

Investigation of sense of community among cyclists

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Cycling has become determinate in many areas of life. It is a cheap, environmentally friendly and flexible mode of transport, and due to the emergence and development of cycle sport and the growing willingness to follow a healthy lifestyle, cycling provides sports opportunities and the daily exercise for many. The aim of this study¹ is to investigate the sense of community among cyclists by conducting an online survey using validated questions from the Sense of Community Index 2 (SCI-2) model, with 362 responses gathered. According to the results, the interpreted scales were applicable and most of the respondents agreed with the 4 dimensions of the SCI-2 (Membership, Influence, Integration and fulfilment of needs, Shared emotional connection) which assumes that cyclist do feel a kind of community with each other. From a marketing point of view, cycling can be perceived not only as an activity but also as a group of consumers linked to this activity.

Keywords: sense of community, cycling, Sense of Community Index 2

1. Introduction

Cycling is playing an increasingly important role in everyday life, and there may be a number of motivations behind an individual opting for the bike. The popularity of following a healthy lifestyle, regular exercise (Légrádi, 2001) and the commitment to environmental protection and sustainability contribute to its spread (Kisgyörgy et al., 2008). However, it can be observed that cycling tourism has also boomed in recent years, with cycling becoming an important component of the industry. In addition to its many positive features, the popularity of cycling lies in its role in building individuals' identity and attachment, as well as being an excellent tool for symbolizing social status (Volgger–Demetz, 2021). As a result, the role of cycling and also the role of communities formed around this activity have increased, so their examination and deeper understanding is important. In the present study, we aim to explore whether cycling – as an activity – is able to create a community among cyclists. If so, what factors contribute to its development and how they affect its extent.

People prefer activities that can relax them physically, mentally, and spiritually, and are enjoyable, fun, and easy to spend time in their leisure time. One such activity is cycling, which plays an important part in people's lives and has long been a popular tool, whether for transportation or sports purposes (Duran et al., 2018), and even sports can strengthen belonging to the community (Csóka et al., 2021). Cycling is cheap, flexible, and the one most sustainable modes of transport – which can even be used as a sharing economy (Buda et al., 2019) – and its emissions do not

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result in any pollutant emissions, thus reducing carbon dioxide content, which in turn contributes to the adequate health of people (Hidvégi et al., 2015).

2. The role of the consumer community and tribe in marketing

Community participation is vital to people's well-being, so that a lack of social connection affects both mental and physical health (Ipsen–Hall, 2021). The stratification of society and the formation of groups have been observed for a long time. The widespread and popular hippie era in the 1960s drew attention to the fact that a lifestyle can be chosen by anyone, which also marked the beginning of the division of society into smaller groups (Töröcsik et al., 2019). Communities are no longer required to be geographically close to each other. It is sufficient to mutually recognize a common identity, and if this is achieved, individuals may be symbolically close to each other, even if they are separated by a significant distance (Prónay–Hetesi, 2016).

Consumer communities can also form, which are an integral part of the marketing field. In this case, individuals explore groups in which they feel comfortable, have an experience, and can identify with common values (Prónay–Hetesi, 2016). The formed groups play a significant role in the (purchasing) decision-making and behavioral processes due to the individual's desire to resemble or imitate the group (Hofmeister-Tóth, 2006). Some consumer communities are not tied to a specific brand, which is why we can distinguish between brand communities and consumer tribes. In the former case, members nurture emotions about the brand of a product or service. They can be described as a special and geographically unrelated community based on social relationships between fans of a given brand (Muniz–O'Guinn, 2001). According to Cova and Cova (2002), tribal consumption was created through the search for social relationships with people, the shared use of products and services, through a "connecting value". Consumer tribes are made up of individuals with similar consumption, mindsets, or value judgments, but in contrast to the brand community, they are not centered on the brand, much more importance can be attributed to the community and community thinking. What is also important to emphasize is that joining one type of tribe does not preclude membership of other tribes or communities (Robin, 2011).

We also interpret the cycling community as a consumer tribe. Their role is being enhanced by the growing popularity of cycling, which is compounded by the growing importance of this activity in building individuals' identities, their attachment to each other and in symbolizing their social status. Today, it can be seen much more as a symbolic activity of the affluent, so the connection between cycling and striking consumption has become apparent. It is also true of the cycling tribe, which is also integrated into the definition of a sense of community through the membership dimension, that in relation to cycling, the tribe defines the norms, competencies, and symbolic knowledge that cyclists must acquire to become a full member. Cycling is therefore a good tool to reflect that we are a member of a community (Volgger–Demetz, 2021).

3. Sense of Community

A sense of community is one of the most defining parts of community psychology, in which belonging is expressed as a feeling in the individual and his or her needs are satisfied as a result of togetherness. The first prominent theoretical definition of a sense of psychological community is due to Sarason's (1974) work that characterizes an environment or community that allows individuals to experience group-like similarity, belonging, and social support that they are willing to maintain in the long run. A sense of community is important in modern social life because it has many benefits that improve quality of life in both mental and physical terms (Warner et al., 2013).

The sense of community can be conceptually related to the idea of a consumer community already expressed earlier. A sense of community among individuals is mostly able to develop as a result of a similar range of interests, regardless of how far apart they are geographically located. Several studies have previously raised research questions for brand communities or groups based on the same interests or leisure activities. Based on these, it can be concluded that the sense of community does not always have to be linked to the brand of a product or service, this phenomenon cannot be observed only in relation to brand communities. The combined consumption of activities of the same interest by members of a group can both evoke a sense of belonging. A sense of community in this sense expresses the extent to which an individual is able to attach to another person as a result of performing the same activity (Drengner et al., 2012).

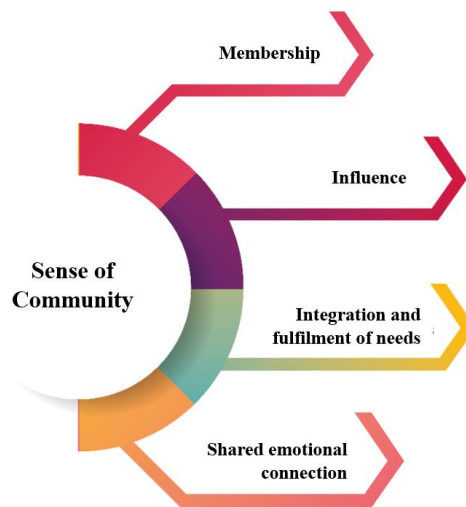
3.1. Sense of Community Index 2 (SCI-2)

The sense of community can be interpreted along four dimensions. A sense of membership develops in a person when he or she is accepted by a community and is able to fully integrate into it. Predefined criteria and boundaries to protect intimacy ensure group structure and security (McMillan–Chavis, 1986). From the marketing perspective, membership can be interpreted as meaning that an individual must purchase an object or service that makes the membership valuable to him or her and secures his or her position within the group (Rosenbaum et al., 2005). Influence can be interpreted as a two-way definition; on the one hand, the member matters to the other members, so his or her actions affect the group as a whole and even be able to influence community activities and on the other hand, the group also influences the actions of individual actors. These two seemingly opposite factors can work simultaneously (*I wonder what other cyclists think of me*).

Reinforcement and meeting needs is the primary function of a strong community, so by interpreting integration and fulfilment of needs, the community is able to meet the individual needs that have made members join (*I can meet important needs by being a cyclist*). The personal values that can be considered as common values within a group are confirmed for the members. Shared emotional connections are based in part on time spent together and sharing experiences together (*Cyclists often experience significant events together, such as holidays, outings, or tragedy*). Communication assumes that the more people interact with each other, the more likely

they are to have a closer relationship also plays an important role. Furthermore, the quality of the interactions is of paramount importance, as the more positive the participants experience through the community and the relationships they build, the stronger the attachment. (McMillan–Chavis, 1986).

Figure 1. Dimensions of the Sense of Community



Source: own construction based on McMillan–Chavis (1986)

3. Research method

The study investigates the Sense of Community among cyclists. As far as we can tell, this is the first study which applies this theoretical model in case of cycling. Thus, the study should provide evidence about that the SCI-2 model and its scales can be applied in this field. Since the scales originally were used for measuring sense of community in other cases, had to interpret the scales in Hungarian language, thus slight justifications were made in order to better fit to cycling. In sum, our hypothesis is the following:

H1: Cyclists have sense of community towards other cyclists

The data collection was carried out via an online questionnaire between March 14 and April 4, 2020. The questionnaire was shared through Facebook posts, friends and groups. These groups contain cyclists who have any kind of interest in cycling. The latter could have impact on the results since cycling could play greater importance in the member's life. The responses were gathered by the Survio online survey system which is optimized for mobile devices, thus filling out the questionnaire was easy for the respondents.

This method allowed us to reach more cyclists through social media and collect data in a structured way. The scales of the SCI-2 model were applied in our

investigation, however, slight changes were made during the interpretation to better fit to measuring sense of community among cyclists. The scales were measured on 5-point Likert scales, which is the most accepted range in Hungary, where “1” represented “Totally disagree”, while “5” represented “Totally agree”. This method allowed us to measure the strength and the direction of the attitude (Sakip et al., 2018).

The data collection provided 364 responses which were reduced to 362 after data cleaning (non-cyclists were excluded). 61% of the respondents were male cyclists, while 39% of were female. Most respondents were between 36-55 years of age (57% of the respondents). 12% of the sample was between 15-25, 18% were between 26-35, while 11% were between 56-65 years of age. 2% of the sample was older than 65, the average age of the whole sample was 42 years.

44% of the respondents graduated from university (possessing Bachelor’s, Master’s or other university degrees), while 43% graduated from high school. The rest finished only elementary school or vocational training.

4. Research results

The data were analyzed with the help of IBM SPSS Statistics. According to our research purpose we wanted to measure whether a sense of community exist among cyclists or not. This assumption was linked to two expectations:

1. The internal consistency of the SCI-2 scales is acceptable in case of cycling.
2. If the internal consistency is acceptable, then the means of the SCI-2 dimensions are above the average (more than 3.0 where the range is between 1-5).

The dimensions were created based on the SCI-2 model. In order to test the applicability of the model, a Cronbach alpha test was carried out (Table 1.). According to the results *Membership*, *Influence* and *Shared emotional connection* comply the requirements relating to Cronbach alpha, since the values are over 0.7. However, in case of *Integration and fulfilment of needs* and Cronbach alpha value is below 0.7. In recent years, there are competing opinions regarding the range of acceptance in the scientific community and there are scientists who argues for lowering the threshold to 0.6 (Taber, 2018). Thus, we decided to accept the *Integration and fulfilment of needs* dimension as well.

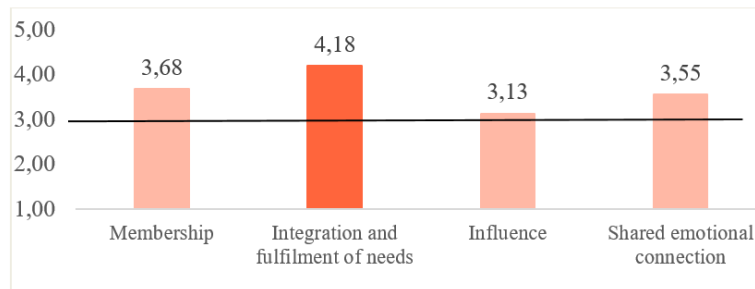
Table 1. Cronbach alpha test for SCI-2 dimensions

Dimensions of SCI-2	Number of scales	Cronbach-alpha
Membership	5 scales	0.761
Integration and fulfilment of needs	3 scales	0.622
Influence	5 scales	0.777
Shared emotional connection	4 scales	0.746

Source: own construction

Figure 2. demonstrates the results of the SCI-2 where the means were calculated from the scales of the given dimensions. In the figure, the black line demonstrates the middle point of the range (3.0 where the range was between 1-5).

Figure 2. Mean of the SCI-2 dimensions



Source: own construction

According to the results, we can conclude that cyclists have a sense of community since the means of all dimensions are above 3.0. *Integration and fulfilment of needs* was ranked the highest ($m=4.18$), which means that most cyclist agree with that cycling can fulfil important needs and if a problem arises, then he/she can discuss it with other cyclists as well. Most respondents also agreed with the scales related to *Membership* ($m=3.68$). In this case cyclist feel that cycling is an important part of their life and recognize other cyclists as well in their neighborhood. Furthermore, these respondents also agree with that there are certain words and objects that help them to be associated with cycling. *Shared emotional connection* was also important among the respondents ($m=3.55$), which assumes that cycling is important for them personally and spend time with other cyclists. *Influence* was ranked lower ($m=3.13$) compared to the other dimensions, however, it is still above 3.0. Based on our investigation it turned out, most cyclist do not care about other cyclists' opinions about themselves, however, taking part in the cyclist community is important for them.

In sum, we can conclude that the internal consistencies of the dimensions are acceptable and most of the respondents agreed with the SCI-2 dimensions. Thus, the study provides evidence that the theory of Sense of Community can be interpreted among cyclists, and the community has the characteristics of community.

5. Conclusion

The aim of the study has been to measure the sense of community among cyclists using the SCI-2 model. As can be seen from the results, a sense of community appears among the respondents we examined, and the assumptions related to the application of the model have also been met. However, the relationship between a sense of community could not be clearly identified in relation to attendance at cycling events. Overall, however, a significant proportion of the cyclists in our survey say that cycling plays an important role in their own lives and makes them feel good about cycling. Furthermore, they believe they are able to influence other communities, and most of

them feel that if they have a problem, they can discuss it with other cyclists. Based on these results, we have seen that many cyclists view the bicycle not only as a simple means of transportation but as a kind of activity that connects the individual with other cyclists. This activity is part of their everyday life that they take pride in.

This study has an important message not only for the cycling community but also for researchers and marketers. On one hand, it provides evidence that the SCI-2 model can be applied, however, it is important to note that this general model was not primarily developed to measure the sense of community experienced during cycling. Accordingly, it may be worthwhile to further develop a measurement specifically designed to examine cycling community feelings in more detail based on the model. Furthermore, the results of the research can be well-suited to lifestyle studies that are becoming increasingly important in marketing, as for some consumer groups cycling can even be a means of self-expression or a well-defined segment. It provides opportunities for brands to raise brand awareness in such communities and associate those lifestyle values with the brand perception – such as environmental issues, sports, sustainability and health.

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