Asia Pacific Academy of Science Pte. Ltd.

Business and Management Theory and Practice 2026, 3(1), 3851.
https://doi.org/10.54517/bmtp3851

Article

Off the chain: An appreciative inquiry into the emerging culture and values of a new layer 1 blockchain organization

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CITATION

Sweigart EA. Off the chain: An appreciative inquiry into the emerging culture and values of a new layer 1 blockchain organization. Business and Management Theory and Practice. 2026; 3(1): 3851. https://doi.org/10.54517bmtp3851

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 26 June 2025
Revised: 13 December 2025
Accepted: 19 December 2025
Available online: 6 January 2026

Abstract: Amidst the rise of Web3, a technology transforming user interactions and challenging corporate control, this study uses a hybrid model of appreciative inquiry that matches the remote and decentralized nature of Web3 communities, to investigate the formation of a blockchain startup and its emergent culture and values. Despite limited resources, the company has built a diverse, global community via digital platforms, exceeding stakeholder expectations. This appreciative inquiry uncovers a community manifesting five core values: excellence, sustainable innovation, inclusivity, continuous learning, and creativity, challenging stereotypes often associated with the Web3 industry. This work advances participative research by introducing a hybrid model of appreciative inquiry tailored for remote and decentralized Web3 communities. By adapting appreciative inquiry to the unique dynamics of blockchain-dependent organizations, this study extends the methodology's applicability and demonstrates its effectiveness in uncovering and fostering core communal values within cutting-edge technological contexts.

Keywords: organizational leadership; appreciative inquiry; blockchain; Web3; culture; values

1. Introduction

From the earliest human civilizations to the present, technological innovations have changed how people work and live. Currently, a new wave of internet applications underpinned by blockchain technology, often referred to as Web3, are transforming online interfaces and introducing new organizational structures and business operations [1]. Blockchain is a decentralized and public database system that securely logs information across a network of computers instead of being governed and verified by central authorities [2]. This technology has the potential to enhance direct user-to-user interactions, reduce the information and service control exerted by large corporations, and allow access to user networks more affordably than currently available.

Although blockchain is revolutionary, it relies on people working individually and together to design, develop, and implement it. As new organizations form to create and disseminate this innovative technology, they are faced with the age-old philosophical and practical opportunities and challenges that humans have encountered since the dawn of civilization in terms of who they are and how they work (i.e., their values and culture).

Recently, I was engaged as an organizational leadership consultant by a blockchain startup company founded in 2020. The purpose of the project was to assist the company in co-discovering and documenting its emerging culture, values, and community-identified key skillsets for individual and group success. As an organization, the company aspires to engage a million contributors—from coders and

designers to artists and digital entrepreneurs—of different ages, stages, and backgrounds through its platform. For its ecosystem to operate efficiently and effectively, its founder believes that the company's recruited contributors must understand the norms, values, and culture of the community.

As a startup enterprise with limited funding that has not yet released the first version of its product publicly, the company relies on the digital equivalent of word-of-mouth advertising to raise brand awareness and generate interest in the upcoming launch among developers and potential application users. The company primarily uses the social media platform Twitter (now known as X) and the messaging application Telegram to share content related to its development operations and encourage engagement with the company. It also shares thought leadership through the website Medium. Engaged followers of its Twitter and Telegram accounts who interact with the company on these channels are invited to join its server on the social media application Discord. The company uses its Discord server as the digital hub for its global online community of coders, designers, artists, digital entrepreneurs, and others interested in its technology.

Discord is a communication application, akin to software like Skype or platforms such as Slack and Teams [3]. It accommodates voice and text chats, video calls, and screen sharing, providing users with a variety of ways to interact and communicate. It functions on two levels: servers and channels. The server operates as a virtual meeting space, while the channels facilitate open conversations. Initially, Discord became popular as a platform for gamers, but it has since broadened its scope and services to address general communication requirements.

The company's marketing approach has been successful in the founder's view and supported by feedback he has received from current and potential investors and other industry participants. Without any cash expenditures on marketing, as of February 2023, the company had attracted over 3000 followers on Twitter, more than 1400 members on Telegram, and approximately 1740 participants on Discord. The founder indicated that these results exceeded both his and investors' expectations significantly. In addition to this followership, the company employed approximately 8 full-time equivalents and 4 part-time equivalents as of February 2023. The team of full- and part-time personnel are all members of the company's Discord server and primarily used the applications Slack, Notion, and GitHub for communications, document management, and software code management, respectively.

The company's primary product is a Layer 1 (L1), the base protocol or foundation of a blockchain system where its main operations occur. L1s contain the protocols that define a blockchain's network and basic functions, such as transaction processing, consensus mechanisms, and block creation [4]. As such, this project presented a compelling parallel between the company's use of programming logic and computer code to delineate the foundational elements and operational modalities of its system, and its concurrent exploration of organizational psychology theories, frameworks, and applications as guiding principles for orchestrating collaborative efforts within its team and broader community of developers and users.

2. Materials and methods

Qualitative investigation is aptly suited to explore questions about organizations and their leaders' behaviors and characteristics [5]. Given this project's interest in understanding the emerging culture, values, and community-identified key skillsets for individual and group success, I determined a qualitative methodology was the most fitting approach. The founder's desire was that the project be collaborative and inclusive of the diverse members of the community the company had built through its primary social media platform, Discord, and its core team of employees and contractors working on the software. As such, I proposed a form of participative inquiry known as appreciative inquiry for this project.

Participative inquiry has gained popularity as a collection of research methodologies that encourage cooperative examination and problem-solving within groups, dissolving the divide between researchers and participants [6]. When seen as a problem-solving tool, participative inquiry can be considered a spectrum, with action research at one end and appreciative inquiry at the other [7]. Action research, initially introduced by renowned organizational psychologist and change management theorist Kurt Lewin [8], is a systematic exploration into a problem or challenge faced by a group. The objective is to thoughtfully scrutinize a problem, devise iterative solutions, and generate knowledge beneficial to the individual, the group, and external entities (such as relevant academic communities or literatures). On the other hand, appreciative inquiry is a future-oriented strategy for identifying innovative concepts, methodologies, and productions that empower a group to evolve into its optimal self-representation [7,9,10]. Due to its forward-looking nature and collaborative and co-creative ethos, I proposed appreciative inquiry as the most appropriate methodology for this study.

Appreciative inquiry seemed an especially appropriate approach given that it "assumes that every organization and community has many untapped and rich accounts of the positive – what people talk about as past, present, and future capacities, or the positive core" (p. 8) [7]. For an organization operating in an industry that is often negatively viewed by the public and poorly understood by policymakers and regulators [11], I wanted to use an approach that centered the human beings in the organization and assumed positive intent on their part. Further, appreciative inquiry offers an organization an opportunity to boost its shared knowledge, foster adaptability to change, and expand its ability to achieve desired outcomes [7], which seem like worthwhile aspirations for a startup company.

Appreciative inquiry is a four-stage process: discovery, dream, design, and destiny [12]. During the discovery phase, the lead investigator engages in dialogical interviews with members of the organization (or team) to identify the key capabilities and strengths of the organization or team and analyze the collected data to spot recurring patterns and narratives. These insights and overarching themes are then shared back with the larger group for further understanding and evolution. The discovery phase is followed by the dream phase which aims to tap into the aspirations individuals hold for their future within the organization (or team), building on the realization of their existing capabilities. It promotes dialogue about positive experiences and hopes for the future. Following the dream phase, the design phase is

about identifying the strategic steps necessary to achieve the envisioned future. It entails reaching a consensus on a shared future dream and outlining the necessary actions to make it a reality. At this juncture, the question posed by the organization is, "What do we need to become in order to be this desired way in the future?" In essence, it is an act of "reverse engineering" (p. 177) from the sought after future to the present. Finally, the destiny phase focuses on planning and establishing task forces to advance the actions determined during the discovery, dream, and design phases.

The company's founder, another member of the company's executive team, and I collaborated to co-develop the scope for this initial project using the framework of appreciative inquiry. We agreed that the first step would be a discovery phase where we discover and map the company's "positive core" (i.e., its culture and values, what the community looks like and aspires to be at its best) through a co-creative, interactive dialogue.

We agreed that, because the company has no physical office location and all employees, contractors, and members of the community engage with the company virtually, a traditional, workshop-format approach to appreciative inquiry [13] was unfeasible. Through dialogue, we developed a process that sought to preserve the collaborative aspects of appreciative inquiry, while accommodating the unique circumstances of a completely virtual participant group. The first step in our hybrid approach was gathering input from the company's employees, contractors, and community. Next, I analyzed and synthesized the responses. Finally, I reported out the findings and, through a series of largely asynchronous, digital interactions, participants provided feedback and iteratively developed the map of the positive core. Collectively, we derived five guiding questions for the study, shown in **Table 1** below.

Table 1. Guiding questions for discovery phase.

Guiding questions
What is the emerging culture?
What are the emerging core values of the community?
What skills help community members be their best selves?
What skills help community members best contribute to this blockchain?
What does (or will) the community look like at its best?

A hallmark of the Web3 industry is the self-organization of participants who are often dispersed around the world [14]. In this environment, it can be challenging to implement traditional approaches to data gathering. The company's developer community lead, who I knew only by his one-word screen name, and I worked together via asynchronous messaging over the company's Slack workspace to determine the best approach for soliciting input from the members of the growing online community. Due to language limitations on both our parts (neither of us speak the other's native language fluently) as well as disparate time zones, this communication method was most efficient. Based on his input, we selected asynchronous, digital text-based surveys as the most appropriate method for collecting information from the sprawling community.

2.1. Participants

The participants invited to engage in this study were all the members of the company's Discord server, which included its full- and part-time personnel (collectively, the community). Although I am included in the count of part-time personnel, I did not provide responses to any of the questionnaires. In total, 63 members of the community responded to the long-form questionnaire.

Working with virtual participants generally, and in the environment of Web3 specifically, presents a challenge to reporting detailed demographic data on participants as is customary in organizational psychology studies. A foundational element of the philosophy behind Web3 is self-sovereign identity [15]. Self-sovereign identity is the concept that individuals should have control over their own personal data and decide who can access it, instead of having institutions hold that power. In addition to reticence to providing traditional demographic information, many people engaged with Web3 seek to use the technology to take on identities that feel more authentic to them than their physically observable traits and characteristics might suggest in real life [16]. Although hardly a new phenomenon, individuals often present a digital version of themselves online that does not reflect their appearance or background in real life [17]. The founder, as the client, was more concerned with respecting community members' individual privacy than collecting demographic data. As this was foremost a commercial project, rather than an academic one, I followed the client's direction.

2.2. Role of the consultant-researcher

Klenke [5] suggested that axiology, the exploration of our values and what we consider important, serves as the symbolic framework that connects ontology, epistemology, and methodology in organizational and leadership studies. It is often argued by academics that unbiased or strictly objective research does not exist because every researcher brings along their own moral values and convictions that shape their work [18]. I acknowledge that my work is influenced by my own viewpoints and biases, as well as my commercial relationship with the company who contracted with me to perform this study. Thus, it is crucial that I take these into account in the context of this research where I am both consultant and researcher.

In this study, I most closely fit the description of participant-as-observer, one of the four positions a researcher may inhabit according to Gold [19]. The founder included me as a member of the team for the duration of the project. As such, I participated in regular group meetings and interacted with other personnel via the Slack workspace and through video conferences. I also joined the Discord channel where, from time to time, I participated in threaded discussions about the development of the company's product as well as contributed my own original digital art. Gold notes that a benefit of this orientation is that the researcher may engage with participants both formally and informally, gaining a broader and potentially more holistic view of the people, organization, and environment. The resulting familiarity may also yield insights for the researcher that a more detached observer would not gain. Simultaneously, there is also the risk that too much intimacy with the participants

will cloud researchers' views and potentially cause them to overlook flaws or challenges they might otherwise notice.

Reflexivity refers to the process of maintaining a critical outlook in research, especially concerning the researcher's own personal beliefs and perspectives [20]. Despite the prevalence of reflexivity in academic research for quite some time, its integration into the field of management studies is a relatively recent development [21]. Soedirgo and Glas [22] propose that researchers adopt the practice of active reflexivity whereby they engage 4 approaches: documenting assumptions with respect to positionality; formalizing reflections in a pre-interview record; include knowledgeable others in the process; and transparently demonstrate reflexive work throughout the process of publishing. I have incorporated the authors' 4-part method in this study to support me in maintaining a critical perspective on this work.

2.3. Ethical considerations and practices

Before data collection commenced, I communicated in writing with the founder and all participants to ensure that they were fully informed about the nature of the study, including confidentiality and privacy. Participants were given the choice to remain anonymous or provide their Discord username on their survey responses. If they chose the latter, they received compensation in the form of digital points, devoid of any cash value, that could affect their ranking on the members' leaderboard, from the company's community manager. To further safeguard the rights and welfare of the participants, all community members were required to confirm that they were over the age of 18 at the time of registration. The goal of the study design was to minimize the likelihood of involving members of vulnerable groups. Data collected from this study was stored on a private page of the company's online Notion workspace. The Discord usernames of the participants who provided them were shared with the online community manager so that he could award their digital points.

2.4. Data collection

My initial plan was to use a combination of short-form questionnaires with open-ended questions shared on both the Discord server and the company's internal Slack workspace. I quickly learned that the fast pace at which Discord users contributed content to the platform made it difficult to get more than a handful of responses to each short-form questionnaire before it disappeared amongst the vast sea of new messages. After further text-based discussions with the community manager and founder, I settled on a long-form questionnaire created using Google Forms that would be shared on both the Slack workspace, to reach the company's personnel, and the Discord channel, to reach the broader community. Initially, I thought that a longer list of questions would appear too cumbersome and dissuade participants from responding. The community manager shared that, in his experience with the members of the Discord server, they were eager to contribute to the development of the organization broadly and appreciated having their voices heard. This surprised me because I was biased by the belief that community members had short-attention spans and would be disinterested in what I thought of as the somewhat esoteric nature of this project.

Collecting data and engaging in the appreciative inquiry process asynchronously, leveraging the Discord platform, aligned with the company's remote-first and digitally native structure. At the same time, it also introduced methodological considerations worth noting. The asynchronous format enabled broad participation across time zones and allowed individuals to reflect and respond thoughtfully at their own pace. Potentially, this might lead to increased accessibility and depth of engagement for some participants. However, the absence of synchronous interaction or in-person dialogue may have limited opportunities for dynamic co-construction of meaning, real-time rapport building, or the capture of emotional nuance that often emerges through tone, gesture, or shared space.

After I created the questionnaire using Google Forms, the community manager shared the Google Forms link to the Discord server in 4 separate posts over the course of 1 week. I shared the Google Forms link on the Slack workspace 3 times over the course of 1 week. By the end of the week, 63 respondents had completed the form. I downloaded the responses to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for analysis. The questionnaire comprised 25 items focused on identifying the "positive core" of the company (i.e., culture and values). **Table 2**, below, presents the items.

Table 2. Questionnaire content.

Item #	Question
1	What words come to mind when you think of Company?
2	What makes you most proud to be associated with Company?
3	The thing Company does best is _____.
4	I believe the Company community values _____ [list all that come to mind].
5	The most important technical capability you need to succeed at Company is _____.
6	Important technical capabilities for success in this community are _____.
7	The most important inter-/intra-personal (i.e., universal) skill you need to succeed at Company is _____.
8	Important universal skills for success in this community are _____.
9	How are decisions made at Company?
10	What are some examples of decisions that have benefitted the Company community?
11	What are some examples of times when Company has been at its best? What made those moments so successful?
12	What are Company's greatest achievements and accomplishments? How were they achieved?
13	What are Company's unique strengths?
14	What are Company's competitive advantages?
15	How do Company's unique strengths contribute to its success?
16	How do Company's competitive advantages contribute to its success?
17	What are the traits, characteristics, or skills that make someone successful at Company?
18	What are some of Company's success stories?
19	How does Company encourage innovation and creativity?
20	What successful innovations or new ideas has Company implemented?
21	What are some ways that Company contributes to the world?
22	What makes Company a positive and healthy environment for contributors?
23	How should community members respond when they see a member not behaving in line with Company's values?
24	What does it mean to do the right thing at Company?
25	What does it look like when a community member acts in line with Company's values?

2.5. Data analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research should be a comprehensive process, occurring concurrently with, and following, formal data collection [23]. It is often overly simplified as merely the practice of coding, but it extends to issues of selectivity, interpretation, and presentation, all of which mold the results of a study [20]. Rigorous and systematic data handling and analysis form the cornerstone of qualitative research. For this study, I used interpretive inquiry as the primary analytical approach and the constant comparative method as a means of systematic data collation with continuous theory building and reevaluation [24,25]. Given the relatively low volume of data and the resources available to complete the project, I conducted the data analysis manually.

2.5.1. First-cycle coding

I began by categorizing the responses in a Microsoft Excel sheet, then proceeded to analyze the information and record words, concepts, and thoughts that instantly captured my attention. This technique, termed "open coding" in the initial stages of grounded theory [26], is known in contemporary research settings as 'initial coding' to emphasize its early stage in the research process [27,28]. In addition to the spreadsheet, I used a paper research journal to record my thoughts on the process and my experience as both consultant and researcher.

Once the initial coding stage was completed, I revisited the data using concept coding [29,30]. This method is versatile and applicable to a wide variety of qualitative research methods. Concept coding, another first-cycle coding technique, aids researchers in uncovering deeper meanings beyond the evident words and phrases in the data. Concepts are typically abstract ideas, not concrete objects or observable actions, that encapsulate broader implications of a text. For instance, when respondents discussed the company's technology, terms like "nextgen" or "next generation" were frequently used to denote the product's novelty. However, these phrases suggested not a literal new generation of the product, but the underlying concepts of newness, innovation, and a sense of being at the forefront of a technological revolution. Concept coding was instrumental in my attempts to comprehend the broader perspective and concept behind the responses. This was especially useful considering many of the respondents probably were non-native speakers of American English, a fact I realized through my interaction with the team and on the Discord server.

The final step of the first-cycle coding procedure involved employing in-vivo coding [31,32] to the collected data. In-vivo coding is suitable for a variety of studies and employs participant-generated codes instead of those created by the researcher [28]. It begins with the participants' perspectives and expressions about their experiences, without interpreting them through pre-existing concepts or theories. Using the participants' exact language positions their voices at the center of the study [32]. Through the in-vivo coding process, I noticed a repetition of certain words and phrases in the data. An example is the term "communication", which I noted in numerous memos as a key skill for success in the community mentioned by the participants. Even though I had observed this term in my previous reviews, its recurrence in my in-vivo codes made it stand out more prominently.

2.5.2. Second-cycle coding

Second-cycle coding is an iterative procedure of reevaluating, consolidating, and reassessing the outputs from first-cycle coding [28]. In prior research studies, I have observed my personal tendency to set off with intention of pattern coding, aimed at clustering recurrent topics, words, phrases, and concepts [33], only to find myself veering into content analysis, a quantitatively oriented system which typically prioritizes the frequency with which a word or phrase occurs in the data over its deeper implications. Recognizing that I was repeating this behavior in this instance, I adjusted my approach and adopted axial coding instead.

Axial coding is designed to discover the most important and recurring themes and subthemes through an intellectual refinement process [28]. I liken axial coding to a sculptor chiseling away at a block of marble: the objective is not merely removing material but rather sculpting the mass to reveal its most meaningful and significant form. Much like the sculptor's reflection and adjustment are crucial to create a meaningful piece of art, axial coding heavily relies on the researcher's contemplation and memoing to refine existing codes, with the intent to interconnect them and expose their shared essence, thereby becoming more abstract over time.

The core of this process involves striking a balance where the categories and themes are abstract enough for wide applicability yet retain the subtleties and individual characteristics of the diverse codes that led to their creation [26]. Despite its critics who question its necessity [27] and its potential for being overly prescriptive that might divert researchers from their own analytical processes [34], I regard axial coding as beneficial when applied with restraint. I reached the saturation point when the data ceased to provide new insights [35].

At this stage, I synthesized my findings and presented them to the founder and other team and community members through a series of synchronous and asynchronous dialogues over video calls, the company's Slack channel, and the Discord server. In a traditional appreciative inquiry, these interactions would have been in-person and iterative in real time [36]. However, as described above, the nature of the company's workforce and community necessitated an adjusted approach that aimed to maintain the co-creative elements of appreciative inquiry while reflecting the realities of an entirely virtual group of participants.

3. Results

The company's community is early in its formation. The questionnaire responses suggested that there are already commonly shared beliefs about the traits and characteristics of the community (i.e., its culture and values). Through the data analysis and iterative dialogue with the founder, team, and other community members described above, we collectively identified five main elements of the company's positive core: excellence, sustainable and purposeful innovation, genuine inclusivity, continuous learning and adaptation, and creativity and fun.

3.1. Excellence

Numerous participants shared the view that the company's core team is creating one of, if not the, best technological ecosystem of its kind in the blockchain realm.

The consensus was that the company attracts contributors to the community who excel in their field(s) of expertise and contribute their knowledge and skills through active participation in the design, development, and creation of the company's new and novel technologies and products as well as the learning and growth of the community. Instances of commentary that contributed to the development of this theme are highlighted in **Table 3**, below. Some responses reflected more than one of the themes identified.

Table 3. Examples of responses reflecting theme of excellence.

Example responses
"Excellent innovation, excellent thinking"
"It's a solid community to feel a part of. Team is smart, building openly, inviting participation and contribution, and many do want to contribute. Also what is likely going to make me contribute to the codebase is that the I respect the team and would be proud to have my code accepted."
"I think the best moments are the code and its description (uncluding the site, medium). It became successful because of the team's in-depth knowledge and experience."
"that I will help in the basis of such a project, which will become the flagship of the future"
"A novel approach to blockchains with mass appeal and a big brain team that can actually deliver"
"[It] is most egalitarian thing we've ever seen. It's insanely ambitious"
"Individual excellence"

Although a context-dependent term, excellence emerged as the most suitable umbrella to describe the sense of setting a new standard for the industry and bringing together exceptionally talented contributors shared by respondents.

3.2. Sustainable and purposeful innovation

The Web3 industry has been criticized as unsustainable for a variety of reasons including its high energy consumption and resulting climate impact [37]. In contrast, participants expressed the belief that the company's product is more energy and cost efficient than existing technologies. Further, due to the low number of software developers fluent in the native programming languages of Web3, the industry has been perceived as exclusive and inaccessible [38]. Community members pointed to the unique architecture of the company's product which allows software developers to use legacy programming languages to create Web3 applications as lowering barriers to entry. Participants noted that bringing more developers into the Web3 environment will contribute to the sustainability of the industry, which the company has stated publicly is one of its primary objectives. Tied to this concept is the idea that the company's product will subsequently provide more profitable outcomes for those who contribute most to value creation within its environment. Instances of commentary that contributed to the development of this theme are highlighted in **Table 4**, below.

Table 4. Examples of responses reflecting theme of sustainable purpose.

Example responses
"can really reshape the fabric of society"
"I want the web3 to become really useful and embedded in society, so that its potential is not used solely for selfish purposes, but really made our lives better. That's why I'm proud to be involved in projects that nurture revolutionary/breakthrough technology in a bear market. What attracts me is the opportunity to spread the word and work alongside the team."
"It is computationally inexpensive."
"ability to make more people to join web3"
"[Company] are making efforts to reduce barriers to entry for developers who want to work in web3"
"its rewarding work"

The notion of purpose appeared alongside sustainability in the questionnaire responses and follow-on dialogues. Web3 proponents have articulated one of the purposes of the technology is to offer potential benefits for people in developing nations and those living under oppressive governments [4]. Supporters assert that, by fostering financial inclusion, simplifying remittances, reducing corruption, resisting censorship, promoting fair trade, and verifying identity, these technologies can increase transparency, empower individuals with control over their data, and connect producers and consumers directly. These beliefs were echoed by the community participants as an example of the best that the company and its product can be in the world.

3.3. Genuine inclusivity

The Web3 industry has been criticized both internally and externally for its lack of diversity and inclusion [39]. Recently, Movement Strategy CEO Jason Mitchell pointed out that if equal access and education for everyone aren't integral parts of progress, the disparities in Web3 will only intensify [40]. Despite this seemingly well-earned reputation, participants expressed a commitment to creating a diverse and inclusive community with respect for the differences of others as a central tenet. Several respondents indicated that individuals discriminating against others or harassing them would be in contravention of the community's values and should be corrected by other community members.

Instances of commentary that contributed to the development of this theme are highlighted in **Table 5**.

There was overlap with the notion of the company's product lowering barriers to entry for software developers because they can use programming languages not typically associated with Web3 as contributing to inclusion and greater diversity of community members.

Table 5. Examples of responses reflecting theme of genuine inclusivity.

Example responses
"[Company] is a positive and healthy environment for contributors due to several reasons. First and foremost, the community values collaboration and inclusivity, ensuring that everyone's voice is heard and respected. Members are encouraged to engage in constructive dialogue and offer feedback that can help the community grow and improve. [Company] maintains a safe and welcoming space by actively promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. The community prioritizes creating a culture that celebrates differences and recognizes the unique experiences and perspectives that each member brings. Finally, [Company] recognizes the importance of work-life balance and supports its members in maintaining it. The community values the well-being of its contributors and offers flexible schedules and ample resources for mental and physical health."
"Community members should respond by addressing the behavior in a respectful and constructive manner, and by pointing out how it is not in line with [our] values. It is important to approach the situation with empathy and understanding, and to seek to understand the other person's perspective. If necessary, the community member can seek the assistance of a moderator or administrator to help mediate the situation and ensure that everyone is treated fairly and respectfully. Ultimately, the goal should be to foster a positive and supportive community where everyone feels valued and respected."
"By actively engaging in respectful and constructive communication with others, collaborating to find solutions to problems, and supporting the growth and development of others within the community. They are open-minded and willing to listen to different perspectives, and they approach disagreements or conflicts with empathy and a desire to find common ground. They are also committed to maintaining a safe and welcoming environment for all members, and they take responsibility for their actions and the impact they have on others. Overall, a community member acting in line with [our] values is someone who is committed to creating a positive and inclusive community culture that benefits all members."
"Openness: Community members have active and open communication and collaboration to jointly promote the development and prosperity of the community. Innovation: Community members are highly innovative and creative, actively exploring and trying new technologies and methods to promote the continuous development and progress of [Company]. Community awareness: Community members have a strong sense of community, realize that they are part of the community, and actively participate in the construction and maintenance of the community. Respect and understanding: Community members have an attitude of mutual respect and understanding, appreciate and tolerate different views and cultural backgrounds, and jointly promote the development and progress of the community."
"Because it is language agnostic."
"All ideas are welcome, even silly ones. The community manager [Name] makes the discord a safe space for anyone to ask questions and learn, and I often see the founder talk in the discord often."

3.4. Continuous adaptation and learning

Participants viewed ongoing personal and technical growth and development of themselves and others as an imperative for the community's short-, medium-, and long-term success. Community members indicated that they invest in on-the-job learning, self-study, and coaching others to learn new capabilities and skills and observe others doing so as well. This area also overlapped with the theme of genuine inclusion. Instances of commentary that contributed to the development of this theme are highlighted in **Table 6**, below.

Table 6. Examples of responses reflecting theme of continuous adaptation and learning.

Example responses
"creative development"
"Engaged, asks lots of questions, open to helping new members who have questions, directing them to relevant docs if necessary."
"Creating a culture of experimentation: Encouraging employees to experiment with new ideas, products, or processes can help foster innovation and creativity. VRRB can create a safe and supportive environment where employees feel free to take risks and try new things without fear of failure."
"Persistence: Success often requires overcoming obstacles and setbacks, so successful people tend to be persistent and resilient in the face of challenges."
"Willingness to learn and being an advocate to onboard more coders."
"Blockchain technology is constantly developing and changing, developers need to have the ability of self-learning, be able to continuously learn new technologies and tools, and apply them in actual development."
"Innovative thinking: [Company] is an emerging blockchain technology that requires developers to have innovative thinking, be able to propose new ideas and solutions, and promote the continuous development and progress of [Company]."
"I want to develop as a professional"
"Developers need to be able to learn by themselves"
"Learning and development opportunities: [Company] provides employees with opportunities to learn and develop new skills, including attending conferences, training sessions, and other professional development opportunities. This can help employees stay up-to-date with the latest trends and technologies, which can foster innovation and creativity."

In an industry where education is considered an important element to increasing diversity and promoting inclusion [39], community members saw this as a core part of their and the company's mission.

3.5. Creativity and fun

The act of creating and sharing memes serves a significant function in the culture of the Web3 industry. Memes were first defined in 1976 by Richard Dawkins as "gene-like infectious units of culture that spread from person to person" [41]. In the modern context, memes have become synonymous with viral internet content, typically comprising images, videos, or text, which are humorously captioned or altered and then widely shared across social media and other online platforms [42]. These internet memes often reflect current events, popular culture, or social attitudes, and their content can evolve as they are passed on, with each user potentially adding their twist or interpretation.

Memes have emerged as a cornerstone of community building in the Web3 industry, offering a shared language or in-joke that fosters camaraderie among members of specific blockchain or cryptocurrency communities [43]. Beyond solidifying these bonds, memes are a potent, viral form of marketing, effectively boosting awareness and sparking interest in particular projects or ideas. Moreover, they act as accessible educational tools, simplifying and demystifying complex blockchain and cryptocurrency concepts, market trends, and industry news for a

broader audience. Additionally, memes have evolved into powerful symbols of resistance, enabling commentary on traditional financial systems, and expressing discontent with the status quo. They encapsulate the disruptive potential of blockchain and cryptocurrencies in challenging existing power structures. Similarly, digital art has also become an important part of the Web3 landscape in the form of both nonfungible tokens (NFTs) as well as standalone pieces shared, like memes, to market industry projects [1].

Instances of commentary that contributed to the development of this theme are highlighted in **Table 7**, below.

Table 7. Examples of responses reflecting theme of creativity and fun.

Example responses
"Funne memes"
"its focus on innovation and creativity"
"Creativity: The ability to think outside the box and come up with innovative solutions is essential in the virtual and augmented reality industry. Successful [Company] employees are able to generate new ideas and bring them to life in creative and engaging ways."
"A genuine contributor - whether a superstar meme maker and appreciator, writer etc."
"Media influence, the ability to describe and promote information beautifully."
"You are incentivised to contribute in the areas you feel comfortable in. If you are a great thread writer, there's a place for you to share your threads, and the team actively commends good creations. The same is true for devs, memooors, artist etc."
"Friendly Communicative and Fun"
"being funny"

The company's Discord server has a channel dedicated solely to memes and one just for digital art created and shared by community members. The memes and art are frequently used in the company's marketing materials with the respective contributors receiving digital points as well as attribution. Although participants explicitly mentioned art and memes in their responses, through the subsequent dialogue I recognized that they carried a deeper meaning. For the community, creative expression in both the technical (i.e., software development process) and in the artistic sense were a source of fun and camaraderie building. Having a good time while participating in this work was a high priority for participants.

4. Discussion

This study revealed that the nascent community of the company is already manifesting shared cultural traits and values, with five main elements being central to its positive core: excellence, sustainable and purposeful innovation, genuine inclusivity, continuous learning and adaptation, and creativity and fun. The collective recognition of the company's high-standard technology ecosystem indicated an environment fostering excellence. Furthermore, the unique product architecture, which invites software developers to employ traditional programming languages, creates a sustainable and inclusive platform, broadening accessibility and industry sustainability. This accessibility aligns with the community's shared beliefs of

utilizing Web3 technology for social benefit, particularly for those in developing countries or under oppressive regimes.

A commitment to diversity and inclusivity underpins the community culture, with proactive correction of discriminative behavior seen as a collective responsibility. The community values continuous learning, both technically and personally, further enhancing diversity and inclusivity. Additionally, the use of memes as cultural artifacts in this community serves various purposes: fostering camaraderie, promoting projects, educating newcomers, and expressing resistance against traditional systems. Additionally, digital art contributes to community building. These creative expressions serve not just as marketing materials, but also as a vital source of enjoyment and community bonding.

4.1. Challenging dominant narratives in Web3 culture

Reflecting on my positionality as participant-as-observer in this study [19], the findings challenged the stereotypes I associated with the Web3 industry. The high degree of emotional intelligence of the community members with whom I interacted surprised me at first, because I was coming with my own biases based on what I have read and observed of the industry in the past. With a few exceptions, the quality of the questionnaire responses in terms of insight and clarity was high. The follow-up dialogues were rich and generative. Further, I did not encounter resistance in the community with respect to either the purpose or the process of the study. On the contrary, I found community members were interested and enthusiastic about the project. This suggests to me that there is an opportunity for scholar-practitioners to meaningfully engage with organizations in the Web3 industry to support them in their formation, development, and growth.

This study's findings present a view that runs contrary to several dominant stereotypes about Web3 communities. Popular narratives often portray these spaces as toxic, extractive, and ideologically anarchic with participants driven primarily by profit-seeking, speculative behavior, and lacking in ethical orientation [11]. In contrast, the values at the heart of the "positive core" of this community as articulated by participants in the study—excellence, sustainable innovation, inclusivity, continuous learning, and creativity—reflect a fundamentally different cultural logic. Rather than decentralization as a pretext for deregulation or disruption at all costs, the participants described a community culture grounded in accountability, emotional intelligence, and mutual support. These values stand in contrast to the prevailing narrative about the industry while also troubling dominant assumptions about leadership in high-growth tech environments.

Whereas traditional startup culture often valorizes hustle, hyper-efficiency, and top-down decision-making, the community-based self-determinative structure studied here encouraged distributed leadership, process deliberation, and care for both individual and collective well-being. These findings suggest that decentralized technology does not inherently produce toxic or exclusionary cultures. Instead, the values of the people designing and participating in these communities shape how power, responsibility, accountability, and collaboration are enacted. In this way, this study contributes to a possible reframing of the theoretical understanding of Web3

spaces. They are not merely technical infrastructures or economic experiments but instead may function as values-driven ecosystems capable of fostering radically inclusive and human-centered organizational life.

4.2. Comparison with previous research

Despite my extensive searches, I could not identify previous instances in the literature of researchers using appreciative inquiry in the Web3 industry. This study was not a classical application of the discovery phase of appreciative inquiry. **Table 8**, below, contrasts the classical in-person appreciative inquiry approach with the digital, remote, and asynchronous hybrid approach applied in this study. It highlights the distinct differences between an in-person, workshop-based co-design environment and the fully digital, asynchronous context in which this study took place. Although a physical workshop typically fosters real-time idea generation, emotional contagion, and a sense of shared presence, the remote setup yielded more reflective, layered, and temporally extended forms of contribution. Rather than coalescing around a dominant group consensus, the asynchronous process allowed divergent perspectives to emerge and evolve over time, often producing rich, unexpected combinations. The trade-off, however, was the absence of embodied interaction and the difficulty of aligning on shared metaphors or moods in real-time.

Table 8. Contrasting the classical in-person appreciative inquiry approach with the digital, remote, asynchronous hybrid approach.

Dimension	**Classic appreciative inquiry: In-person workshop-based**	**Hybrid appreciative inquiry: Digital, remote, asynchronous**
Setting	Shared physical space, synchronous	Online environment (i.e., Discord), no fixed time
Interaction style	Real-time dialogue, spontaneous collaboration	Threaded responses, reflection over time
Tools	Flipcharts, post-its, group facilitation, physical values cards	Discord threads, journaling prompts, asynchronous check-ins, digital values prompts
Rapport building	Immediate interpersonal cues (e.g., eye contact, tone, body language)	Built through consistent participation, written empathy, and moderation presence
Participation equity	May favor extroverted or dominant voices; quiet voices may be marginalized	More inclusive pace; gives space for reflection, neurodivergent access, and time zone fairness
Emotional expression	Often richer in the moment; facial expressions, tone, physical presence amplify connection	Emotional nuance conveyed through text, tone indicators, or creative media (e.g., memes, emojis, async video replies)
Engagement peaks	High energy during real-time sessions, followed by drop-off	Sustained engagement over days/weeks with lower peaks but broader reach
Data richness	Depth through shared stories and group synergy; limited documentation unless recorded	High fidelity written documentation, extensive participant-generated content, but may lack spontaneous co-creation moments
Facilitation style	Active real-time guiding, adaptive to group energy	Light-touch scaffolding, planned prompts, and asynchronous reflection triggers
Reflexivity	Groupthink can emerge quickly if not well-managed	More space for individual reflection and divergent perspectives
Temporal flow	Fast, iterative discovery often compressed into 1-2 days	Slower, more organic unfolding over weeks; allows deeper processing
Design phase co-creation	Live sketching, rapid prototyping, and group consensus	Contribution layering through collaboration tools (e.g., Google Docs), visual prompts, and asynchronous synthesis
Destiny/Commitment	Group energy can drive shared commitments in the moment	Commitment building occurs via async check-ins, documentation, and values alignment over time

Given that the remote, globally distributed community made in-person workshops and meetings impractical, I believe that the approach used reflects the spirit and intent at the heart of the methodology. Perhaps this hybrid model of appreciative inquiry can be used in the future for companies that adopt remote-first working configurations as well as decentralized, distributed organizations.

4.3. Theoretical and practical implications

The findings from this appreciative inquiry offer important lessons for leaders, founders, and organizers working in decentralized, remote-first, and Web3-aligned environments. As the boundaries between formal organizations and open communities blur, especially in blockchain-native ecosystems, intentional culture-building becomes a critical lever for long-term viability and trust. The emergence of core values such as learning, integrity, generosity, and interdependence—surfaced through grassroots dialogue rather than imposed hierarchies—suggests that distributed organizations can cultivate cohesive and values-aligned cultures even in the absence of traditional management structures.

For organizational development professionals and startup leaders, this case illustrates the power of participatory, strengths-based inquiry methods to engage members across time zones, roles, and levels of formality. In settings where participants are pseudonymous, voluntarily engaged, and technically self-sovereign, fostering belonging and alignment requires a shift from compliance-driven models to values-based community scaffolding. The process described here provides a replicable approach for doing so, especially for early-stage ventures, open-source projects, digital cooperatives, and decentralized autonomous organizations (DAOs). The behaviors modeled by community members—listening, self-reflection, acknowledgment of failure, and transparency—offer a framework for distributed leadership in a digital-first age. These dynamics point to an evolving leadership paradigm that emphasizes shared stewardship, narrative sensemaking, and cultural curation.

More broadly, this inquiry suggests that organizations operating in highly technical and decentralized domains may not be culturally void, but rather sites of active meaning-making, identity construction, and collective aspiration. As such, organizational researchers and practitioners should consider expanding their gaze beyond traditional firms to include emergent digital communities as legitimate sites of inquiry and innovation for management theory and practice.

4.4. Limitations and avenues for future inquiry

This study was not without its limitations, which in turn, open avenues for future research. A primary constraint was the inability to implement the classical approach to appreciative inquiry due to the remote nature of participant interaction. The classical approach typically involves in-person dialogues, fostering a rich interactional environment that could potentially generate different and more insightful discussions. As this study had to adapt to the realities of a fully remote setting, it is reasonable to consider that certain aspects of the exchange might have been different had they been conducted in person. Future studies could attempt to implement the classical appreciative inquiry approach within similar Web3 industry contexts, when

circumstances permit, to compare the outcomes and insights.

Drawing on lessons from social and organizational psychology research into survey-taking as a form of organizational citizenship behavior [44], the 63 participants in this study—drawn from a total of over 1,700 members of the company's Discord server—are likely the most personally invested, enthused, and engaged members of this emerging community. As such, the tendency toward self-selection bias should be considered in reviewing the overwhelmingly positive findings [45]. At the same time, this is a qualitative study that aims to surface *fuzzy generalizations* rather than statistically significant population-wide findings [46]. I believe that the findings of this study are best viewed as existing in a space of simultaneous truths, some of which may seem paradoxical or even counterintuitive. Rather than perceiving the Web3 industry as existing at extreme ends of a spectrum between exploitive, toxic scam and utopian human cooperative, these findings demand a more nuanced perspective. Moreover, the positive findings highlight the potential for generative and beneficial developments in decentralized, distributed community governance. I hope that researchers in the future will approach the Web3 ecosystem through this growth mindset lens [47].

The use of digital technology, particularly text-based communication, posed another limitation in this study. Text-based communication inevitably misses nuances such as intonation, body language, and other non-verbal cues that are critical to understanding human interaction and communication. The subtleties of communication that are readily apparent in face-to-face interactions were absent in this context, which may have influenced the depth and richness of the data gathered. For instance, it is possible that some participants' emotions or intentions may not have been fully captured or understood due to this limitation. Future research could aim to employ video or voice-based digital technologies to incorporate the missing dimensions of non-verbal communication, thereby achieving a more holistic understanding of the community's interactions. Additionally, conducting a comparative analysis between text-based and non-text-based interactions in similar settings could offer valuable insights. These potential research paths underscore the need for a multi-modal approach to understand fully the dynamics of remote and virtual communities in the emerging Web3 era.

Researchers investigating this space may want to consider exploring adjacent constructs—such as emotional intelligence, values-based leadership, and community engagement—in the future. Such studies could enrich our understanding of leadership and culture in DAOs and other decentralized teams. Finally, comparative studies between blockchain-native communities and traditional tech startups may reveal how the structural affordances of decentralization influence leadership authenticity, participation dynamics, and long-term resilience in digital organizations.

5. Conclusion

The company at the center of this study is an early-stage L1 blockchain organization whose founder believed that uncovering shared cultural traits and values that already mark its nascent identity was an important project. Using a hybrid approach to the discovery phase of an appreciative inquiry, this study found that central to the company's positive core are five key elements: excellence, sustainable

and purposeful innovation, genuine inclusivity, continuous learning and adaptation, and creativity and fun. The community's recognition of the company's technology ecosystem underscores a collective drive towards excellence. The company's unique product architecture, allowing for the use of conventional programming languages, broadens accessibility and fosters industry sustainability. This open-access ethos aligns with the community's vision of leveraging Web3 technology as a force for social good, notably for those in developing countries or living under oppressive regimes.

Moreover, the community is characterized by a strong commitment to diversity and inclusivity, with a shared responsibility to rectify any discriminative behavior. Emphasizing continuous learning on both personal and technical levels, the community enhances its diversity and inclusivity, contributing to an enriched collective experience. The use of memes and digital art in this community serves multifaceted roles, from building camaraderie and educating newcomers, to expressing resistance against conventional systems and promoting projects. Beyond their use as marketing tools, these creative expressions play a crucial role in community enjoyment and bonding.

The study's application of appreciative inquiry in a Web3 setting adds to the body of literature, demonstrating its feasibility in a non-traditional, remote context. However, the digital nature of the interactions may have impacted the depth and nature of the dialogue. This study presents a hybrid model of appreciative inquiry that could potentially be applied to future studies in remote-first or decentralized organizations.

Contrary to common Web3 industry stereotypes, the community exhibited a high level of emotional intelligence. The insightful responses and the enthusiasm towards the project not only surprised but also signaled potential opportunities for consulting psychologists to engage meaningfully with Web3 organizations. Future research could delve deeper into these themes, further examining the role of emotional intelligence, creativity, and cultural artifacts in remote, distributed communities. Ultimately, this study sheds light on the unique culture and values shaping this Web3 community, paving the way for further exploration and understanding in this rapidly evolving digital landscape.

Funding: None.

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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