Towards an Understanding of Social Capital in an Online Community of Filipino Music Artists

Jerome V. Cleofas

Abstract—Cyberspace has become a more viable arena for budding artists to share musical acts through digital forms. The increasing relevance of online communities has attracted scholars from various fields demonstrating its influence on social capital. This paper extends this understanding of social capital among Filipino music artists belonging to the SoundCloud Philippines Facebook Group.

The study makes use of various qualitative data obtained from key-informant interviews and participant observation of online and physical encounters, analyzed using the case study approach. Soundcloud Philippines has over seven-hundred members and is composed of Filipino singers, instrumentalists, composers, arrangers, producers, multimedia artists and event managers. Group interactions are a mix of online encounters based on Facebook and SoundCloud and physical encounters through meet-ups and events. Benefits reaped from the community are informational, technical, instrumental, promotional, motivational and social support. Under the guidance of online group administrators, collaborative activities such as music productions, concerts and events transpire. Most conflicts and problems arising are resolved peacefully. Social capital in SoundCloud Philippines is mobilized through *recognition, respect* and *reciprocity.*

Keywords—Facebook, music artists, online communities, social capital.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE technologies introduced by the internet and the increasing relevance of social media networks in the last five years, the interaction between people online have been hastened and communities based in cyberspace has been considered as a viable influential social group. Although earlier studies suggest that internet use increase isolation and diminish social integration [1], [2]. Online platforms such as social networking sites, chat boxes, forums, built for specific purposes, create alternate communities and social arenas which have been argued as an alternative to social linkages found in the real world [3]. Cyber communities manifest cultures, beliefs and relationships which are comparable to real world [4].

Social capital, the cohesiveness of social networks, is considered to be a significant determinant of quality of life [5]. Various literatures have demonstrated the usefulness of the online environment and social networking websites in increasing social capital in different contexts such as in education [6], political involvement [7], and advertising [8].

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Sharing of information and digital resources, especially music, online has been increased by the emergence of social networking sites. For professional, commercial, independent and amateur artists, the internet has presented an opportunity to perform for a larger audience for a lower cost. Some of the popular musical artists in the scene started off as undiscovered singers and musicians who uploaded their music and videos in social networking and media sharing sites for exposure, and have been seeded and shared by their earlier listeners for them to gain more followers. Musicians also get the chance to work together through various online platforms [9].

Filipinos have been known for their love of music, as evidenced by some artists from the country being known in the international scene of the music industry. Also, the Philippines have been named as the Social Networking Capital of the World, with 93.9 of the nation reportedly signed up for Facebook [10]. Music artists make use of these social networking sites to form groups.

This study aims to understand how social capital is mobilized in communities based in an online platform, more specifically, how this is demonstrated in an online community of Filipino music artists from the SoundCloud Philippines (SCPhils) group.

To understand social capital in the online community, this study uses four selected dimensions of social capital by Dudwick, Kuehnast, Jones and Woolcock [11], namely: *trust and solidarity, collective action and cooperation, information and communication* and *social cohesion and inclusion.*

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

The research design of the study is the Yin's case study method [12]. The case study design allows both in-depth description and explanation of the case at hand. This method allows the case to be directly observed, and information to be gathered in their natural setting. The design also emphasizes the use of multiple data collection sources, to ensure a thick and holistic description of the topic of interest.

B. Data Collection Plan

To adhere to ethical standards of internet research [4], a letter seeking for permission was sent to SCPhils administrators to secure their permission to conduct the study in the said group. At the same time, the researcher also publicly announced my research project in the Facebook group through a post. The study employed four data gathering methods in order to provide a more holistic picture on the case at hand: *mining of internet data, participant observation,*

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interviews and focus-group discussion. This is to ensure triangulation in the study [13]. Data collection spanned from October to December 2013. The researcher has been a member of the group since August 2013.

C. Data Analysis

After the information from the online platforms, interview transcripts and observation notes have been subjected to basic qualitative content analysis [14], specific strategies were used in order to come up with case descriptions to describe the phenomenon of interest, which is the social capital in the online community. These strategies included *theoretical and rival propositions, pattern matching, explanation building, and time-series analysis* and *logic models* [12].

D. Ensuring Trustworthiness

Member checking with members of the online community being studied is a requisite for qualitative research being done among cyber communities to validate the findings [4]. As the study progressed, the researcher incrementally presented my findings through postings in the group, soliciting comments for validations. Generally, the study findings were positively accepted with some comments for revisions, especially from administrators.

III. AN INTRODUCTION TO SOUNDCLOUDPH

SoundCloud Philippines or SoundCloudPH or SCPhils is "an organization of Filipino music enthusiasts who have a strong passion in creating and appreciating music." Through this online platform, the group aims to inspire more Filipinos to pursue their passion for music through sharing and enhance its members' competence in their respective musical skills. It also desires increased recognition of its members by showcasing their talents through Facebook and Soundcloud. Ultimately, the group's goal is the discovery of its artists through providing them the opportunities for exposure through online promotions, organizing musical events and talent sponsorships for other organizations and stakeholders. In addition, the group has also been involved in charitable causes. The group was founded by an overseas Filipino worker based in United Kingdom and is seven months old by the time of this writing. It has ten administrators and over seven hundred members as of December 28, 2013.

The group is composed of singers, instrumentalists, composers, arrangers, mixers and producers, multimedia artists, bands event managers and other-related media practitioners. Group interactions are a mix of online encounters based on Facebook and SoundCloud, physical encounters through meet-ups and events. Some of the projects and activities initiated by the group are grand collaborations, musical concerts and productions, online albums, talent sponsorship for other organizations and artist promotions.

IV. BENEFITS REAPED FROM THE COMMUNITY

Online data, observations and interviews suggest many benefits that members of the community have reaped from the group that can be categorized according to the following: (1) informational support; (2) technical-instrumental support; (3) promotional support; (4), motivational support; (5) socio-emotional support, and; (6) non-musical expertise support

A. Informational Support

Although the group is restricted by nature, the members have access to all the public posts that other members place in the group. The platform provided by the Groups services of Facebook provides ease in sharing and receiving ideas. Information that circulates in the group vary from one topic to another, but most are limited to musical concepts and group activities as guided by the policies set by the admins.

B. Technical-Instrumental Support

The group is composed of hundreds of members with diverse musical skills, ranging from singing to music production and videography. Due to this, collaborative efforts to complement each other's musical strengths arise from members in the group. This type of support is further manifested through sharing of material resources, like those who have no means to produce quality recordings on their own can seek the help of other members who have better recording equipment. Aside from resources, members also share their musical expertise through assistance in mixing or editing, vocal and performance coaching and music arranging and production.

C. Promotional Support

Being essentially an online-based community on Facebook, the group is embedded in an environment wherein recorded performances, in both video and music streaming formats, can be freely shared. Members "plug" their recent or old SoundCloud recordings, both by them or by other members. Events, gigs, ceremonies and television shows, wherein any member is involved can also be shared with the group. Members who also offer media services also use the group as a means to advertise.

D. Motivational Support

Since the performances are freely shared and viewed by the members, they feel motivated to continue their craft in music. They get inspirations on how their next musical act would be better. An interview with an administrator reveals that the pooling of diverse talents introduces a sense of challenge to be noticed. Through words of encouragement from others, members inculcate the desire to become better.

E. Social Support

Gaining new friends is one of the major benefits reaped by the members of SoundCloudPH. Interviewees from the focus group discussion jointly agree that the online community was instrumental for them to find each other, share their interests in music and form personal bonds and friendships with each other. There are some members who have admittedly gained romantic relationships with co-members. This interaction beyond music-related intentions is evidenced by frequent meet-ups, dinners, movie dates, birthday parties and night-outs that cliques of the group are attend to.

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F. Non-Musical Expertise Support

Majority of the members are not full-time musicians. Most of the artists in the group are undiscovered amateurs. They engage in musical activities as a hobby to express their passion. When not engaged in music, these members can be found practicing their respective professions or occupations, while the younger members of the group are working as students. The artists therefore have other skillsets and resources other than those related to music that can also be accessible to other members.

V. TRUST AND SOLIDARITY

A. Diverse Membership

As it has been discussed earlier, the characteristics of the group members are widely differentiated. The characteristics of the artists in the community vary in terms of age, location, occupation, musical talents and personalities. Also, the members come from different musical backgrounds and prefer varying music genres. However, this conglomeration of different people seems to work for the active members of the site. Members see this diversity not as a source of divide, but as an opportunity to complement on each other's musical strengths, as exhibited by one member's post:

> "...being in this group feels like you're in a different world because you become open to different possibilities, musically speaking."

B. Nature of Interaction between Members

It must be understood that majority of the interactional attributes of the group are dependent on the interface and the features provided by the online platforms Facebook and SoundCloud. Seemingly, every post is received with a positive regard. Negative criticism on performances, if any, is usually given with caution: *"Efforts are always appreciated, whether you are good or bad,"* an administrator said.

Participants of this study generally view the community as a cluster of loving, humble, respectful and helpful people.

During actual meet-ups, the researcher would usually observe that members who would be meeting others for the first time would exhibit certain shyness. However, the more outgoing members would reach out and accommodate others.

C. Support Seeking

Because the Facebook group served as a public avenue to share the artists' musical talents through posting uploaded performances, other members become acquainted with the people, resources and the skillset that they can access for their own musical needs. There are various ways wherein a member can ask for assistance from other users. First would be to announce their need in the internet as exhibited by the post:

> "Is there anyone here who knows how to put effects on the vocal tracks? Can you teach me? Thanks!"

Second would be to privately message the source of assistance needed through Facebook or SoundCloud. Response to those seeking support also varies. As one member during an interview explained:

> "It's based on the seeker's approach, and the target helper's availability."

D. Patterns of Cleavages and Conflicts

Generally, relationships among members are civil and harmonious, but the group has also been witness to misunderstandings. Since cooperation, humility and involvement are common virtues held highly by members, users who exhibit behaviors that are perceived to be selfish by members are usually frowned upon and isolated. During the focus group, one administrator said:

> "We don't like people with a strong sense of self-entitlement..."

Administrators deal with rising disputes collectively, especially when the unpleasant behavior of the member/s in question causes an obvious stirring in the group. Concerned parties are privately messaged by an assigned administrator to issue a gentle reminder. Usual sources of conflicts are posting of insensitive statements, misunderstanding among collaborating artists, misrepresenting the group and bypassing administrators, personal and romantic issues, and exhibition of behaviors that make them seem unapproachable. Another problem faced by the group is the presence of posers in the community. Some members who were found to be misrepresenting themselves were peacefully dismissed from the group.

VI. COLLECTIVE ACTIONS IN THE GROUP

SoundCloudPH is an avenue wherein musical artists can represent themselves both individually and collectively. The diversity of the backgrounds and skillsets of the members presents a wide range of opportunities to collaborate with one another. Collective actions can be seen in: pairs, such as vocal duets and singer-instrumentalist partnerships; groups, such as quartets and bands, and grand collaborations, which pools in a larger number of artists in one recording or performance. Collective activities are also seen through charitable means such as reaching out to victims of disasters or an ill member.

Drivers of collective actions in the group are opportunities to learn from another artist, the desire to assist and share, bonding among other musician friends, improving and complimenting skillsets and increasing popularity.

The admins support, encourage and engage in small group collaborations with very little regulation, to allow artists to maximize their creativity. The admins even create activities and programs to make collaborations flourish. However, for grand collaborations, at least one admin has to be involved in the planning process. During the FGD, the admins jointly agreed that grand collaborations are a representation of the group and therefore need to be supervised.

VII. INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

SoundCloudPH is generally a cybercommunity. Majority of interactions between members are held online. As earlier discussed, the interactional attributes of the community are largely dependent upon the features which social networking sites provide. Usual internet based sites or apps that are used

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by the members and admins are *Facebook, SoundCloud, Dropbox* and other file sharing sites*, Line* and *Emails*.

Administrators also make use of the Facebook group to post announcements and important events. Admins have access to more features such as the ability to add or remove members from the group and pin important posts at the top of the page to make sure that members who log in to the group will be able to see the announcements.

Some SoundCloudPH members are located in provinces while others are residing in other countries. The ability of the internet to bridge people even without physical contact has been a very important factor in strengthening group ties.

VIII. SOCIAL COHESION AND INCLUSION

The basic requirement for inclusion in the exclusive SoundCloudPH FB group is for the artist to have at least a Filipino descent and an active SoundCloud account, with postings of his/her musical performances. New members are either SoundCloud artists that are discovered and invited by the administrators or those that are referred by existing members. As earlier discussed, the administrators hold the authority to include new members in the group.

From a pool of hundreds of artists, collaborations and meet-ups with other people, groups of friends form within the group. It can be observed that there would be certain members who would interact and collaborate more frequently than the rest. Through a private message, one member mentioned that some users are selective with the posts that they comment, support and promote.

In the online community, there would also be members who are usually isolated from group activities. These would primarily be the non-active members, who rarely interact nor make use of the group. Other members that are usually not invited in collective actions are those who have exhibited unpleasant behaviours in the group.

It is very evident that most artists belonging in the community have a shared social identity and express their appreciation and pride for their membership. Their pride as a member is exhibited in the use of the #SCPhils hashtag in their Facebook and SoundCloud posts. In events where they perform in, some artists would always present themselves as members of the group and promote the community page to other people. There seems to be a sense of group ownership for individual accomplishments.

Mobilizing social capital in SoundCloudPH: A summary: Based on my findings, there are three R's that can encapsulate the findings on how social capital is mobilized in the online community (1) **Recognition**, wherein members appreciate the talents and strengths of others, express their admiration and also recognize their own talents are worthy to be shared; (2) **Respect**, wherein members maintain a harmonious flow of communications, make bonds and friendships, and treat others with respect, courtesy and with positive regard, and; (3) **Reciprocity**, wherein members offer their assistance and skills as much as they seek support from others, engage themselves in activities and collaborations and involve themselves in collective actions within the group.

IX. DISCUSSION

The features offered by the online platforms Facebook and SoundCloud truly have helped hasten how social capital is mobilized in an online community, even for some members who are not able to meet physically. The administrative provisions and personal desire of members to improve musical abilities and make bonds, paired with the ease and connectivity offered by the virtual environment, increase the member's networks. This phenomenon of gaining and mobilizing social capital in the internet and social networks have also been demonstrated in studies among Japanese citizens [15]; members of civil virtual organizations [7]; and students [2].

The argument of [11] that trust and solidarity is based on established networks and familiarity among members, and relationships built, is supported by this study's finding that actively engaging in interaction with members provide gains for both individual artists and the group.

The ability of group members to come up with collective actions such as duets and grand collaborations as an exhibition of flowing social capital is also demonstrated in other online based civic organizations based on social networks [16] The varying levels of social cohesion seen in the group like formation of cliques, presence of isolates and conflicts have also been found by [15] who explained that ties between and among individuals in the online communities vary in magnitude and strength. Kozinets [4] also explained that in cyber communities, trolls who will show inappropriate behaviors in online groups will usually be present.

The findings of the study are very much unique to the context of Philippine music and cyber culture, so transferability of findings in other online communities may be restrained. Future researchers are also therefore encouraged to use cross case analyses between and among online groups and utilize quantitative measures with exact indicators. Findings may also be influenced by the proponent's membership and leadership in the group.

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