
Social Media and Development in a Hybrid Intentional Community in Rural Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

I explore how social media applications are applied by members of a hybrid, intentional eco-community in rural Hong Kong. I draw on both my own participant observations over the year I spent in the community and interview data with ten of the community's members to construct an ethnographic account of social media use in the community. Social media apps are ubiquitous, yet their effects are not entirely positive. Although the technological affordances enable both the community and its members to grow, a darker side is also revealed, where increasing levels of individualism interfere with the community-level ethos and potentially threaten the community's long-term survival. The practical and theoretical contributions of the study are discussed.

1. Introduction

There is a long tradition of research into the social aspects of technology use in the non-profit sector (e.g. Tim et al., 2018; Zheng & Yu, 2016), where there is an interest to explore and interpret the social worlds inhabited by a variety of stakeholders. Examples of such social worlds can be found at the community level, and it is the intentional community that is of particular relevance to the current study. An intentional community is a grouping of individuals who deliberately come together for a common purpose. Such groups of people are sometimes referred to as neo-tribes (Hardy et al., 2018), since they are made up of people from all walks of life who have a shared passion for a specific topic, though neo-tribes are also described as being ephemeral or transient, and some disappear very quickly (Goulding & Shankar, 2011). The intentional community may be physical (the people actually meet and work together), virtual (their interactions are restricted to the online space) or hybrid (Bakó et al., 2021). Although intentional communities are established for many different purposes, I suggest that they have a common interest: to survive and thrive, and thus to transcend the ephemerality commonly associated with neo-tribes. This is not a frivolous remark because the tendency of communities to fail is substantial: Clay (2017) notes that the failure rate is over 90%.

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Communities today very often depend to a greater or lesser extent on communications technology. At one extreme, this could reflect an Artificial Intelligence-induced filter bubble or echo chamber, where the members of the community serendipitously find each other as a result of their shared attributes, keywords and interests (Zhitomirsky-Geffet, 2022). However, a more deliberate use of communications technology is also valid, i.e. the community may form first without any technology involvement, and then decide instrumentally which technology best fits their needs. Over time, this technology may contribute either to the development (and success) of the community, or to its demise.

Intentional communities are often not well resourced financially and as a result tend to apply software applications that are free to access, notably social media. Research into intentional communities is often anthropological in character, with the researcher narrating an enlightening story about how technology has helped a community to thrive in some way (e.g. Bakó et al., 2021; Khoir & Davison, 2019). Nevertheless, the reverse can also be true: a community could be harmed by the inappropriate application of technology (Glaser et al., 2018).

Although a community may be viewed externally as a monolithic and homogeneous entity, all communities are made up of, and inevitably depend on, the contributions of individual people. Encouraging these individuals to collaborate on projects that benefit the community as a whole is critical to the community's long-term success, i.e. its surviving and thriving. However, such working together is not easily achieved. For instance, meetings of community members are renowned for their inefficiency and ineffectiveness: they tend to be too long, try to accomplish too much, and often infuriate the very people who should be working together (Kashtan, 2021). Asynchronous meetings that are mediated through technology may alleviate some of these problems, yet also exacerbate others. For instance, while the use of information and communication technology (ICT), such as email, social media messengers and wikis, may simplify communication among members, it may also complicate their relationships, as I explore further in this article. Such harm may be invisible to some community members: even if they see the harm they may choose to ignore it, preferring not to change their technology use practices because of existing habits, a sense that the technology is easy to use and useful, or their appreciation of its convenience in their lives. Nevertheless, in some cases the harm may be so significant as to constitute an existential threat to the community itself. For instance, it may be that the technology enables the formation of splinter groups and sub-communities, or causes some members to be isolated from others. In an extreme case, the community could be hijacked by a dominant splinter group, with disillusioned members choosing to leave and the community as a whole fragmenting.

In this exploratory and interpretive case study, I examine communication practices in an intentional community, which I pseudonymise as Cobra Valley. Cobra Valley was founded in Hong Kong in 2013 and thus might be seen as a surviving, even thriving, community. Cobra Valley's primary purpose is to engage in organic farming activities, at the same time raising awareness in Hong Kong about the need to live in harmony with nature and to conserve land and water resources. The activities at Cobra Valley include manual labour in the fields (rented from local, indigenous landowners) where vegetables are grown, and the running of workshops related to agricultural topics. However, Cobra Valley is increasingly experiencing problems at the intersection between technology

use and community development. I problematise (Chatterjee & Davison, 2021) this situation, which involves Cobra Valley as a community, the community members, the social media technologies (primarily WhatsApp) that are commonly used by members, and the normative social environment of Hong Kong where Cobra Valley is located. I then seek to answer the following research question: how does social media-based communication affect the development of an intentional community?

Following this introduction, I review the literature on social media use and its impacts, with a particular focus on intentional communities. I then present contextual information about Cobra Valley and introduce the research methods. An ethnographic narrative describes the way social media applications were used at Cobra Valley and the impacts of their use, drawing on the interview data. I discuss the findings and limitations, and consider the nature of the contributions for research and practice. Finally, I conclude the paper with directions for future research.

2. Materials and Methods

The literature pertaining to social media is voluminous. Google Scholar suggests about 8.9 million items and many research sub-domains, viz.: influencers, marketing, relationships, platforms, brands, engagement, and communication channels, among many others. In order to keep the number of studies to be reviewed at a manageable level, I focused on the following (inclusive) search terms: “mobile social media”, “intentional communities”, and “eco-village”.

Social media is a type of communication media designed for the exchange of content via virtual networks and communities that has “fundamentally changed the way we communicate, collaborate, consume and create” (Aral et al., 2013, p. 3). For instance, it is noted that social media are relatively versatile (Schlagwein & Hu, 2017) in that people can use the same social media application for very different purposes. Nevertheless, much of the early research into social media was technologically-deterministic, examining “the inherent features of a technology independent from its use and context in which the technology is used” (Cecez-Kecmanovic et al., 2014, p. 813). These research designs were often premised on the assumption “that the design of social media inevitably leads to certain use behaviours” (Chen & Wei, 2020). However, a solitary focus on something so broad as “user behaviour” does not permit a more nuanced appreciation of the impact of social media applications and thus it is valuable to consider how people appropriate or adaptively structure social media applications (Curtis et al., 2017).

In contemporary society, social media are ubiquitous and they undoubtedly create significant value for a wide variety of individuals who are better connected as a result. Usage patterns associated with social media are sometimes referred to as networked individualism (Rainie & Wellman, 2019), a new environment that has to some extent replaced in-person social interactions. Individual people craft the design of their networked reality in terms of how they interact with others, the tools that they use, and their own idiosyncratic behaviours. Boyd’s (2010) research into networked publics is also relevant, given their focus on the “imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology and practice” (ibid., p. 38). This notion of an ‘imagined collective’ is central to the neo-tribe, where a disparate grouping of individuals appears to come together in the pursuit

of a shared endeavour, yet where there are likely to be many points of individual distinction that have the potential to subject the 'imagined collective' to considerable strain and tension. For instance, while some individuals may be comfortable to engage in rapid-fire communication through technology that is essentially 'always on', others may feel overwhelmed and take steps to reduce the volume of communications to a more manageable level. Finding a happy balance within a collective is not easy and a failure to reach compromise may either cause some individuals to exit the collective, or even cause the collective as a whole to fragment or disintegrate.

Prior research has documented how social media applications help a wide variety of employees to get their jobs done better. For instance, Davison and his colleagues (Davison & Ou, 2017; Davison et al., 2018) noted that employees in the media, communications, marketing and public relations functions of a global hotel chain found social media applications to be particularly helpful when the corporate systems that they were expected to use inadequately supported their work. Social media applications often compensate for the absence of face-to-face interaction in situations such as "quick questions and clarifications, coordination and scheduling, [and] discussions of complex work" (Avrahami & Hudson, 2006, p. 505).

Notwithstanding their convenience, researchers have identified a darker side to social media (Bawden & Robinson, 2009). For instance, not only do filter bubbles restrict the extent to which people are exposed to alternative narratives (Kitchens et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2022), but people can become addicted to the technology (Vaghefi et al., 2017) and it may also interfere with or interrupt regular work (Addas & Pinsonneault, 2015). A recurrent theme in social media research relates to the phenomenon known as technology overload (Yin et al., 2018) or technostress (Tarafdar et al., 2019). This is particularly noticeable where the use of mobile devices, such as phones, is concerned. Mobile devices tend to be permanently connected to the Internet, which means that there is the potential for a user to be overwhelmed by a continuous stream of incoming messages (Lee et al., 2014).

Messages sent through social media tend to be short. In some cultures, this terseness is acceptable because of a prevailing preference for implicit communication where meaning can be inferred from the context (Ou & Davison, 2016) and interlocutors share sufficient common knowledge such that a few words can convey precise information. However, interlocutors who do not share this common knowledge may find that short messages are obscure (Teodorescu & Saharia, 2016), may not be readily able to comprehend the intended meaning, and so may need to ask for clarification. Such clarification is easier to achieve when interlocutors are proximate: Davison et al. (2013) have documented instances of employees who sit in the same office, and even at the same table, preferring to communicate with each other through social media, only engaging in face-to-face conversations when essential. However, when individuals are separated, whether physically, culturally or linguistically, it is more difficult to have effective face-to-face conversations: virtual teams experience a range of these issues on a regular basis that challenge the team's long-term efficacy, viability and survival (Sarker & Sahay, 2004).

At this point, I turn to consider the literature on eco-communities, also referred to as eco-villages. Sham et al. (2021) citing Dawson (2015) define an ecovillage as "an intentional community, traditional or urban, which incorporates ecological, economic, social, and cultural components of sustainability

to regenerate the natural environment”. These communities may be physical or virtual and their members may engage in face-to-face or virtual communication, with social media applications particularly popular. Healy (2014) suggests that “humans are fundamentally community-based. A community is characterised by deepened relationships between people and people to place”. However, these intentional eco-communities have not been the target of widespread research: a Google Scholar search yields just 14 results. This may in part relate to the nature of intentional communities. As Bonady (2014) remarks: “Thanks to intentional community, I sailed through the next five years with very little computer use. In the shared houses and communities in which I lived, in-person interpersonal communication was a high priority”. Indeed, it is argued that Internet-based technologies may damage ecovillages (Glaser et al., 2018) if they reduce levels of interaction, communication, cooperation and socialising among members, essentially replacing physical communication and separating the members of the community.

Bakó et al. (2021), on the other hand, report on their eco-discourse analysis of the Facebook pages of “Székely Ökofalu” (Szekler Ecovillage), a Hungarian speaking intentional community rooted in Central Romania. They note that ecovillages are influenced by a phenomenon that they refer to as medialization, which they define (*ibid.*, p. 2) as “the ubiquitous presence of media within the various substructures of society”. Digital platforms enable creation and distribution of multimedia content shaping the basic attitudes of the community members and affecting community building. Their analysis of 374 Facebook postings that were created from September 2014 to January 2021 yielded discussions oriented around such topics as sustainability, restoration and innovation. Taken together, the discourse is characterised as eliciting “a worldview built on pluralism and eclectic bricolage, a syncretism of ideas” (*ibid.*, p. 3).

3. Background and Context

Cobra Valley was founded in 2013 in a remote area of rural Hong Kong. Although Hong Kong is a relatively small place with 1104 km² of land, the high population density that characterises the urban areas is juxtaposed by very low densities in rural areas. Cobra Valley is located in Nam Chung¹), a village area with five hamlets and their land, in Hong Kong’s far North East. In the early 20th century, as many as 350 people lived in the area. Today, four of these hamlets are still inhabited (with 5 to 50 inhabitants each) and one is deserted. Prior to Cobra Valley’s formation, the land consisted of two types: rice paddy fields and fish ponds, both of which had been abandoned for several decades. The former farmers/fishers (and their families) emigrated from the area (primarily to Europe, many to work in Chinese restaurants) in the 1950s and 1960s. A few of them, now in their 70s or older, have returned to retire. Although they no longer have an interest in working the land, they do not want to see it desecrated and have thus far resisted the temptation of succumbing to the entreaties of developers to convert the land into shipping container storage, truck parks, golf courses, barbecue sites or other recreational facilities. The Nam Chung area is not well served

1) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nam_Chung

by public transport: local people in the area typically walk or ride bicycles to get around. People who do not have a car must make use of an infrequent minibus service to the nearest railway station, or walk 40 minutes to a main road where there is more regular transportation.

The members of Cobra Valley all maintain connections with the urban areas: some live there or have family members living there; some work or study there; all visit the urban areas from time to time. Thus, although Cobra Valley is located in a rural area of Hong Kong, it is closely connected via its members to the normative social and technological environment that characterises Hong Kong's urban areas. Demographically, Cobra Valley's members fall into two primary groups: a younger group of farmers and environmental activists (aged 35 or below) who are digital natives and in most cases university degree holders; an older (aged 55 or above) group of people, some of whom are in full time employment, others who are retired, with very different education levels (some primary school, some university).

Cobra Valley's founder is still active in the community, living in one of the local hamlets, but has stepped down from day-to-day management activities, even though she actively participates in both farming activities and workshops. An executive committee (six people) is notionally responsible for decision making, with a strong preference for consensus. There is currently no executive decision maker or leader with both personal and positional authority to determine actions to be taken, and Cobra Valley is thus an acephalous community. Achieving consensus on which actions to take is often fraught: scheduled meetings often over run, and consensus itself is elusive with many competing individual objectives obfuscating the identification of a common direction.

The major activities undertaken in Cobra Valley are vegetable farming and educational workshops. Land that is rented from local landowners is farmed, and a temporary structure is used as an activity centre to hold workshops, meetings and other non-farming activities; a kitchen is attached to the activity centre. Two shipping containers have been converted into office and storage space. The two major locations (fields and activity centre) are approximately one kilometre apart, linked by a track between fields and fish ponds. Vegetables grown at the farm are sold to members, a local organic vegetable distributor and occasionally farmers' markets; the educational workshops held in the activity centre are offered to the general public, with half or full day-long workshops running most weekends, as well as week-long residential workshops a few times a year. Cobra Valley also works with local tour guides who conduct walking-tours of the Nam Chung area and focus on the indigenous historical, cultural, ecological and educational aspects of rural Hong Kong life.

Cobra Valley has approximately 40 paid-up members, with a dozen or so visiting the community on a regular basis but only six living in the nearby hamlets and villages. No one actually lives at Cobra Valley because residential buildings cannot legally be constructed on farmland. More members would like to live locally, but this is complicated by the limited supply of suitable properties at prices they can afford, and the reluctance of the older generation of villagers to rent (let alone sell) their ancestral homes to non-indigenous outsiders. As a result, those who cannot rent locally must live further away, with one-way commute times to other parts of Hong Kong of up to 180 minutes on public transport.

The overarching vision of Cobra Valley is the need to protect the earth and build sustainable living community networks. This is operationalised as engaging in a simple, autonomous lifestyle

that makes good use of local resources. Cobra Valley's development plan, set out by the community's founder, identifies three objectives: integrating into the global eco-village community; alleviating environmental degradation; and developing an eco-community education base for HK's local needs. The intention is that Cobra Valley should be open to people from a variety of different backgrounds to come and learn how to live and farm in a rural area.

Special activities (workshops, learning activities, volunteer sessions) tend to be held at weekends, and so on weekdays the activity centre is less used. The farmland is fenced to keep out the local wildlife, in particular wild boars that sometimes break in to dig up and eat the vegetables. Two farmers and two interns (all salaried) work 2-4 days a week at the farm: none of them live in the vicinity of Cobra Valley, all commuting from outside, and there are some days when none of them are present. Other members work on a more or less regular basis as unsalaried farmers on various activities (weeding, clearing, digging, planting, watering, mulching, harvesting) as they have the time to do so, often on a daily basis. Administration work and the organising of activities is undertaken by two salaried part-time staff, as well as unpaid volunteers.

In order to investigate the use of communication technology by the members of Cobra Valley and thus address the research question, I undertook an ethnographic study that is informed by principles of anthropology (Avison & Myers, 1995). For one year prior to undertaking this research, I lived in a hamlet within Nam Chung and regularly engaged in community activities on a voluntary basis. My identity as a university-based researcher was well known to community members, and information about the research project was shared and discussed with them. Research ethics approval for the study was obtained from my institution and the purpose of data collection was explained to community members who were interviewed for this study as part of the consent process. I selected 15 potential interviewees from the core members of the community: people who are actively involved in community activities on a daily or weekly basis; ten of these core members agreed to be interviewed. All interviews were conducted in English and were transcribed immediately afterwards.

I developed a semi-structured interview protocol (Myers & Newman, 2007) in English (see Appendix). Questions focused on three topics: communication practices among community members; technology affordances of social media as experienced by community members; the relationship between technology use and community development. However, interviewees often wandered off topic and provided interesting reflections that informed my understanding of the way technology was used that transcended the questions themselves. Interviews were undertaken with ten members, each interview lasting 20-60 minutes (see Table 1 for details of the interviewees). Five members refused to participate in an interview, but two of them responded to interview questions through WhatsApp. I present the ethnography as a narrative that is organised thematically.

Analysis of the data (which includes interview transcripts, personal observations and a planning document made available by the community's founder) involved the single author reading the entire transcribed text of the interviews multiple times to identify and distinguish the emerging first-order concepts (Van Maanen, 1979) related to the focus of the research. I mapped the concepts to quotations from the interviews and other data items, constantly comparing the quotation-concept matching to ensure consistency and to eliminate any discrepancies (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019). As a result of this data coding process, I was able to identify what I call emergent themes at a higher level

than the original concepts. These themes, around which I structure the ethnographic narrative in the next section, are: historical background; daily activities; social media-based communications and their problems; dysfunctionalities in community communications; and reactions to a report that I wrote about my initial findings for the community.

Table 1. Interviewees

Interviewee Code	Current Role in Cobra Valley	Tenure in Cobra Valley (Years)
A1	Administrator	0.5
D1	Founder	10
E1	Volunteer and Executive Committee Member	5
E2	Volunteer and Executive Committee Member	5
E3	Volunteer and Executive Committee Member	9
F1	Farmer	3
F2	Farmer	1.5
F3	Farmer	2
V1	Volunteer	4
V2	Volunteer	8

4. Communications at Cobra Valley: An Ethnography

When Cobra Valley was founded in 2013, the community was smaller than it is today, with about 20 members none of whom lived locally. As the community grew, a few were able to find accommodation in the local villages and hamlets, but the majority had to travel from further afield. At that time, most communications involved emails and phone calls. WhatsApp was adopted in 2016 primarily because it could be used on mobile devices, was informal and perceived to be friendly. The founder explained how she wanted to create a sense of inclusiveness among members, and therefore decided to create numerous WhatsApp groups, each focusing on a specific topic. Thus, there were groups for farmers to discuss crop management, for members who live in the local villages to discuss local issues, for members interested in the purchase of organic vegetables, and for the members of the executive committee. Over time, the number of groups expanded so that at the time when the research was undertaken there were 40. While some groups may have only 2-3 members, others have 20-30. There is no one group to which all 40 members belong.

Members (particularly the 15 or so who are more frequently on site) do meet and talk face-to-face on a regular basis, notably on Thursdays when there is a weekly lunch gathering at the activity centre. This event provides a good opportunity for interaction and brief discussion about community events, with more detailed discussions sometimes scheduled immediately after lunch. However, more extensive discussion with a larger group of members is also required for topics like farming and workshop arrangements, and calling for volunteers. Meanwhile, other topics such as the hiring of new staff, discussing finances, ordering food items from local eco-markets (bulk orders), and discussing

government policies that affect the community, require the participation of different groups of members.

While some of these conversations may take place at the Thursday lunch, or during the occasional half or full day meetings held for the purpose of discussing specific topics, it is more common that one person initiates a conversation with other members on a social media application. The communications are almost invariably written in Chinese and are group-based: one-to-one messages are only sent when there is a clear need for a response from a specific person. Four broad types of message can be identified: formal communications about opportunities and events, often with links to external media; personal analyses of situations of interest to members, such as government policy, farming progress; reports on events, often with photographs; light-hearted items describing personal situations or observations inside or outside the community, accompanied by emojis and stickers that were described to me as being ‘cute’ and ‘lovely’, used to convey warmth and support.

The frequency of communication varies considerably. Some days may see no communication at all, but on other days there may be hundreds of messages across the groups. To provide a simple illustration of the communication patterns, I undertook a message frequency count by the 14 members of one group that focuses on general issues during October 2021. In total, 442 messages were sent. The number per day ranged from 0 (two days) to 30 (four days), and the number per person ranged from 3 (two people) to 72 (one person). The most messages sent by one person on one day was 16, the most people who sent at least one message on one day was 11, and the highest number of days when the same person sent at least one message was 23. The shortest message only contained one word “No”, while the longest message covered several phone screens.

Several members commented that the reliance on social media was problematic, for multiple reasons. Firstly, shorter messages were often quite oblique or cryptic. This sometimes led to misunderstandings that generated tensions among members and even conflicts which required resolution through face-to-face conversations. Many people said that they would actually prefer face-to-face conversations, but lacked the time for them. This can be explained in part by the fact that the members who commute to Cobra Valley on public transport use their travelling time as the opportunity to read and send messages. When they arrive at Cobra Valley they need to get to work immediately, for instance as farmers, and there is little time for discussion. Occasionally, day-long meetings are arranged where these detailed conversations can take place.

Secondly, when WhatsApp changed its privacy terms²), several members reacted by refusing to use WhatsApp, moving all their communications to Signal. Here they created parallel groups to those in WhatsApp. This significantly increased the degree of communication fragmentation and polarisation in Cobra Valley: members who stayed with WhatsApp found themselves excluded from some conversations and forced either to install Signal and join those new groups in order not to be left out of communications, or to lose online touch with some members altogether.

Thirdly, some members (A1, D1, E1, F2, V2) like to attach emojis, stickers and videos to their messages. F2 reported that these paralinguistic features add “fun, sparkle and creativity” to otherwise boring messages. However, there are others who never use these features (E2, F1, F3, V1), preferring unemotional conversation that keeps to the point and is no longer than absolutely necessary. E2

2) <https://www.wired.com/story/whatsapp-privacy-policy-facebook-data-sharing/>

noted that “all the emojis and stickers fill up my small phone screen and annoy me”.

Fourthly, the nature of social media applications is that messages are presented in a continuous and chronological sequence, with no opportunity for categorisation. If multiple topics are being discussed simultaneously, all the messages are interwoven and it is hard to trace the course of a conversation. Taken together with the large number of daily messages, searching for a particular message is difficult (D1, V2), especially with Signal which does not support Chinese language searching.

Fifthly, while the majority of text messages sent are short, some accompanied by photos (up to 25 photos accompanied the messages sent in October 2021), a few messages are very long: the longest may run to several hundred words. These lengthy epistolary communications are also annoying for people who prefer short messages, and some told me that they “simply don’t read them at all”. Thus, while very short messages can be too cryptic to understand, long messages may not be read at all. E2 told me “I feel overwhelmed by information: there is too much to take in, let alone reply to”.

This leads to the sixth problem: non-responsiveness. Most messages are sent in groups not to individuals but these messages are often ignored, even if a response is expected. D1 commented “WhatsApp allows people to escape responsibility as they can wait for others to respond. People have developed the habit of not replying”. This leads to the concern that people are not really talking with each other at all but just talking at each other. Several members commented on this lack of responsiveness, suggesting that communication is not actually working at all. As F1 explained, “sometimes I send a message to everyone in the group, but there is no reply, so I send it again. If there is still no reply I have to write to each person from whom I expect a reply individually”. Meanwhile, E3 noted that if she is not careful to check her phone frequently, “the number of unread messages can quickly spiral out of control; it is then both time consuming and frustrating to read and reply to each of the many messages, yet such responses are expected given her role as an executive committee member”.

Beyond WhatsApp and Signal, some members prefer to communicate with email, yet many others never read or respond to email messages at all. There is no single platform that all members like to use. Coupled with the absence of a single decision maker who might mandate the use of such a single communication platform, communication often appears to be fragmented, decision making tortuous and no one person can be up to date with everything that is going on. D1 noted “There is no clear mechanism for community discussion”. This creates the impression that Cobra Valley’s communications are somewhat dysfunctional. Although social media applications helped many people to get engaged in conversations, and indeed to create ‘focused’ groups of people to discuss specific topics, they unintentionally promoted divisiveness: the insistence of some members to use either Signal or WhatsApp, but not both, for instance, did not correspond with a community ethos.

As a participant observer at Cobra Valley, I wrote up a report (1400 words) in which I analysed my experiences in the community, focusing on the way members communicate, and shared it (on WhatsApp) with 15 core members in October 2021. Interestingly, not a single person reacted to my analysis on WhatsApp though a few did talk to me individually and in person. They commented that the report was too long but agreed with some of the findings, notably about the dysfunctionality

of communications. They pointed out that the number of subgroups had been reduced. When I spoke with a long serving member (V2) of Cobra Valley, I asked if social media-based communications had inadvertently empowered members to the extent that Cobra Valley was less of a community than she would like it to be, that Cobra Valley was negatively affected by the individualism often visible in the communications. She was hesitant to reply but agreed that “young people in Hong Kong are increasingly individualistic and that while social media-based communication is undeniably convenient, she too would prefer more intimate face-to-face conversations with people”. Another long-time member (E3) suggested that the absence of face-to-face communications made her worry that “people would lose the ability to work together in future”. Already, she found that “some people would only communicate on social media and refused to use other channels”. Even when people do meet in person, they spend much of their time on their phones, which she described as rude (cf Turkle, 2011).

In my report to the community, I suggested that a single communication platform incorporating all the popular features of social media, coupled with a more formal message structure, better search facilities, group document editing, file management, etc. would help the community both to consolidate communications and to achieve a greater sense of inclusiveness. However, although some could see the merits of such an idea in terms of communication effectiveness and efficiency, no consensus could be achieved: the majority were happy with the applications that they already used and they saw no real value in shifting to a new and unfamiliar platform. Thus, the engrained habits and convenience associated with social media use appeared to trump both the enhanced communication performance that might be achieved with a technology that is a better fit for the tasks at hand, and the stronger community that might result from more integrated communication practices.

5. Discussion

The technology preferences, communication patterns and their consequences observed at Cobra Valley are broadly consistent with prior theoretical perspectives related to technology choice, such as Task Technology Fit (TTF) (Goodhue & Thompson, 1995), and communication performance, such as Media Synchronicity Theory (MST) (Dennis et al., 2008) albeit moderated by a strong role for habit. It is important to note that all technology choice selections are individual and voluntary: each member is free to use or not use any specific technology. Nevertheless, the actual technology choices enacted do not always seem to fit the focal purposes very well; instead, they seem to be determined more by habit (Limayem et al., 2007) and hedonic inclination (Lin & Bhattacharjee, 2010) than functionality. Thus, TTF theory (Goodhue & Thompson, 1995) suggests that performance effects for individuals will be stronger when there is a good fit between the task and the technology used. At Cobra Valley, performance is occasionally good but effectiveness and efficiency could be improved; nevertheless, the habit to use, and the hedonic experience associated with the use of, social media applications (primarily WhatsApp) is so strong as to rule out other technologies that might have a better fit with the task and that might in turn result in improved performance. The exception to this was the switch from WhatsApp to Signal, but this was precipitated by privacy

concerns, not functional improvements. Likewise, while Cobra Valley's members regularly engage in synchronous communication, the current technology preferences for social media technologies that can be used on a mobile phone mean that this communication can be quite chaotic and individuals sometimes have problems coordinating their behaviour: discussions about different topics are interwoven, with both important and trivial messages liberally interspersed in the conversation.

Thus, while the purpose of communication at Cobra Valley is to co-construct shared understandings (not to engage in deception) (Dennis et al., 2008), to get work done, and indeed to develop intersubjective meaning and relationships among members (Miranda & Saunders, 2003), not all voices are always heard. Better arguments may hold sway on some occasions (Habermas & Nielsen, 1990), but the exclusion of some voices means that some arguments are not heard at all. For instance, one administrative staff member posted a message that was relevant for many people on only one Signal Group (and not on any WhatsApp groups at all), effectively excluding many people from the conversation. On another occasion, a farmer wanted immediate assistance harvesting ginger and sent the request to several Signal groups, but no WhatsApp groups, effectively excluding both those who do not have the habit of checking their phones continually and those who do not use Signal yet might otherwise have been willing to help. This use of one social media application but not the other is tantamount to a filter bubble effect (Kitchens et al., 2020): the members of different sub-tribes (Hardy et al., 2018) self-select which social media application to use (and which groups to belong to), thus determining what information they receive. Even if members see messages, personal preferences mean that they may not read them in detail: several members indicated that they prefer to read shorter messages, often skipping longer messages altogether. As noted above, the fragmentation of the conversation across multiple technology channels (WhatsApp, Signal, Email) further complicates the picture, as does the choice of language. Finally, while the vast majority of Cobra Valley's members are native Cantonese (Chinese) speakers, some actually prefer to write messages in English, which are then inaccessible to those who are monolingual, unless they copy/paste to a translation application. One of the WhatsApp-mediated interviewees in this study translated my questions from English to Chinese (using Google Translate) and then wrote all her responses to my questions in Chinese, which I had to translate back to English.

These fragmentary effects have implications for the very nature of what it means to belong to an intentional community, where a more holistic and inclusive set of communication norms might be expected. Not only are not all voices heard by all members, but a few voices tend to dominate the discourse and some voices are essentially silent, at least where social media is concerned, lurking in the background and seldom if ever reacting to the ongoing streams of communication. Fragmentation of this kind is seldom addressed in the theories that are developed to explain technology appropriation, and thus this constitutes a fertile ground for future work.

Technology users are naturally free to use whatever technology and for whatever purpose they like, irrespective of whether this use is consistent with the intentions of the designers of the technology (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994). Nevertheless, the fit between the capabilities of the technology and the task requirements will influence user behaviour: not all technologies offer the same functionality and thus while synchronous communication is possible with email, social media applications and the telephone are probably more appropriate technologies (Dennis et al., 2001). Nevertheless, even

when a technology is used in a way that might seem counterintuitive, e.g. when the fit with task is weak or the resulting performance is poor, individual users can adapt to the technology and over time will find that the cognitive effort required to work effectively will diminish (DeLuca et al., 2006). This implies that the resistance of users to switch to a different, perhaps better-fitting technology, may be considerable as the users can anticipate the cognitive effort that will be required as a corollary of that switch. This resistance was apparent in the lack of interest members exhibited in my suggestion that they unify communications on a single platform, notwithstanding the advantages that this might have brought. Therefore, even when problems related to the development of suitable technologies for human-human communication can be identified, the solutions to those problems may be hard to realise. In large measure, I suggest that the tendency of humans (at least those who are not bound by corporate mandate) to select technologies purely for individualistic (and perhaps selfish) reasons is so strong as to render futile the idea that a single unified platform could be used by all. However, this argument is also open to future research exploration.

In the ten years since Cobra Valley was founded, the communication technologies in use have shifted from email and telephone in the first few years, to WhatsApp in 2016, and to a mix of WhatsApp, Signal and email in 2022. Face-to-face communications have always existed, but they arguably play a less significant role today for daily interactions. Even when people are physically proximate, they often prefer to communicate via social media applications (cf. Davison et al., 2013). The changing technology preferences have also exerted an influence on the way Cobra Valley has developed. The sense of community that was reportedly strong in the early years has dissipated to some extent, even as the community itself has grown larger (cf. Ng et al., 2019). The number of active members has stayed fairly constant, but there are fewer occasions when face-to-face communication occurs. The dominance of social media communications has led to individualism being more apparent than collectivism: members express ideas about what they think and want to do as individuals, often neglecting what would be good for Cobra Valley as a community. Some members have rejected the eco-community label altogether, seeing Cobra Valley as a convenient location for them to operate a private business and earn an income, benefitting from the facilities (land, networks, equipment, people) that Cobra Valley ‘provides’ but not wanting to contribute much in return. Is this an unintended dark side of social media, or is it simply how communities evolve when individualistic preferences are manifested? The founder of Cobra Valley envisioned a community where people would want to come together to practice eco-friendly activities. When it proved impossible for more people to live in the community, instead commuting from outside, online communications became popular. Social media groups emerged, focusing attention on specific topics. In this way, the original objectives of Cobra Valley have been achieved to some extent, but the collective thinking that characterised the early years seems to have been supplanted by a more selfish individualism, where the interests of the Cobra Valley community itself are no longer of central importance.

The literature on online communities is replete with studies about success and failure factors for such communities, as well as life cycle development models (see Iberri & Leroy, 2009, for a review). There are similar reviews for physical intentional communities (e.g. Sanguinetti, 2012), yet Cobra Valley does not exactly fit either of these community types, being a hybrid of each, with physical presence but no co-housing as no one lives communally onsite, bolstered by substantial

online communicative practice, yet with no standardised set of communication technologies or practices. As Cobra Valley navigates its unique path, it may encounter the successes and failures that characterise both online and intentional communities. For instance, the preference at Cobra Valley for consensual decision making is consistent with the literature on intentional communities and exhibits the same features: enhanced interpersonal skills but an inefficient process (Kirby, 2003). Inefficiency itself may not be a problem for everyone: some members suggested that they enjoy the extended conversations, yet others felt that time should be used more carefully, resenting having to participate in meetings that lasted too long and/or accomplished too little.

The idiosyncratic nature of Cobra Valley opens up a new theoretical space, given its reliance on social media for communication and its rather loose structure. Theories like MST are premised on economic rationality: what is the most effective and efficient way of getting things done. At Cobra Valley, technology choices tend to be economically irrational (they are neither particularly effective nor efficient), yet they are both ecologically rational (they make sense in and are dependent on the circumstances that pertain in the local context) and socially rational (Goldstein & Gigenrenzer, 2002) in that they broadly support the core values of the community: consensus in decision making and freedom to communicate how and with whom you like. The prior literature on social media has predominantly emphasised economic rationality, and indeed the vast majority of IS research focuses on the economic interests of organisations (Clarke & Davison, 2020). But the theoretical possibilities surrounding the different rationalities are considerable: the habitual preference of many of Cobra Valley's members for casual and hedonic technology-based experiences drives communication behaviour to a far greater extent than do effectiveness and efficiency considerations, or for that matter performance, at least as measured in economic terms. Some members argued that inefficient communication is actually better because the increased amount of time involved means more in-depth and extended communications, which then strengthen the community as a whole. This is thus an instance of adaptive structuration (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994) akin to bricolage (Levi-Strauss, 1966), with resources cobbled together on the fly so as to create solutions that cost little but time. I suggest that researchers should closely examine the opportunity to develop new theoretical perspectives surrounding different rationalities pertaining to online and hybrid communities. Since a key objective of any community is to survive and even thrive, it is reasonable to imagine that economic rationality may not be the most effective. Instead, adhering to ecological and social rationalities may better predict a community's longevity.

Will Cobra Valley prove resilient as it enters its second decade? Although its ineffective and inefficient communication may frustrate some members, the net effect may be positive if it draws members together in extended discussions that strengthen the community's core values and ethos. Technologically, it appears stable enough and the core members will no doubt adapt and adopt new technologies as they become available. Indeed, the connections that Cobra Valley maintains with the outside world mean that they will be kept up to date with technological innovations that they can apply. Critically, the issues identified in this study have not (yet) precipitated an irreversible exodus of members and the core activities in which Cobra Valley engages persist.

Like any research project, this one suffers from limitations of scope and scale: an investigation into communication practices in a single hybrid community cannot hope to generate findings that

will generalise broadly in other communities, cultures and countries. Nevertheless, a contribution is made to the social media and hybrid community literature: too many very similar social media applications fragment communications quite effectively, excluding voices from conversations; the absence of a common technology policy and the adoption of a laissez-faire style of acephalous leadership licence an anything-goes form of behaviour that may not be in the community's best interests if individualism rises and the interests of the community fade. It is recommended that community leadership teams consider carefully the balance between technological freedom and community resilience: too little technological integration and too much (even inadvertent) exclusion of members may harm the community's resilience in the longer term. Thus, a balance of the different rationalities (economic, ecological and social) may be advisable. While communication is essential to community survival, online interactions are more effective if interlocutors not only write, but also read and reply to messages. If a community is to thrive, a strong sense of belonging to and working for the community are essential: technology can play a role in contributing to these outcomes, but technology alone will not guarantee them.

6. Conclusion

In this study, I have explored how members of Cobra Valley, a hybrid eco-community, communicate with one another, and the implications of this communication for community development. Two different social media applications constitute the dominant communication channel, but their dominance has created new problems for the community that are currently not recognised by most members. Neo sub-tribes (Hardy et al., 2018) have emerged that self-segregate themselves with filter bubbles (Kitchens et al., 2020), excluding non-members with the result that communication is significantly fragmented, with consensus on topics of community-wide relevance singularly difficult to achieve. In addition, neither effectiveness nor efficiency are pressing concerns for most members of Cobra Valley, and so the suggestion to improve performance by consolidating communications on a single platform has not met with members' approval. Instead, many of the core members favour a looser community (and technology) structure that would afford them a measure of independence, yet with minimal responsibility to work for the benefit of Cobra Valley itself.

Social media technology may have paradoxically accelerated both the growth and the fragmentation of Cobra Valley. In an initiation and growth state, social media can encourage a state of inclusion, encouraging more people to get involved and giving them a sense of belonging. Social media groups can support this growth because they enable a focus on specific activities. However, there is a dark side to social media groups: they can facilitate the development of cliques or factions in echo chambers (Kitchens et al., 2020), where the individual interests of members are championed at the expense of the community as a whole. Social media also enables interaction without presence, yet presence is an essential part of a community that seeks to practice eco-friendly living habits: as a community, Cobra Valley values both online and offline interactions, yet some of its 40 members almost never appear in person, instead relying on social media to participate occasionally and remotely. Meanwhile, when individualistic groups emerge, they may start to promote values at variance with

those that reflect the interests of the community, initiating a fragmentation process. Once a critical mass of interest sentiments is expressed that do not favour the community as a whole, the fragmentation process may be irreversible unless there is a collective turn away from the filters that enable that individualism and a return to the community. These theoretical ideas merit assessment in future research investigations into the ways in which IT and people interact in communities.

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[Appendix] Interview Protocol

How long have you worked in or been associated with the community? In what role(s)?

Which IT applications do you personally like to use for a) your personal or work life outside the community? b) your life inside the community? How do you see IT applications being used by other members? What is the intensity of use? Are there any notable patterns of use? What are the features (affordances) of these IT applications that you like and dislike? How and Why? Examples. Are there any features (affordances) that the IT applications do not have that you wish they did have? How and Why? Examples.

What is the relationship between use of the IT applications by community members and the development of a sense of belonging to the community? Can you give examples? Does the technology foster or impede the community's growth, stability, permanence, development? How? Why? Do you have concerns relating to the use of social media for community communication? Are there any unexpected benefits or disbenefits associated with these IT applications in the context of the community?

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