamwork as P4 discusses:

“Especially within a team, it’s not only desired but also expected that everyone contributes—not just for personal fulfillment, but also to continually shape the team. It’s crucial that anyone who identifies room for improvement or sees ways to enhance performance shares their ideas.”

Often the interviewees positively discussed that both founders stimulate this open feedback culture, P15 also noted that this information is conveyed as part of the onboarding process for new employees. However, some employees faced challenges during their initial period, as X pointed out:

“Difficult. One had to admit a lot, and it was sometimes painful. I had 1-2 conversations with P15 [...]. It was truly an experience at the beginning—speaking openly with a CEO and even criticizing them, and the CEO actively asking for criticism ...and that’s when I discovered a new approach for myself.”

Additionally, this feedback culture is also incorporated in interaction with members in online communities on various levels. For example, after posting, comments are monitored by an interdisciplinary team consisting of artist managers and the involved influencer. When participants provide constructive feedback, it is taken seriously and integrated into strategies or new content, often the team discusses feedback to implement improvements and pass them on to influencers. As P4 puts it:

“...what many viewers don't know is that we genuinely read almost everything. Nearly every comment under every video has been read by someone on the team. We're aware of everything that comes in, and if there's something genuinely constructive, we even discuss it within the team. We ask ourselves, 'Okay, was that feedback? Should we really do it that way in the future?' Or sometimes we admit, 'Okay, that didn't go so well with the project or the video. It wasn't cool, and they're right.’”

Employees point out that the dialogue between influencers and the community, including constructive criticism, is important. Creating a positive and safe community is crucial for influencers and strengthens the connection amongst content providers and users. Influencers also request feedback from their communities, as P4 explains:

“It's quite diverse. We have projects where we actively seek feedback, and others where we ask for tips. For example, an influencer completed Game X, essentially some of the most challenging games on the market. Especially with such projects, the influencer often asks, 'Do you have feedback? What could be improved?' We do inquire about it, but sometimes feedback also comes spontaneously, perhaps even a bit too much. If there's constructive feedback, we take it to heart.”

Being a role model

In the interviews, there was frequent discussion about a personal/professional values compass (e.g., social media behavior in private settings, brand checks, as well as specific topics such as vegetarianism, sexism, gendering, gambling racism, trans- and homophobia). It was also emphasized that personal values must align with organizational values and that the founders of the company exemplify these values. Moreover, often employees underline the important role of influencers as role models in business and society. As P9 emphasizes:

“It's about the conscious use of social media and how people perceive it. Unfortunately, many young individuals view it as a given, and they allow it to influence them significantly. Whether it's about appearance or other aspects, there's a pressure to conform with. However, social media presents a curated version of people's lives—it's not the full reality. As a young person bombarded by this content, you might start believing it represents the entire truth. It's crucial to consume this image consciously and critically. We need extensive education on this, and content creators can play a role in shaping

awareness because they have a voice on these platforms. For me, this is the most critical issue.”

Additionally, interviewees also underlined that GIMA operates a ‘value based compass’ in line with the values of staff, influencers, and founders, and they strive to connect these while developing and sharing content. This concerns various topics, such as vegetarian lifestyle, animal welfare, anti-racism, misogyny of female gamers or female game influencers or advocate for LGBTQ+ rights. P03 discusses:

“Our company’s general value compass aligns strongly with social aspects [...]. This is often beautiful because it precisely reflects the interests that P16 holds, which also align with the company’s values. We can delve into topics such as vegetarianism, vegan living, the environment, animals, and social assistance in our content. These are all themes we can seamlessly incorporate and gladly explore.”

Influencer also strive to share these values with their communities, for example by sharing their thoughts via video content or during a live stream. Often this is supported by the community but can also be criticized by community participants. Influencers or other team members do not actively participate when these views or values are discussed as response to a video or live stream as long as these debates are respectful towards each other. P14 points out, that he is not persistently pushing one’s viewpoint onto others, but leads by example:

“For me, it would be a bit out of context if I were to say, ‘You all should gender now because I think it’s cool.’ Personally, I just do it naturally. On the internet, there are always people who say, ‘Why are you bothering with gendering? It’s annoying.’ That’s just an old mindset. Some sad souls at home find it bothersome because it doesn’t sound as nice anymore. But for me, it doesn’t make a difference. I know my community very well, and many people genuinely appreciate it. That’s where the focus should be.”

Work-life Balance

To support a healthy work-life balance GIMA has integrated various practices to their employees. One example that came up during the interviews was an unlimited number of vacation days. Most of the employees appreciate such approaches, however, for influencers not all implemented rules are workable as they are expected to continuously create content. Pre-producing content is a fair solution for influencers with a larger team, for junior influencers additional workload and stress can develop, which makes it more difficult for them to apply these rules. Another issue that impacts the work-life balance of

influencers and their teams is handling parasocial relationships between influencers and followers and dealing with the decline of channel visits and views. As there are no specific rules in place for these issues, mentoring is used to support each other in better coping with them. In general, community members of these influencers embrace their values to a certain extent, as P10 states that they also share the same values as the influencer.

“I don’t get recognized on the street very often—occasionally, but it’s super rare. However, the Gamescom event was truly intense. Many people recognized me there, and it’s nice to have the opportunity to briefly interact with them. Even though many of them may not want to engage beyond taking a photo, which I find a bit sad, I understand that it’s what they’re used to. You see, if a major influencer, someone like P16, were in my shoes, they couldn’t move freely because within seconds, a huge crowd would form around them—people wanting photos or something else. It’s a reality we’re aware of. While events like Gamescom are intense, P16 is already frequently approached on the street. But I don’t think it’s bothersome; of course, there are situations where interruptions during meals can be annoying. In those moments, it’s our responsibility to communicate that it’s not cool to interrupt someone while they’re eating. As creators, we’re accountable for our content, and that extends to shaping our community. We can say, ‘This is my community, and this is how I want it.’ Of course, if we create objectionable content—like gambling, for example—I know my viewers wouldn’t watch it because we share the same values. It’s about that shared feeling, even at events like Gamescom, where there are so many gaming enthusiasts.”

Governance of offline and online communities

At GIMA, the governance of content is an essential part of governing their offline as well as online community and transferring individual and company values. This takes place before, during production and after the publication of content in their online communities.

Content governance before or during production

Advertorials are a component of this content. Employees emphasize the importance of clearly labeling advertisements, whether through visual markers or by having influencers utilize 'talking points' - scripted reviews of products or services - while always disclosing them as advertisements. However, all

employees are free to decide what kind of connection they would allow to include in their content. So called ‘brand checks’ are carried out by the artists managers and project members when organizations approach the company with the aim to include their products or services as part of livestreams or pre-recorded videos. Via desk research and certain keywords, they investigate the background of the brand. If an organization has a questionable background, a team member as well as an influencer can decide to reject the assignment. P6 explains this process:

“... we discuss the campaigns that express interest in you. We ask for your thoughts and opinions. Personally, I share my own opinion. Before that, we always conduct a brand check. We assess whether the brand has a positive or negative reputation, including any dark history. For instance, consider Beauty-brand X, where antisemitism is prevalent. They’ve never been held accountable, but we refuse to collaborate with them due to our ethical values. We don’t make exceptions just because someone hasn’t faced consequences. Similarly, we avoid working with Food-brand X. However, we give our influencers the freedom to decide if they want to collaborate. We provide them with our research—both positive and negative aspects—so they can make an informed choice.”

This can be decided on the individual as well as company level. For example, an employee that experiences that a certain brand is not in line with her/his personal values, may decide not to work on a specific project involving this brand. As P6 adds:

“..., we can say that it’s ethically unacceptable for me to work on the campaign. Another Artist Manager should handle it on my behalf, please, because it’s personally intolerable for my ethics. We definitely make that distinction.”

Content governance after distribution

After distribution, participants may also provide feedback on the content in relation to certain advertisers with whom GIMA collaborates. If an issue is overlooked and is broadly addressed by community participants after publication, the team will discuss this issue with the advertiser, as P2 states.

“We directly approach the customer and say, ‘We’ve recently received the following feedback from the community, and we’d like to reiterate this or address it.’ We take a determined approach when communicating with the customer because, as representatives

of our artists, we don't want to limit their opinions. It's essential for us to be honest with the community, not blindly promoting any products, but rather presenting them in the light they are meant to be seen."

Employees often discussed if and how influencers respond to feedback, especially negative feedback, and how they use constructive criticism to evolve. As earlier discussed, interviewees underlined an appropriate response to criticism and consideration of constructive feedback as essential for continuous content improvement. However, handling hate comments and filtering feedback are crucial aspects, as is creating a safe environment for creators and their community. As P4 puts it:

"Everyone [from the team] has access to the channel, [...]. For instance, I can moderate comments. Generally, if we read a comment and think, 'Okay, this one is really bad' or 'This one is genuinely discriminatory toward a group,' we always ban or delete such comments. But things like subjective rambling about influencers or disliking a video—well, that's just how it is."

While extreme or harmful comments are deleted, haters are more closely monitored. After upload, team members monitor the comments section within an hour, especially when the influencer also engages with other influencers, specifically female influencers to make sure that these are not harmed, and the community feels safe and comfortable. As P4 adds:

"They also watch the comments live, and if something hurtful comes up or offends them, or if someone targets the rest of the community just because there was a black sheep involved, that's why we still moderate a bit more strictly. It's simply to ensure, as I mentioned, that others in the comment section feel comfortable as well."

More generally, YouTube provides features to block unwanted words in comments using 'blocked word lists.' Harmful or extreme comments can be automatically deleted via the platform organizations or manually deleted, hidden or flagged by the team (See for example: *Learn about comment settings - YouTube Help*, z.d.). These mechanisms are also used to govern the amount of hate comments or troll accounts that add negative comments. In some cases, influencers also 'pin' negative comments to the top of their comments feed or try to reach out via direct messaging with the comment contributor. Community participants that are repeatedly add harmful or disrespectful comments via YouTube, TikTok or livestream sessions are also warned by influencers and/or their (moderating) team and eventually are blocked from the channel (temporarily) if the behavior does not change. As discussed, moderator teams also play a crucial role in governing other community members, however other participants also may

support ‘their influencer’ by commenting on harmful, unjustifiable or superficial comments by others. As P14 explains:

“..., the community almost acts a bit protective or defensive toward me. They collectively respond to the comment—since you can also reply to YouTube comments—and they write things like I would: ‘Well, then just leave’ or ‘It’s unpleasant how you’re being offensive here.’ [...]. Of course, not everyone does this, but if everyone did, it would be overwhelming. Personally, I’m not much of a commenter; I usually just watch without leaving comments. But it’s nice to see the community taking a protective stance in such situations.”

To summarize the above findings the following overview, figure 2, visualizes key-concepts regarding GIMA’s knowledge commons as derived from the interviews.

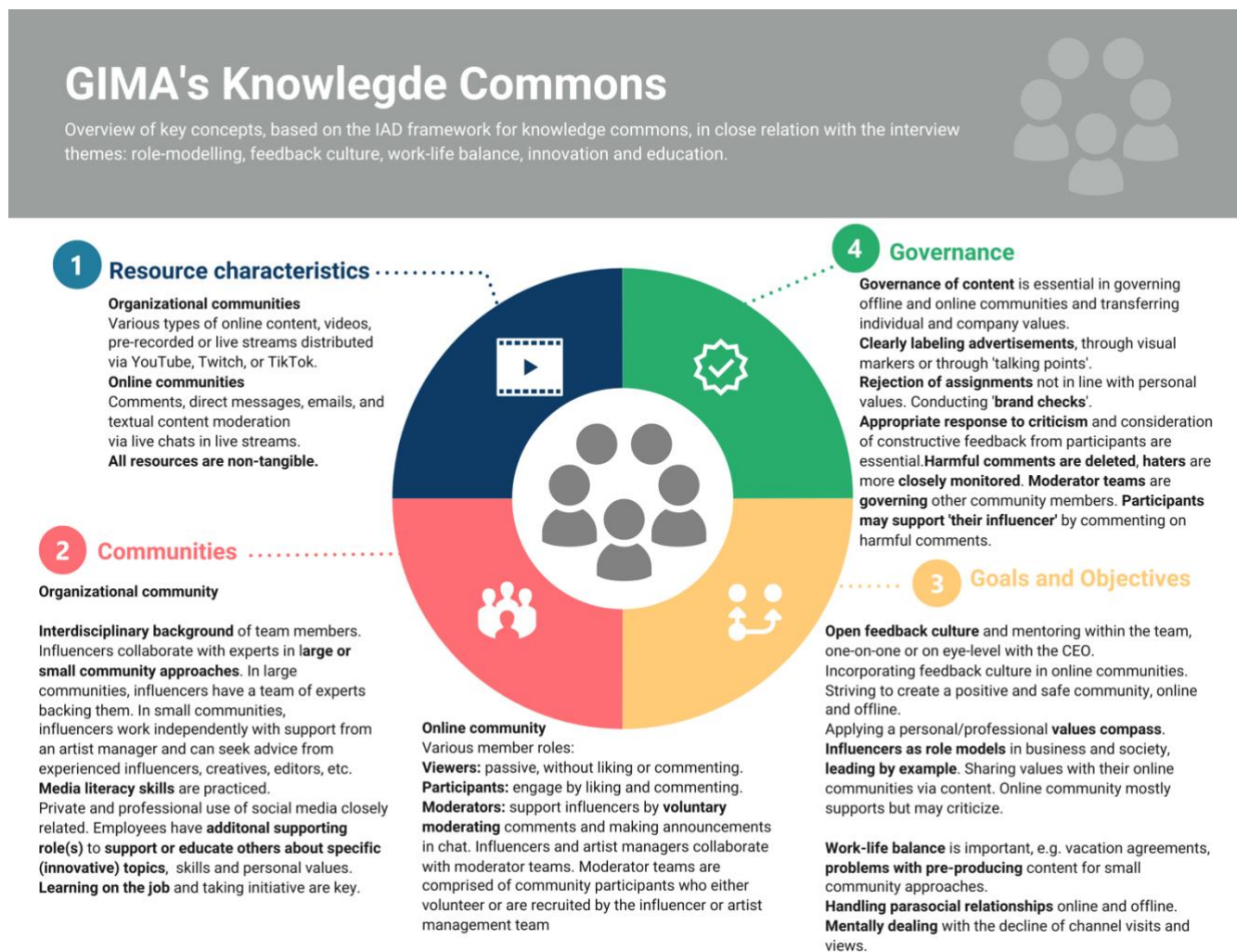


Figure 2: Overview of GIMA’s knowledge commons.

Patterns and Outcomes

The above findings are summarized in a community map (see figure 3), that illustrates how employees (e.g., managers, producers, creatives, content creators, hereafter influencers) and stakeholders (e.g., followers of influencer channels) of GIMA operate as polycentric communities (their action arenas) in an offline (organizational; interaction between employees) as well as online (influencer channels, interaction between influencers and followers) context. Specifically, the transfer of organizational as well as online community rules, routines, roles, and mindsets of both communities are visualized.

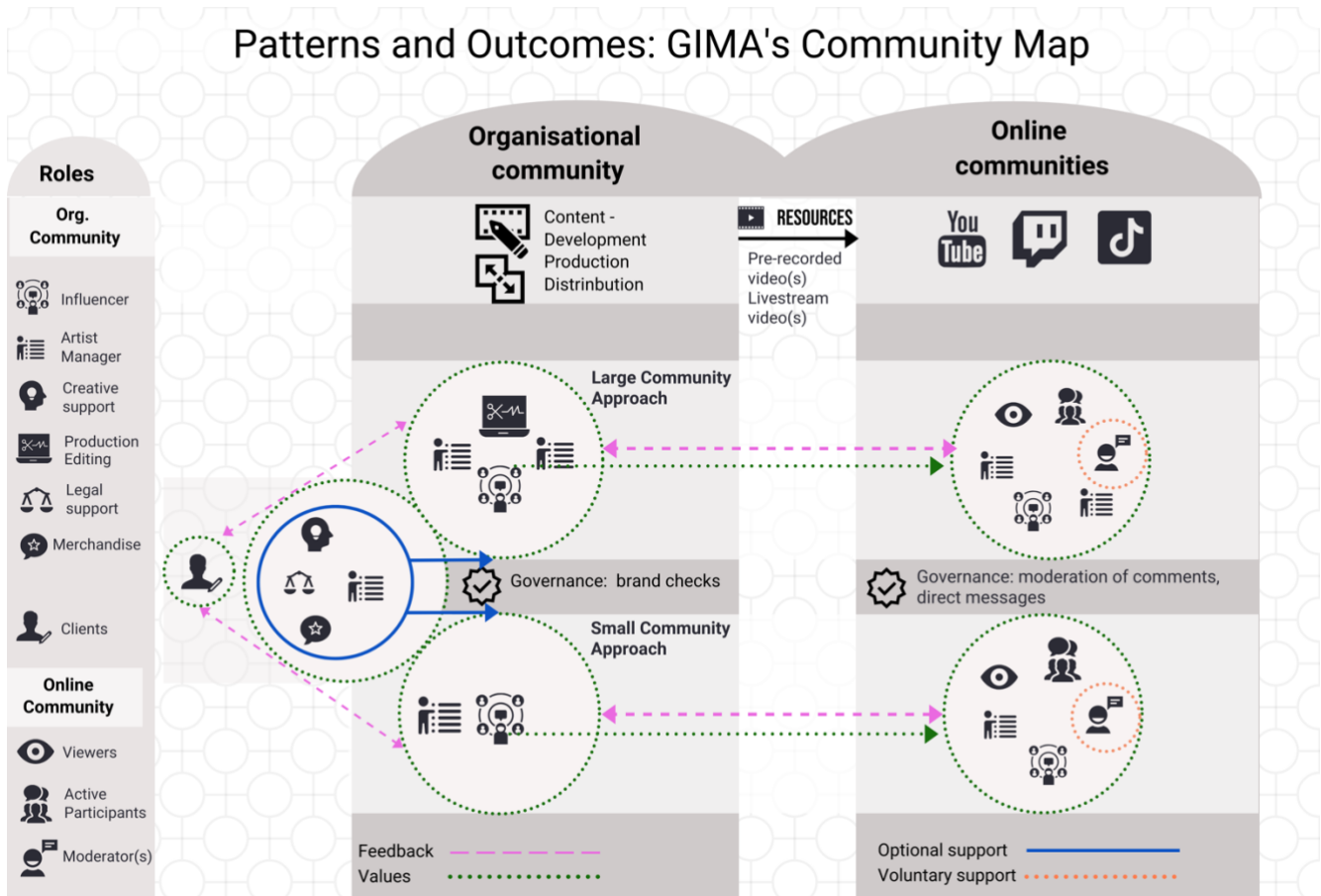


Figure 3: Overview of GIMA's patterns and outcomes community map.

Conclusion

This article explored how employees of a German-based Influencer Management agency, GIMA, operate through polycentric communities in an offline (organizational; interaction between employees) as well as online (influencer channels, interaction between influencers and followers) context. Incorporating the IAD framework allowed us to disentangle how organizational community values are transferred from offline to online community values from the perspective of employees and founders. The chosen case

provides new theoretical as well as practical insights about online communities developed by organizations and governed by content providers and users. Theoretically, this research shows how various layers of offline and online communication and knowledge sharing may 'safeguard' communities and their members through polycentric approaches with important elements such as defined by Ostrom (2010): non-hierarchical, through self-organization, and mutual adjustment. Specifically, the role of online mediators and their connection with online as well as organizational communities may be interesting to further investigate because of the polycentric nature in combining voluntary roles with organizational roles.

The study further uncovered valuable insights into the implementation of value-based practices and the challenges associated with their integration within the influencer industry. In light of frequent criticism regarding the 'commercialization of influence' within the industry (Hund, 2023, p. 170), GIMA's strategy of cultivating an open workplace atmosphere, prioritizing values within the organization, and nurturing a safe and friendly online community culture could serve as a source of inspiration for other small and medium-sized enterprises operating in this sector.

GIMA's foundation is built upon a diverse and interdisciplinary team of employees. The demographic shows career changers with an interest in gaming who apply digital/media literacy skills in professional and private circumstances. All team member work on developing and fostering a safe and open community environment offline and online. Employees experience support in different areas and from different actors within their organizational community but, foremost enjoy the possibility to work autonomous, contribute their own ideas, provide and receive feedback, have the possibly to opt-out on working on specific projects that do not align with their values. Finally, they can share these values with others through workshops and forum discussions or even transfer these in content produced by GIMA. Influencer may struggle with some of the organizational community rules as their production scheme forbids them to make use of flexible vacation agreements. Importantly, influencers and their supporting team members set standards in advertising production based on shared values and by applying ground rules in applying so-called brand checks.

With regards to the transfer of values, influencers strive to lead by example and ask for feedback from online community members. Parasocial relationships play a significant role in their engagement with community members, especially for influencers with large communities. However, clear communication about boundaries is essential for influencers with large or small(er) communities. Furthermore, influencers receive support from moderating teams that operate based on joint community rules, ensuring a safe and friendly online environment. Essentially, influencers are aware that they must

live with hateful response, but they also have backing and support from their communities when negative comments arise. Lastly, influencers often find that their values align with those of most community members.

This paper focused on understanding organizational as well as online community practices from an inside-out perspective. As the collected data solely concerns interviews with employees from GIMA, it misses an essential perspective—the perspective of online community members—that was beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, future research should focus on examining the transfer of offline values to online communities from the perspective of online community members who follow, engage with influencers or support them as moderators. In doing so, it opens possibilities for a richer analysis of whether and how these communicative community practices and values are transferred by influencers and their teams into their online communities.

Quantitative research should measure the extent to which their community values correlate with members of their online communities. As part of the second study, survey items will be created and tested based on this study, particularly in the context of how organizational community values are translated into online community values. Moreover, focus group meetings will be organized with community members, specifically with members in different roles such as viewers, active participants, and moderators. Regardless of its methodology, more research is needed on whether and how organizations are willing and able to transfer their offline community values to direct stakeholders, such as members of online communities. This case may serve as example study to search more organizational and online communities in the influencer economy.

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About the author

Deike Schulz grew up on Juist, the most beautiful sandbank in the world. In the 1990s, she moved to the Netherlands to study Media Art. She later founded a web agency and then transitioned to higher education, focusing on online media. Schulz holds a PhD from the Centre for Responsible Organization Competencies and Sustainability at Nijmegen School of Management centered on online communication, particularly legitimacy judgments in online communities. As part of her research, she played a pivotal role in developing innovative methodologies for analyzing and comprehending social media platforms and influencer communities. She now leads the Organisations and Social Media professorship at NHL-Stenden University of Applied Sciences, working alongside fellow academics, students, and external stakeholders in researching online communication's impact on organizations and society. Central to her research is a relentless commitment to understanding and promoting responsible leadership on both an individual and collective level, going beyond the realms of online and offline spaces.

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