Assessing Barcamps: Incentives for Participation in Ad-Hoc Conferences and the Role of Social Media

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ABSTRACT
Barcamps are conferences without predefined content, often referred to as ad-hoc conferences or unconferences. Therefore, the outcomes of a barcamp are largely unknown before the event. This raises the question of participants’ motivations to attend and contribute. To answer this question, we conducted an exploratory empirical study at the Barcamp Graz 2012. We applied a mixed-method approach: first we used a sociodemographic questionnaire (n=99) which allowed us to characterize the ‘typical barcamper’. Second, we conducted qualitative interviews (n=10) to get a deeper understanding of the participants’ motivations to attend, expectations and the use of social media in that context. We identified three concepts, which could be deducted from the interviews: people, format and topics. We found that the motivation to attend and even a common identity is quite strongly based on these three factors. Furthermore, the results indicate that participants share a set of activities and methods by following the barcamp’s inherent rules and make extensive use of social media.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
I.2.6 [Learning]: Knowledge acquisition; H.4.3 [Information Systems Applications]: Miscellaneous

General Terms
Human Factors, Theory

Keywords
Barcamp, Social Media, Motivation, Self Organization, Knowledge Exchange, Communities of Practice

1. INTRODUCTION
Barcamps are conferences without predefined content, often referred to as ad-hoc conferences or unconferences. They aim at an open and democratic way of communication, and unconstrained exchange of knowledge and information. Unlike traditional conferences, there is no strict distinction between the audience and the presenters, as everyone is encouraged to participate and contribute.

The first barcamp was organized in 2005 as an alternative to the invitation-only Foo Camp (Friends Of O’Reilly). The obvious name chosen for similar events open to the public was Bar Camps, since both foo and bar are popular placeholders for variables in computer science, much like the John Doe persona. The name ‘barcamp’ is therefore a playful allusion to its origin in the technically-minded Web 2.0 community.

Barcamps are typically held over a weekend, i.e. they last 2-3 days. Participants do not pay a conference fee, as expenses are mostly covered by sponsors, and the event is (self-)organized by convinced barcampers, committees or non-profit organizations. The program emerges out of a get-together in the beginning of each day: participants introduce themselves, typically using three hashtags, briefly declaring their interests and expectations, and proposing topics that they want to talk or hear about. This allows for identifying other participants with related interests and for merging overlapping session proposals.

Still, more session proposals than session slots may arise. Those of most interest to the audience are assigned to a slot in the session raster by voting. After session planning, the participants spread into sessions. If there are multiple parallel tracks, they may switch whenever they want. The complete group only convenes for refreshments, concluding sessions, and feedback to the organizers at the end of the barcamp. Extended breaks between session slots guarantee opportunities for follow-up conversations and networking.
Barcamps are mostly self-organized and characterized by openness. There is only a widely accepted set of rules1 see Table 1. However, there are no restrictions regarding the adaption and evolution of the barcamp idea. One such development is the emergence of barcamps with a special focus. An example for this is the IndiaCamp2 which aims at informal exchange of experiences and knowledge about India, connecting like-minded European and Indian citizens in a familiar context and inspiring new collaborative projects. Barcamps may also consist of multiple sub-camps with specific topics. Other forms offer workspaces for more practical and technical presentations. Barcamps can be considered a success story. Since its beginning, the idea has spread worldwide. The barcamp.org website lists events on all continents. In Austria, there were 27 events in 2012 alone3, and the number has been increasing in the last few years. Aspects of the history of the barcamp movement have been documented by Bernhardt and Kirchner [1].

For people not familiar with the concept, the appeal of barcamps may not be clear. Little information is available prior to the event besides a list of participants and a few general themes. Due to their informal nature, they are usually attended within leisure time. But why would anyone sacrifice his or her spare time to attend an event for which the outcomes are completely unknown? Even barcamp veterans sometimes struggle to come up with a convincing answer to this question.

This paper is addressing exactly these motivational incentives. Therefore we conducted an empirical study during and after a large barcamp in 2012, present its results and discuss them. Alongside this investigation we examine the characteristics of the participants of Barcamp Graz 2012. As a second focus, we aim to shed more light on the role social media play in this context, and how exactly they are used. In the end we give an outlook and compare barcamps based on the achieved insights to other similar theoretical frameworks such as Communities of Practice (CoP) [10]. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first exploratory study that empirically analyzes motivations of barcamp attendees.

Through our study we were able to infer the following three motivational aspects or concepts, respectively, with respect to motivation for attending barcamps:

- People: Meeting and networking with interesting and diverse people of the barcamp community is crucial
- Format: Little restricted structure of the barcamp drives the motivation to attend
- Topic: The common theme of the (sub-)camp implies shared interest between participants and determines the emerging and to be discussed themes

The rest of this paper is structured as follows: in Section 2, related literature on the barcamp concept is discussed. Section 3 presents the object of our study, Barcamp Graz, and our methodology regarding the development and realization of questionnaires and interviews. Results are reported in Section 4. Section 5 discusses the three inductively inferred concepts in detail. Finally, we present a future research roadmap with respect to similar theories, constructs and movements.

### 2. RELATED WORK

Although the occurrence of barcamps and other forms of unconferences has increased noticeably in the past years in many countries, few scholars have investigated these new event formats. This lack of research interest is quite surprising given the increasing number of academic conferences that add barcamp-style sessions to their program (cp. WWW 2012, WebSci 2013). At the same time, the corpus of practically-oriented, non-academic texts has grown considerably. Most publications in this tone are freely available on the Web and aim at promoting the idea of barcamps by providing case studies and learnings from completed events. Quite a few texts contain manuals and step-by-step-tutorials for future barcamps — cp. Ernesto and Leal [5], Lapointe [9], Louie et al. [12], and Bernhardt and Kirchner [1].

Two books are outstanding among the practically-oriented literature dedicated to barcamps: Steve Lawson’s Library Camps and Unconferences [11] and Michelle Boule’s Mob Rule Learning: Camps, Unconferences, and Trashing the Talking Head [2]. Both authors have a background in library science and found expertise on the organization of un-alone libraries. The books lack critical distance to unconferences, but fulfill their primary subjective well, i.e., to introduce readers to the concept of unconferences and to assist them with organizing such events.

### Table 1: Rules of Barcamp.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rule</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st Rule</td>
<td>You do talk about BarCamp.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Rule</td>
<td>You do blog about BarCamp.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd Rule</td>
<td>If you want to present, you must write your topic and name in a presentation slot.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th Rule</td>
<td>Only three word intros.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th Rule</td>
<td>As many presentations at a time as facilities allow for.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th Rule</td>
<td>No pre-scheduled presentations, no tourists.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th Rule</td>
<td>Presentations will go on as long as they have to or until they run into another presentation slot.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th Rule</td>
<td>If this is your first time at BarCamp, you HAVE to present. (Ok, you don’t really HAVE to, but try to find someone to present with, or at least ask questions and be an interactive participant.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2[http://www.barcamp.at/IndiaCamp_2012](http://www.barcamp.at/IndiaCamp_2012)
3Most barcamps are registered on: [http://barcamp.at](http://barcamp.at)
Motivations and expectations of participants have also been investigated in similar contexts. There are several movements which also make use of digital communication technologies and where participants contribute in their free time without monetary compensation. Prominent examples are Open Source (e.g. Linux), Open Content (e.g. Wikipedia), and social movements (e.g. Occupy Movement). Prior research has studied the role of motivations in these movements. For open source, Ye and Kishida [18] theorize that ‘learning is one of the motivational forces.’ Lakhani and Wolf [8] conclude that ‘enjoyment-based intrinsic motivation, namely how creative a person feels when working on the project, is the strongest and most pervasive driver.’ Additional motivational factors are intellectual stimulation and improving skills. What distinguishes barcamps from these movements is that the participants do not have a common goal besides networking and knowledge sharing. Building the best operating system, contributing to the world’s knowledge, or changing the political system are all topics that can be pursued at a barcamp, but there are usually no prior intentions by the organizers to establish such a goal. The organizers only provide the environment and a topical framework in which such endeavors can take place.

A number of researchers have looked into the role social media plays for scientific conferences. Social media have been conceptualized as e-learning tools [4], as means to enhance conference experiences, and as participation driver [15]. Among the different types of social media, Twitter has attracted a lot of attention due to its easy-accessible content (compared to other social media services) and hashtags that attracted a lot of attention due to its easy-accessible content (compared to other social media services) and hashtags that invite to communicate alongside events. Before, during and after events, Twitter is used in very different ways. It helps with assembling, connecting and maintaining relationships — cp. [3], [14] and [7].

3. METHOD

In the following, the methodology underlying our exploratory empirical study is described. Therefore we first specify the object of our investigation. In a second step, our methodological procedure regarding the questionnaire will be explained. At last we will report the method of our interview administration including the selection procedure.

3.1 Characteristics of Barcamp Graz

The object of study is Barcamp Graz¹ (BCG) and all investigations and results are based on this barcamp, its characteristics and attendees. BCG consists of a yearly changing combination of sub-camps that deal with certain topics, e.g. politCamp for internet policies and participative democracy, wissensCamp for knowledge management and technologies, iCamp for mobile software development and devices. This means that participants have a broad variety of topical frameworks to choose from and engage in. BCG is organized by volunteers reflecting the different communities involved. Its atmosphere is rather informal, which can be perceived in Figure 1.

3.2 Questionnaire

To be able to determine who is attending the barcamp and for what reason or motivation respectively, a questionnaire was administered. The questionnaire was paper-based and handed out at the reception of BCG 2012. It consisted of 8 questions, out of which two thirds were quantitative in nature. Participants were asked to state their age, gender, number of previous barcamp visits, education, employment status, place of residence and technical affinity level. It was pointed out that resulting data will only be used in anonymized form, and will not be given to third parties.

Besides the sociodemographic description of BCG attendees, the questionnaire also served the need to elicit the expectations regarding the barcamp in general, and the motivation for participation. While technical affinity was elicited using a five point Likert scale, employment status and expectations were retrieved via multiple choice questions. All the other questions could be answered either quantitatively or qualitatively. The final question aimed at recruiting people for a subsequent interview to get a more complete picture of the issues raised in the questionnaire and thus more concrete information on the motivation of participants.

3.3 Interviews

For the interviews, which were administered about two weeks after the unconference, we used selective sampling based on the answers given in the descriptive questionnaire by BCG participants. The main goal was to represent the diversity of the participants regarding age, gender, educational background, employment status, and - above all - motivation. The corresponding questions of the sociodemographic questionnaire were therefore analyzed beginning with the multiple choice question about motivation. Hence the interview sample was first selected based on the results of the motivation question. We then sought a good distribution regarding the other criteria, namely age, educational background, and profession. In cases were no perfect match was available, we chose the next best candidate.

For conducting the interviews we opted for a semi-structured interview-type. That is, the interviewer followed a given guideline, but additional questions adapting to the actual

¹http://www.barcamp-graz.at/
situation and interviewee were also acceptable. This enabled us to focus on the topics at hand without constraining them to a particular format. Every interview was audio recorded and transcribed. Interviews were carried out by all authors, implying that the recording situation differed. Nonetheless, we tried to conduct them in the same form and in a silent environment. The following questions have been asked:

- How did you hear about Barcamp Graz?
- What motivated you to attend Barcamp Graz?
- Have you attended Barcamp Graz out of private or professional interest?
- What were your expectations towards Barcamp Graz? Have these expectations been met?
- Please compare Barcamp Graz to other events that you attend for the means of knowledge acquisition. How does Barcamp Graz differ from these? What are the advantages and disadvantages of a barcamp?
- What role do social media play for you in context of the barcamp? If you use social media, do you use them for the barcamp? Can social media also present a barrier to a successful participation?
- Where do you see development potential for the barcamp? What would you change?

For interpretation of results regarding our main research question (motivation), we mainly focus on the motivations and expectations of the participants and the role they attribute to social media at a barcamp. For the analysis of the interviews, we chose qualitative content analysis based on Mayring [13]. The interviews were transcribed literally, only leaving out passages where interviewees were far off-topic. In a second step, the authors paraphrased these transcriptions. Out of this text material, we inductively developed categories for discovering structure in a multi-step process. For each step, we structured and summarized the content further. If no categorization was possible, we just summarized and reported the paraphrased statements. For this task we tried to stick to the material as close as possible (cp. [13]).

4. RESULTS

This section presents our findings based on the descriptive statistics of the questionnaire, and the results of the qualitative analysis of the interviews. To reiterate, the paper-based questionnaire was conducted with the purpose to describe the characteristics of people who are attending the barcamp, and elicit their reasons for doing so.

4.1 Questionnaire

In total, almost half of the BCG 2012 participants (99 out of about 200 registered attendees) took part in the voluntary survey. The participants aged from 16 to 61 years with a mean age of 29 years (n=92; M_mean=29; Range=45) and consisted of about 25% females (n_female=25; n_male=73). The average education level was secondary school (n=98; M_arithmetic Mean=4.48; SD=0.84) with 65% holding an academic degree. About one-third of the 99 attendees are students (35.4%), another third self-employed (34.4%), and/or 40% are employees. A minority also stated to be a blue-collar worker (2%) , retiree (2%) and/or pupil (1%).

On average, the participants of BCG 2012 had attended a barcamp before once (n=85; M_Median=1.00; RNG=30; see Figure 2). But there are a several outliers, i.e. seven participants have attended 14 times or more, and 14 participants have attended seven times or more. Regarding knowledge and skills with respect to technology, the participants described themselves as rather technically affine (n=90; M_arithmetic Mean=4.19; SD=0.95). The last question investigated the expectations of the participants concerning the barcamp (n=99). All in all, nearly half of the barcamp participants (47.5%) are attending with the aim to explicitly share their knowledge and to network for professional reasons (46.5%). About two thirds of the participants are interested in the social get-together (73.7%), aim to gather new ideas (80.8%) and meet people with similar interests (64.6%). But almost all attendees (88.9%) are expecting to learn something on the barcamp. The issue that only half of the barcampers participate with the goal to share their knowledge at the barcamp stands out in the context of a conference for free knowledge exchange. To investigate further on this issue it was taken into account in the interview selection and will be also discussed later on. The last part of the questionnaire aimed at acquiring participants for the interview. Half (n=95; 50.5%) of the participants indicated their willingness to be contacted.

4.2 Interviews

Out of the 48 volunteers for interviews, we selected an interview sample of 10 participants. Our aim was to select a sample as balanced as possible with regards to the diversity of BCG attendees. First, we focused on the most important aspect, i.e. motivation. We split the volunteer set along the knowledge sharing aspect, resulting in two groups of almost equal size. Afterwards, we narrowed down our selection and chose the best fitting participants based on the other selection criteria: educational background, employment status, gender and age. In this process, we tried to achieve a distribution as diverse as possible. As a result, we had a wide variety of educational backgrounds, ranging from software engineering to business, law and geography. The interviewees were a mix of students and researchers, employees, freelancers, and retirees. We interviewed 3 women and 8 men, reflecting the male dominance at the barcamp. The
age ranged from 28 to 61. The length of the thereby gathered interviews varied from 11 to 51 minutes.

4.2.1 What is the people’s motivation to attend BCG?

Conducting the interviews, we had the chance to ask the interviewees about their motivation more deeply. One interviewee said that the first incentive was the name ‘camp’ which reminded him of tents and through this positive cognitive association, he was motivated to attend Barcamp Graz. But basically, the motivation of the barcampers - which will be discussed in detail hereafter - shows that it has something to do either with

- the barcamp people,
- the format and structure of the barcamp,
- or the topics of the (sub-)camps.

Firstly, one very strong and important reason (and therefore motivation) for attendance are the barcampers themselves: getting to know new people or meeting people of the barcamp community is important for both newcomers and insiders. ‘Learning from the youngsters in the IT-sector’ and ‘getting feedback by young people’ was mentioned as well. Although the idea of barcamps has its origin in the IT-community, the participants have very diverse backgrounds and working fields. This aspect, already underlined by the results gained from the questionnaire, was also mentioned by one interviewee as motivation. One interview partner expressed that the greatest advantage of a barcamp is at the same time its greatest disadvantage: the outcome highly depends on the quality and the motivation of the attendees. The experience is highly influenced by the kind of people actually attending it, and the spontaneously emerging discussion topics.

Secondly, the barcamp is seen as a self-regulating organization and system and therefore it represents one very interactive form of knowledge transfer. The few constraints of barcamps (except barcamp rules, see Table 1) in comparison to other conference formats allow for openness and freedom in many aspects. There is also no central coordination authority. The latter two arguments were mentioned as important reasons by two interviewees. The breaks throughout one barcamp day, which are longer compared to traditional conferences, were mentioned positively. One interviewee watched videos from and about barcamps before to get an idea of this concept. This underlines the interest in this format on the one hand and the visibility of such camps in social media on the other hand (see Section 4.2.4).

Further, besides these factors directly referring to the organizational structures of barcamps, most of the participants have been motivated by their expectations regarding the (sub-)camps and the topics addressed by them. Thereby the variety of interesting and exciting topics, e.g. technical matters but also socio-political aspects, are strong motivators. Getting new ideas, exchanging knowledge and the chance to learn something, are reasons mentioned by other interviewees. One participant stated motivation to learn something about new topics and that the barcamp is an opportunity to meet the appropriate discussion partners. Additional motivation triggers are (1) receiving compact information about topics and ongoing trends, (2) getting feedback within an easy atmosphere, and (3) listening to the concepts of others. The (at least partially) practically oriented sessions and the present experts underline the legitimacy of both the barcamp format and the contents considered at barcamps. We also asked the participants if the nature of BCG attendance is private or professional. All interviewees stated that they are attending at least to a certain extent out of private reasons.

4.2.2 What expectations did the participants have regarding the BCG and to which extent did they come true?

Next, we asked interviewees for their expectations and whether they got fulfilled. Besides the available responses of the sociodemographic questionnaire, the following expectations were named:

- freedom to express and comment,
- acceptance of the own opinion and communicated content,
- giving others input on their ideas,
- in-depth discussions of self defined topics and resulting knowledge growth,
- achieving an overview over the state-of-the-art of technology and the different topics within sub-camps available,
- getting to know the ‘in’ words of the community,
- collection of useful and - above all - practical information for one’s profession,
- experiencing new and interesting things,
- excitement because of the barcamp in general,
- and understanding of BCG as an enjoyable event.

Even if a categorization is not feasible with these few points, it becomes clear that there is not much difference to the aforementioned motivational reasons. Except for the notion of BCG being a very enjoyable camp and the corresponding thrill of anticipation, it is all about learning and knowledge sharing and the incentives the structure of the barcamps offers in general. Interestingly, all interviewees considered their expectations satisfied. Some did not even have specific expectations: ‘Oh well, basically I don’t have expectations yet they are exceeded every time’! What is interesting is the fact that also people who had never been at a barcamp before were motivated by this open and free concept although potential results remain rather unclear. Therefore, the pure interest in free knowledge exchange and construction is one important factor for people to take part in such an un-conference.

4.2.3 Do social media play an important role in barcamps?

Most interviewees had a positive opinion about the use of social media at barcamps, and attributed an important role by comments such as: ‘On the one hand I am a strong fan of participation and on the other hand it adds value for everyone!’ One interviewee pointed out that the reason for the key role can be found in the social space of the attendees, which constitutes social media. Another participant argued along the same lines by assessing the attendees’ opinion about the importance of social media usage in relation to their own engagement. Yet another interviewee
described social media as nice 'background' media, but considered personal exchange more important than spreading of information into the virtual world. One interviewee took an opposing view by stating that social media is irrelevant for him/her with regard to the barcamp.

But which kinds of social media are actually used at BCG? The interviewees named the following types of social media: social networks (personal: Facebook, Foursquare; professional: LinkedIn, Xing), microblogs (Twitter), blogs and wikis (MediaWiki). However, this list is probably incomplete, as based on our interview sample, and other types and services are used at barcamps as well. After we had figured out which types of social media were applied by our interviewees, we focused on the how and when. We structured the questions into three periods: before, during, and after the barcamp. Social media has a different role in these three periods. Details are discussed in the following.

**Role of social media before the barcamp.**

In advance of a barcamp, social media are used to promote the un-conference as an event in general. This became also obvious, when asking 'How did you you find out about the barcamp?' Half of the participants responded that friends told them about it, and/or they found out about it by checking the Austrian barcamp homepage (wiki) every now and then, or by following social media (e.g. Twitter). The communication of the own attendance in order to motivate others is a second reason. Furthermore social media represent a source to gather information (location, specials, camps etc.) about the event. Further, the promotion of the location itself via Foursquare is another use of social media before the event.

**Role of social media during the barcamp.**

During the un-conference, social media are used in terms of spreading of news, highlights, interesting thoughts and funny topics, via Twitter, blog entries or wikis. This is done in the midst of a session, but also afterwards for documentation. Social media enables to dig into the content and outcome of a session when one is personally not able to attend the barcamp, or a certain session because of interest in a parallel session. Commonly, social media is used as means for communication as well.

**Role of social media after the barcamp.**

After barcamps, social media are used to connect to other participants, to structure them and to keep relationships alive. Additionally, outcomes and conclusions of unconferences are spread and may result in feedback and follow-up discussions. Presentation slides are distributed in this way as well. Some use social media to keep session outcomes for personal use.

Social media obviously have many different roles before, during and after a barcamp. It can be concluded that social media are mainly used as a promotion tool before, as a tool for spreading and/or consumption of content during, and as an exploitation and dissemination tool after the event. For the success of social media usage, it is crucial to communicate certain channels that are then commonly used, e.g. hashtags in Twitter (#bcg12) and articles in a commonly edited wiki.

### 4.2.4 May social media also constitute a barrier?

Apart from the aforementioned advantages, could social media at a barcamp be regarded as a barrier as well? To illuminate this topic we asked the interviewees if the use of social media can also have a negative influence on a successful participation, or the barcamp in general. Thereby three interesting aspects emerged.

Firstly, the use of social media during barcamps can result in a decrease of attention. According to two interviewees, this is due to active or passive consumption (tweeting and reading) of social media. Shifting of attention to write and spread a current thought leads to a deficit in attention for the actual discussion for a short period of time.

Since most promotion prior to a barcamp is limited to social media channels, it can be regarded as a second potential barrier, possibly deterring possible attendees. Promoting a barcamp only via social media could result in the perception of a barcamp as an insider event. People might be afraid of not being able to understand specific technical terms, topics, etc. One participant however sees also other aspects in these social barriers. Using the wrong platform could attract the wrong audience (e.g. marketing professionals using the event for product advertisement), while using traditional media for large-scale promotion of the event might increase the percentage of tourists (attendees not actively engaging in sessions). In the eyes of one interviewee, this could possibly lead to a reduction of barcamp engagement and hence quality.

The third potential barrier can be explained by the perceived decrease in quality of social media contents. The first barcamps were held in the heyday of personal blogs, which typically offer relatively high content quality. Nowadays, as one interviewee points out, the demands and requirements for written and documented controversy in social media decreases, as barcamp participants prefer more informal tools like Facebook and Twitter (generation phenomenon). Furthermore the content produced is dependent on individual perception and is heavily context specific. Therefore social media are not always able to represent the reality adequately, as another participant indicates.

In conclusion, the use of social media regarding a barcamp can be seen as not only enriching, but also as a barcamp sustaining tool. However, if potential pitfalls and barriers are kept in mind, the possible advantages of social media can be fully exploited and enjoyed. They are part of the barcamp and will develop along each other: 'social media are used in the context of the barcamp and this is absolutely reasonable.'

### 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we provided an analysis of participants of BCG 2012 with special emphasis on the their motivations for attending, expectations, use of social media, and opinions on barcamps in general.

Analyzing the data, we found that the appreciation of other participants and therefore the barcamp community sense is strongly developed. Most participants are motivated to get together with others, expect to network and/or meet people with similar interests. This is supported by the origins of the barcamp concept which was based on the Web 2.0 community. The high significance of the community is also underlined by the existence of a core community of regular barcamp participants. Hence the people form a common identity of a technically-oriented community of barcampers.
The structure or format of the barcamp as an open and self-regulating organization for knowledge transfer is quite important for the participants. They are motivated to engage in free exchange of knowledge. This was pointed out in the interviews. Moreover, the questionnaire revealed that about two thirds aim to gather new ideas as motivation, and nearly all expressed the desire to learn something, which gives at least partial evidence to knowledge sharing motivation. This motivation for knowledge exchange is also somewhat evidenced by the very high participation rate in the paper based questionnaire in comparison to other investigational contexts: out of about 200 conference attendees, half took part in the questionnaire, and additionally, 48 of the questionnaire participants were willing to participate in a subsequent interview. The appreciation of the format becomes also apparent through our finding that the nature of participants’ attendance is mainly of private nature. This indeed underlines the strong conviction of the format, bearing in mind that BCG is held during weekends and without monetary compensation. Therefore, the format has a big influence on the common identity, as it stands in close relation to the motivation of free knowledge exchange.

The topics, which in the case of the BCG are specified by the different sub-camps, also attract and motivate many people. They want to learn what is up-to-date knowledge first hand from peers and experts whom they expect to meet there. Therefore learning something new is one of the key factors for attending, as stated by nearly all participants in the questionnaire. This is obviously in line with findings regarding engagement factors in collaborative online movements, where this is a motivational key factor for engagement as well – cp. Ye and Kishida [18]. Further, the topical framework most obviously leads to a common identity, too. A good example for a common identity is the aforementioned IndiaCamp in Vienna, where the community is tied together by the interest in the country and its culture.

The motivation or common identity to freely share knowledge with others is further visible in the use of social media as shared activity to reach this goal. Again, this has been confirmed though the interviews. Therein, half of the participants stated that they found out about the barcamp by checking social media and/or by the invitation of friends. This kind of invitation resembles somewhat the community aspect in telling friends about an interesting event. Exactly this discourse about the event corresponds to the first barcamp rule and accounts also for a shared activity just like the information about the event by the use of e.g. Twitter or the barcamp wiki.

But what constitutes this set of shared activities actually? On the one hand there are the eight rules of barcamp, to which the previously named rule ‘you talk about barcamp’ belongs. In particular the 8th rule of barcamp presents the community as an open one, which tries to actively involve new members as quickly as possible. Every member is asked to present or at least to participate actively, so that he or she learns to engage in the barcamp way of knowledge exchange. Furthermore, these rules actually lead to the aforementioned second concept, the format and therefore structure of the barcamp. On the other hand there is extensive use of social media, which is also closely related to a special jargon. Some participants are even aware that this jingo might make the barcamp an insider event despite its often stressed openness. Terms like hashtag, retweet etc. are frequently used and might be indispensable to make sense of the topics talked about. These terms mostly belong to the realm of social media, which corresponds to the importance participants attribute to the use of this media during barcamps. Newcomers might be required to engage in learning this terminology and the corresponding use of social media step by step, which usually is done by listening, watching and asking. Hence the learning of this practice can’t be achieved by just being welcomed openly and plunged in at the deep end, but simply takes some time and requires openness also from the side of the newcomers. The terminology is also somewhat reflected in the barcampers’ understanding of themselves as having some kind of technical affinity. Finally, we can not neglect that also this set of shared activities has a certain influence on building a common identity.

6. OUTLOOK

A set of new interesting research questions arose during our research. Alongside our qualitative analysis of the BCG 2012 we have noticed that the three motivational aspects or concepts people, format and topics, and the related activities, stand in close relation to the three main characteristics of the Communities of Practice (CoP) construct by Lave and Wenger [10], which was introduced in 1991 in their book ‘Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation’. According to Wenger, MacDermott and Snyder [16, 17] the three characteristics of CoP are represented in a community, a shared domain and practice. It remains open to further explore and to see how the theoretical framework of CoP is fruitful to explain mechanisms of barcamps. We also saw that some of the motivations and expectations of participants relate to their opinion on different formats of knowledge transfer. The barcamp is for example frequently compared to scientific conferences, which could be an indicator to further investigate into beliefs on these two different formats [6]. Also the obvious parallels between barcamps and other movements in the digital realm (Open Source, Wikipedia etc.) should be further explored, also regarding the point that barcamps not necessarily share a common problem (as e.g. the Open Source Community). The clearly existing relationship of the barcamp to other concepts and methods of Open Space Technology (OST) have to be elaborated, too, even if it was not addressed directly by our interviewees. In this respect it would be interesting to deepen the understanding of goal orientedness, which might be due to constrained contexts (organizations, companies, etc.) of OST intentions, and its consequences.

It would also be interesting to find out more about the regular attendees or core members of barcamps. This could be done by analyzing publicly available participation data on the barcamp wikis. At last, the a bit surprising finding that only the half of the barcampers expect to share their knowledge should be investigated more deeply. Even if we found no indications for this fact in the interviews, it should be answered in e.g. a follow-up questionnaire by raising a more detailed question in this respect.

Regarding the limitations it has to be noted that the Barcamp Graz has a special character with its different subcamps. Even if it is a quite big instance of a barcamp in Austria, its representativity may be questioned in this respect. That is, although our statement regarding the three discovered concepts and the related use of social media along the Barcamp Graz are built on solid ground, we recommend
to validate them in a follow-up investigation on another bar-
camp.

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