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Consumer roles in brand culture and value co-creation in virtual communities

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ABSTRACT

Using a Netnographic Grounded Theory approach to an online fan forum, a Virtual Community (VC), this article considers brand culture and value co-creation. The research site is a VC containing football fans who are viewed as stakeholders of the organisation Liverpool Football Club. Following a service-dominant logic (SDL) and consumer culture theory (CCT) approaches, analysis is conducted on fan consumer behaviour leading to the submission of a Typology of Seven Consumer Community Cultural Co-creative Roles. The authors reflect on existing theoretical consumer responses to market offerings of exit, voice, loyalty, and twist, found in extant literature, adopting these as four co-creative roles. This study contributes three new consumer co-creative roles of entry, re-entry, and non-entry. Managerial implications of the typology are discussed.

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1. Introduction: service-dominant logic, consumer culture theory, and value co-creation

The explosive growth of the Internet (Kozinets, 2009) leads to new relationship realities in consumer culture. Research on virtual brand communities (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002) is required to clarify the culture and value co-creative roles played by consumers as stakeholders (Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009). In this paper, the authors focus on the notion of consumer roles by adopting and further developing Hirschman's (1970) work on the consumer behaviour concepts of, exit, voice, and loyalty, as well as the work of Cova and Cova (2000) in relation to the idea of twist. A qualitative interpretive Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) perspective (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; 2007) permits netnographic investigation of football fans in virtual communities (VCs) (Chan & Li, 2010; Kozinets, 2009). This involves one VC, RedAndWhiteKop (RAWK), from which a grounded theory (GT) (Follett, 2009; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Goulding, 2000) of consumption experiences in context is generated to consider how fandom offline is augmented by fandom online.

In CCT and service-dominant logic (SDL), brand meanings are interpreted (Scott, 1994) and culturally produced by many authors/stakeholders, often during identity construction (Bengtsson & Ostberg, 2006; Merz, He, & Vargo, 2009; Pongsakornrungrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011). This paper links a CCT perspective, of RAWK, to managerial brand theory (SDL) to show how in-depth understanding of the

brand, through the consumers' eyes, can augment one's understanding of brand management theory and co-creation of brand culture and hence value (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Pongsakornrungrungsilp, 2010).

In SDL, the task of suppliers is to understand customer value creating processes to offer support (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2000; 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). CCT consumer researchers want an alliance between CCT and SDL (Arnould, 2007; Pongsakornrungrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011; Schau et al., 2009). CCT provides many perspectives, techniques, and methods, on gaining a thick understanding of consumer value co-creation processes; a primary task in SDL (Payne, Storbacka, Frow, & Knox, 2009). This paper emphasises the management role of delivering greater supplier-consumer collaborative co-creation (Fournier & Lee, 2009), democratising innovation (Von Hippel, 2005), or innovation creation (Füller, Jawecki, & Mühlbacher, 2007), and the benefits of being a listening led organization (Rappaport, 2010).

2. Football fans as consumers

Football fandom is a significant symbolic practice in which socio-cultural relations are negotiated (Fiske, 1992; King, 2002; Richardson & Turley, 2006, 2007). It is also a global industry (Healy & McDonagh, 2007; Mcnamara, Peck, & Sasson, in press; Pongsakornrungrungsilp, Healy, Bradshaw, McDonagh, & Schroeder, 2008). The strong combination of cultural and market imperatives has special implications for fan culture.

Football fans are not "regular" customers (Grossberg, 1992; Horne, 2006; Kozinets, 1997). They are irrationally loyal ("fan equity" – Hamil, 1999; see also Gorman & Calhoun, 1994; Brothers, 1997). For example, fans do not tend to switch allegiances (Richardson, 2007;

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Sandvoss, 2003). In this pseudo-religious activity, fans are members of sacred “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1983/2006; Richardson, 2007). Community is important to many fans and there is a shared sense of emotional ownership (King, 2000; Football Task Force, 1999). This deep attachment makes fans a “captive market” (Conn, 1997) whose demand is inelastic (Conn, 1999); a monopolistic scenario (Michie & Oughton, 1999). Fandom is co-creative; for example, the stadium atmosphere is produced and consumed by fans (Holt, 1995; King, 2002 p. 141; Pongsakornrungrungsilp, 2010). But the heavy emotional bond (Football Task Force, 1999) may lead to possessiveness and desire for more control or co-creation that goes beyond the traditional offline realm of fandom, such as on non-match-days, or on the part of fans who cannot attend matches for whatever reason (e.g., finance, geographical location). This stimulates fan participation in online environments in order to augment and increase their cultural production. Fans display a willingness to partake in co-construction of their social reality, whether it is through display of banners and flags, or the singing of traditional club songs, or even the penning of some new ones (Pongsakornrungrungsilp, 2010; Richardson, 2007; see also Brown, 2007). Fans generally engage in various such practices, utilising any resources they can, to enshrine their identity (Grossberg, 1992), practice, and experience as co-productive (Kozinets, 2001; Richardson & Turley, 2006, 2007) and non-vicarious. The reason for this may be that consumers tend to regard possessions as parts of their identity/selfhood (Belk, 1987a; 1988). Such possessions have a major role to play in the emotional well-being of the consumer: “if they wax and prosper, he feels triumphant; if they dwindle and die away, he feels cast down” (James, 1890 pp. 291–2). Belk (1988 p. 158; 1995 p. 72) observes that such highly “cathected” possessions in one’s extended self tend to be better cared for, maintained, and safeguarded by consumers. Fans’ desire for interactivity to create their culture in ways that go far beyond market transactions is representative of what Richardson and Turley (2006) observe as a widely held belief amongst supporters: being a supporter is something that you do, not something you can buy (Richardson, 2007 p. 156). In “doing” fandom, RAWK members engage various roles.

3. General consumer roles

Within consumer culture, consumers are deemed to act in various ways. In this paper, Hirschman’s (1970) consumer behaviour roles, exit, voice, and loyalty, are foundational, as is Cova and Cova’s (2000) twist. According to Hirschman (1970), the traditional model of the competitive market economy, within the discipline of economics, predominantly only recognises two consumer processes—buying or not buying; exit or not (see Friedman, 1962).

Voice offers us another perspective; a firm’s customers or organization’s members express dissatisfaction directly to management or to some other authority to which management is subordinate or through general protest addressed to anyone who cares to listen (Hirschman, 1970). Voice is messy; it may be graduated by degree. It is championed by political scientists as the non-market mechanism of choice for active citizenship.

There is an opportunity to compromise here, so that a typical market (exit) and non-market (voice) mechanism can be seen as equally valid (Hirschman, 1970; Holt, 2002; McDonagh, 1998; Peñaloza, 2004); for example, dissatisfied consumers “kick up a fuss”/voice (Hirschman, 1970).

Exit from buying a product is not quite as simple as it may appear, such as when customers cannot stop using a product due to a lack of substitutable alternatives (Hirschman, 1970). The role of voice increases as the opportunities for exit decline. There may also be other reasons for lack of exit as a viable option. A major one is loyalty (Hirschman, 1970).

Customer/member loyalty represents a “special attachment to an organization” (Hirschman, 1970 p. 77). It holds exit at bay and activates voice. Loyalty raises the cost of exit, internally at least; for

example, potential to lose lifelong associations, or “unthinkability” of exit, or potential moral and/or material suffering, or continuing to care about an organization even after exit. Hirschman uses football fans as an example (p. 81; see also Hamil, 1999 and Conn, 1997). This may be because of consumers’/members’ belief they are a “quality-maker” (Hirschman, 1970 p. 99) involved in both supply and demand; both production and consumption of the organization’s output; for example, football match atmosphere “quality-makers” are fans (King, 2002).

Sharing leads consumers to see ownership as common (Felson & Spaeth, 1978). Brand communities show signs of sharing, mastery/control, and possessive attachment over the brand (Belk, 2010; Kleine & Baker, 2004; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Belk (2010) says that fans of sports teams are exemplary of this. Like “sharing,” “appropriation” also implies possession and mastery (Cova & Cova, 2000). The individual consumer takes elements of market offerings and crafts a customised consumption experience (Cova & Cova, 2000). This is the consumer position of twist; the consumer uses products and images in ways foreign to the marketing firm to which they relate (Cova & Cova, 2000). Fuller et al. (2007) discuss how members of various basketball shoe brand communities, like Nike, use the Internet (e.g., Niketalk forum) to design their own styles of shoes referring to this as “innovation creation.” It could also be viewed as twisting. Cova and Cova (2000) refer to this as a consumer “position.” This paper takes consumer “role” or consumer “position” to denote a response to market offerings or consumption contexts. Here, twist is adopted as a “role.”

4. Method

The aim of the study is discovery of the “main concern” of participants; fan goal or prime mover of action (Giske & Artinian, 2007; Glaser, 2001). It is represented here by considering why fans consume a leading sports brand in a VC. Coding and “funneling down” (Glaser, 1992) eventually produced the main concern and its three properties as detailed in Section 5 (Pettigrew, 2002; Wasserman, Clair, & Wilson, 2009). Next, this study’s discovery of the GT core category explains how fans “resolve” this main concern (Glaser, 1998; 2001). To carry out this investigation, this paper’s primary research site is the VC, RAWK; a subset of LFC fans; a brand community. RAWK statistics and a screenshot are given in Appendix A. RAWK is independent of LFC; not a business; free; anyone can join; anyone can say almost anything without censorship; and has membership worldwide (RAWK, 2011). For a list of competing LFC VCs, see Appendix B.

This paper uses a CCT perspective to research RAWK brand culture (Bengtsson & Ostberg, 2006; Kates, 2006). Key research questions are:

- 1) Why and how do fans consume within a VC?
- 2) What are the implications of why and how fans consume in VCs for our understanding of consumer roles in co-creation?
- 3) How, methodologically, can researchers explore how the role of fans has evolved to make use of VCs as a resource?

The authors use Netnography (Kozinets, 2009) for data collection and Grounded Theory (GT) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in coding and analysis within an interpretivist cultural anthropological approach (Geertz, 1973; 1974) this study calls the Grounded Theory Online Ethnographic Process, to understand culture on RAWK (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). The authors seek out the messy experiential contextual detail of consumption (Belk, 1987b; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Holt, 1997 p. 344) to form a Geertzian interpretation of its meaning through the eyes of the consumers (Brown, Fisk, & Bitner, 1994; Geertz, 1974; Payne et al., 2009).

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