Feasibility of the Continuation of Online Socials at the UBC Kung Fu Association

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**Introduction**

Background

Student organizations at UBC such as the UBC Kung Fu Association (KFA) commonly use socials to build engagement with the organization and foster a sense of community between members. Socials are events where members can spend time together without having to perform any club responsibilities. This time together helps increase club engagement by providing members with more opportunity to participate and to form friendships with other members. The COVID-19 pandemic forced student organizations to use online platforms to conduct all meetings and events, including socials. During the pandemic the KFA conducted socials using the online messaging and voice chat platform Discord. The socials generally consist of games, martial arts movies, or just chatting.

Purpose

The purpose of this inquiry is to determine the usefulness of continuing to hold online socials after British Columbia lifts all COVID-19 restrictions. Although club members have expressed desire to return to in-person programming, online socials have demonstrated some benefits. Sometimes club members do not have time to come to an in-person event, so they say the online socials are a good substitute. Some club members do not live in Vancouver, so the online events make for a great way to connect to other members. The report will investigate the pros and cons of continuing online socials in addition to regular in-person programming. In the conclusion, it will provide recommendations to club leadership on whether to continue to have online socials and how to go about it.

Audience

This report will be addressed to the KFA executive team, who has the authority to decide how future socials should be executed. I am not a member of the executive team.

Definition of Engagement

‘Engagement’ in this report refers to a student’s involvement with the organization. Engagement involves members’ participation in club activities and the sense of community between members. For example, a member who participates in every club event and feels that they are part of the club community could be considered engaged. By contrast, one who is officially part of the club, but does not attend many events and is not part of the community would not be considered engaged.

Methods

This investigation will use surveys of club members and interviews with club executives. The surveys consist of 12 questions related to a few different areas: opinions on previous online socials, pros and cons of online socials, and interest in online socials after the pandemic has ended. The data will be used to make conclusions about the levels of engagement in previous socials, and whether the KFA might be able to continue this engagement later.

The interviews with club executives will cover similar areas, but will also include questions about their opinions about the manageability of online socials. The questions are intended to assess whether online socials can be done along with all other activities. The interviews will also attempt to get a sense of what impact the socials had on engagement and what they think needs to be done to increase engagement going forward.

I decided that these methods of gathering data were appropriate since engagement is largely based on the opinions of club members. By using surveys, I can get a quantifiable set of data on members’ feelings towards online socials. Interviews will also allow me to get executives’ perspectives on whether this idea might work to build engagement.

These methods have limitations. It is difficult to objectively measure a group of people’s opinions, since opinions can change and are even influenced by the way a question is asked. After results came in, I noticed that one question in the survey is clearly biased to a certain answer, so I have decided not to use the results of that question in this report. Executive interviews are also limited in their perspective. Although they are useful for understanding the organizational side of events, they only provide insight on the \perspectives of one small group of people.

Scope

To assess the feasibility of continuing online socials, I will investigate the following questions:

1. What, if anything, have been the advantages of holding online socials?
2. What, if anything, have been the disadvantages of holding online socials?
3. Do club members feel like online socials have been an opportunity to form connections with other members?
4. Is there enough interest among the members in continuing to have online socials?
5. What are the executives’ perspectives on how beneficial or detrimental online socials have been throughout the pandemic?
6. Do executives feel that it is manageable to continue to hold online socials along with the normal in-person ones?

This range of questions should be sufficient to determine the advantages and disadvantages of online socials, as well as their feasibility going forward.

**Data Analysis**

Advantages of Online Socials

The survey results suggest that an overwhelming majority of club members felt that online socials during the pandemic were enjoyable. All survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that online socials during the pandemic were enjoyable. Out of the respondents who attended at least one event during the pandemic, 3 strongly agreed and the other 4 agreed. Respondents also unanimously agreed (but did not strongly agree) that online socials were engaging during the pandemic. All except one member agreed or strongly agreed that online socials are convenient.

Figure 1: Member responses to “Online socials were enjoyable during the pandemic”

Figure 2: Member responses to “Online socials were convenient during the pandemic”

The results are slightly more mixed when members were asked whether they felt the online socials were a good bonding experience (Figure 3). Two responded neither agreed nor disagreed that online socials were a bonding experience, two strongly agreed, and the rest agreed.

When asked to write which part of online socials they enjoyed the most, nearly all respondents wrote that they liked spending time together or playing games. Some respondents wrote that it was a good opportunity to catch up with people to whom they had not spoken in a long time. Finally, one respondent felt that online socials were convenient because it was easy to come and go whenever they needed to.

These results suggest that online socials might provide additional opportunities to create engagement. All respondents agreed that online socials were enjoyable and engaging. Most agree that the socials were a good bonding experience. Convenience is also a major advantage of online socials.

Disadvantages of Online Socials

While the responses generally indicated that members found the socials satisfying, there were parts they were not satisfied with. When asked which parts they disliked, members responded that the technology required to make the socials work sometimes fails. Sometimes there are disconnections that make the experience less enjoyable. One member responded that it is harder to include new members online when older members already have a sense of community. Finally, another member disliked that not as many people showed up to online socials as in-person socials.

The results suggest that the major problem with online socials is inclusivity. Members who do not have a good internet connection or decent hardware may feel excluded by the events. New members may also feel excluded by the existing sense of community among older members. The results suggest that online socials may not be as useful as a bonding event for new members. Executives may also need to take technological limitations into account when planning an online event.

Bonding Experience Through Online Socials

As discussed earlier, there were mixed opinions on whether online socials were a bonding experience, with most responses leaning to agree. Out of the 7 people who had attended at least one online social, 5 answered that they believed online socials gave them an opportunity to connect with other members during the pandemic. Three reported that they enjoyed the opportunity to have casual conversations with other members during the pandemic. Members also showed neutrality or agreement when asked whether online socials in addition to regular in-person programming would increase club engagement.

Figure 3: Member responses to “Online socials were a bonding experience with other club members during the pandemic”

In executive interviews, one executive reported that online socials were a good way to maintain engagement in a time when there were almost no opportunities for meetings. On the other hand, executives also noticed that the socials were not inviting to new members.

Online socials may be a good bonding experience between current members of the club. Most members and executives appear to feel that online socials are a good bonding opportunity. They reported that they felt it was a good place for members to talk and catch up. However, they will likely be limited as a bonding experience because new members will not yet feel comfortable enough to fully engage with the club.

Interest in Continuing Online Socials

According to the survey results, 7 of the 12 respondents say they would be likely to attend an online event in the future. One person said they were very likely and two said they were neither likely nor unlikely to attend. The distribution of the results suggests that there is some interest among members in continuing online socials, but all members are not necessarily enthusiastic about them. We might also interpret this to mean that members are interested in coming, but may have concerns about their ability to attend.

Figure 4: If online socials were to continue after the pandemic, how likely would you be to attend at least one?

When members were asked what they believed makes an online event good, some responded that high attendance made an event more enjoyable. This suggests that if online socials were to continue, executives may need to take steps to ensure higher attendance to create more interest. Members also wrote that higher engagement made online events better. In this context, we should assume that “engagement” means the sense of community described in the introduction. In an online social, this sense might take the form of interesting conversations between members.

Executives felt similarly about the idea of continuing online socials. All executives interviewed shared the opinion that most members would probably want to prioritize the return to in-person programming. On the other hand, one executive noted that sometimes members have decided to independently play online games or watch movies online together. This executive suggested that doing these types of online activities as official club events may increase interest and encourage bonding among members.

This investigation suggests that members are interested in continuing online socials, but generally are more interested in returning to in-person activities. The fact that most respondents selected “Likely” rather than “Very likely” may indicate either a lack of enthusiasm for the idea, or another issue such as timing or convenience. If the socials were to continue, it would be a good idea for them to be marketed to members plenty of time in advance to ensure high attendance. Many members indicated that they like the idea of having time to chat and catch up with other members. For this reason, it may be a good idea to specify a time during the socials for members to catch up and talk. However, it appears that members are more interested in returning to in-person activities. For this reason, it may be a good idea to prioritize in-person socials while using online socials as an extra bonding time.

Executive Perspectives

Executives have reported that the ability to conduct socials online has been a major help during the pandemic. Executives feel that it was vital for the club’s sense of community that members had at least some form of communication and interaction while in-person meetings were still prohibited. Executives also like the fact that members appeared to be having a good time during online activities. They felt that these activities helped as a substitute for normal in-person bonding activities. Furthermore, they feel the at the convenience of online socials is a major advantage. The ability to join meetings with just a click makes the socials much more accessible for people who live off campus and older members who already graduated and live outside of BC. The convenience also led to more inclusive events. One executive liked that co-op students can also attend online socials, which has generally not been possible previously. Over time, executives felt the online socials had a very good turnout, with as many people attending online events as the pre-pandemic in-person events.

All executives interviewed tended to share the same idea of whether online socials were challenging to run. They all felt that it was difficult to entice people to come at first. They also all agreed that there were issues with technology that prevented the events from running as smoothly as they would have preferred. Online socials are also challenging because there are few activities a group can do in an online format. On the other hand, it became much easier over time. Executives and members gradually figured out how to better use technology to run online events and there were fewer hinderances later. One executive said that although there were more people participating, the quality of engagement decreased in an online format. By this, they meant that it is harder for members to connect in an online space than an in-person meeting. Despite the good turnout, they felt that it was not as much of an opportunity for bonding as an in-person meeting. They felt that it would not be possible to help new members bond with older members since older members already have some sense of community.

The executives felt that holding online socials in the future would be manageable. The club already has a Discord server, and members have already learned how to use it. The executives feel that since this groundwork has already been laid, doing it again would not be difficult. They have also had practice running these events, so there should not be any technical challenges. One executive felt that it may be a challenge to schedule them in addition to regular club programming. This executive felt that it would be a challenge to fit online socials into the busy club schedule. However, another executive suggested that online socials could continue in a more informal way.

Executives felt less positive about whether online socials would continue to be useful later on. They felt that if they were to be continued, they should be considered low priority because in-person programming is more important. Taking the lower quality of engagement into account, holding in-person events would be a better way to let new members get to know each other and build connections. However, online socials may be useful to continue to build community in the club.

**Conclusion**

Summary and Interpretation of Findings

 This investigation found that members and executives both saw more advantages than disadvantages to online socials. It found that people feel that online socials are a good bonding experience, albeit only for existing members. It also found that although there is lower engagement in online socials that in-person ones, almost all stakeholders felt that there is at least some engagement in online socials. Finally, online socials are thought to be more convenient than in-person socials, which makes them more accessible and inclusive to those who cannot come in person. This might include co-op students and graduated students who no longer live near UBC.

 The major disadvantages with online socials are technology and the lack of community building with new members. The investigation found that technical issues presented a problem for many people who had difficulties using the software or having connection problems. Both members and executives reported a decreased level of participation from newer members. Newer members were reported to have a harder time integrating into this format.

 The investigation found that club members felt that online socials have been a bonding experience, but is limited only to old members. It found that having a time set aside to meet and catch up helped members bond in a time when they could not see each other in person. The higher turnout also helped the bonding experience. On the other hand, the lack of face-to-face contact limited the quality of engagement. Although more people participated, there was less of a sense of community than there would be in person.

 There appears to be interest among members in continuing online socials. Most members who responded to the survey said they would be likely to attend an online event if it was held in the future. Executives also expressed interest in continuing.

 In interviews, executives reported that online socials would be manageable after the pandemic. They said that although they found them difficult to run at first, they got practice using the technology. They believed that if online socials were to continue, the groundwork has already been laid for them.

 Executives reported mixed feelings about the usefulness of continuing online socials. These events should be considered lower priority. Since online socials provide a lower quality of engagement, they should be thought of as an extra informal event to hold in addition to normal programming.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the investigations, I recommend the following to the KFA executive team:

1. Prioritization of in-person gatherings rather than online ones to include newer members and promote face-to-face engagement
2. Continuation of the use of online socials on an informal basis to augment in-person events
3. Continuation of the use of online games and films as the main activity in online events
4. Marketing events far in advance to ensure high turnout
5. Continuation of the use of Discord as the platform for online socials
6. Inclusion of a catch-up time in online socials to allow members to chat and catch up