

Online Brand Community as a Social Apparatus

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This study reconceptualizes the online brand community as a ‘social apparatus’. This perspective challenges the extant view of online brand communities as relatively linear constructs in terms of user accumulated cultural capital and social order as well as the concept of value through social practices. We illustrate, that the inherent diversity of a contemporary online community is composed of far greater complexity than a single brand-oriented discourse. Thus, practices of accumulating cultural capital and the evolution of the online community through multiple types of discourses needs consideration. For managers, this implies an increased need for understanding cultural discourses and the construction of brand value in online contexts.

Keywords: Brand community, social apparatus, cultural capital, netnography

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Introduction

The study of brand communities has become a staple topic, especially in the field of consumer culture theory (e.g. Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002; Lüdicke, 2006; Schau et al. 2009; for CCT, see e.g. Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Also, researchers have recently shown increasing interest in the social consumption practices manifesting in online communities (e.g. Kozinets, 2002; Schau, 2005; Cova and Pace, 2006). In CCT, these methodological approaches have become known as 'netnography' (e.g. Kozinets 1998; 2002; 2006; 2009).

This pioneering work has provided a robust foundation for consumer research in online communities. However, as the online context continues to evolve from a nascent stage, evident in the time of these pioneering research efforts, some assumptions need to be revisited. Contemporary online practices not only increasingly manifest through practices outlined in postmodern frameworks of consumption (e.g. Brown, 1990; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995), but also work as catalysts for their increasing spread in consumer culture (Firat and Dholakia, 2006; Deuze, 2006). It is no longer the early adopters who dominated the online communities, a feature of the Internet during much of the early research. At the time consumers, had a 'reason to be there', to participate in online discourses with brands they felt affinity with (Cova and Pace, 2002; Kozinets, 2002; Muñiz and Schau, 2005).

Online communities thus became conceptualized as being dominated by a single (brand-oriented) discourse (Cova and Pace, 2002, Kozinets, 2002; Muñiz and Schau 2005), in which cultural capital (e.g. Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 2002) is accumulated somewhat linearly (a user moves 'up the social ladder' by accumulating cultural resources and doing 'good deeds' relevant to the brand). Due to the relative ease of participation, the bar for observing and contributing in social online contexts has become lowered. Therefore, online communities are no longer only hubs where cultural capital (see e.g. Holt, 1998) is constructed through brand discourses only (by displaying brand-related knowledge), but have become increasingly organic aggregate meeting-places, not focused around a brand, but around practices (or 'lifestyles') under which various discourses are negotiated.

To assess the contemporary nature of the online communities, we need new frameworks for understanding these vast discursive entities, how cultural capital is acquired in them, and how value becomes negotiated. Our proposed perspective transforms the community's state of being into something that can be usefully analyzed by understanding them as *social apparatuses* ('dispositif' in French), as introduced by Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1977; Deleuze, 1992; Peltonen, 2004).

Thus, our research questions are: 1) What is the role of the diverse discursive nature of an online brand community? 2) How is cultural capital negotiated through the discourses in a online brand community? 3) What implications does such a context have on the negotiation of value? 4) What are the managerial implications of the online brand community as a social apparatus? Thus, we have acquired considerable understanding of the complex social phenomena in a highly diverse, online brand community through netnographic methods guided by a strong autoethnographic orientation.

Theoretical background

Consumer culture theory (CCT) has been guided, from its inception, with a constructivistic / interpretivistic ontology and epistemology (e.g. Arnould and Thompson, 2005). These

underpinnings have guided the field of CCT into inquiries of holistic understanding of social phenomena in highly contextualized settings. The notion of the brand community has claimed centrality in research on consumer collectives in real-life consumption contexts (Celsi et al., 1993; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; McAlexander et al., 2002, Algesheimer et al., 2005) as well as in online research (e.g. Nelson and Otnes, 2005; Kozinets, 1997; 2002; 2006). Overall, brand communities have been characterized as consumer collectives that share norms of behavior related to the brand discourse and the institutionalized practices that arise from them. Commonly, the brand discourse has been seen as the overarching driver of consumer interaction (e.g. Cova and Pace, 2002; Kozinets, 2002), and value has commonly been conceptualized as arising from all practices that pertain and emerge from the social interactions within the community (Schau et al. 2009). Some netnographic studies have also shown interest in the negotiation (and thus constant conflict) between producers and consumers (e.g. Giesler, 2008) and raised their dynamic nature into the forefront (McAlexander et al. 2002).

In similar vein, we wish to bring forth a view of a marketplace (a social online site), where the negotiation (and conflict) does not occur under a brand discourse, but rather the brand discourse is a continuously evolving outcome of the complex patterns of negotiation manifesting as discourses and practices themselves. Through this negotiation, cultural agents participating in an online community can acquire *cultural capital*. Introduced by Bourdieu (1984), and developed in the discourse of CCT by Holt (1998), “cultural capital consists of a set of socially rare and distinctive tastes, skills, knowledge, and practices...embodied as implicit practical knowledges, skills, and dispositions; objectified in cultural objects...[and] is fostered in an overdetermined manner in the social milieu of cultural elites” (Holt, 1998: 3). We argue, that such is the nature of negotiation in an online community – where various distinctive discursive practices clash and are constantly recontextualized through negotiation among cultural agents. Thus, such discursive practices construct novel shared understandings that create value for some and simultaneously remove it from others. Let us now turn to the nature of social practices themselves, and the online brand community as a emergent social apparatus that incorporates discursive practices of various origins.

The so-called ‘practice turn’ in social sciences (e.g. Schatzki, 2001; Schatzki et al. 2002; Reckwitz, 2002; Warde, 2005) is increasingly making its way into consumer research. The radical idea in the practice approach is that it treats ‘practices’ as the site of the social instead of placing the social into the minds, texts, or social interactions (Reckwitz, 2002; Warde, 2005). The online brand community thus emerges a set of discursive (guiding the enunciations within one single discourse) and non-discursive (not directly related to the discourse in question) practices through which the construction of the social apparatus emerges evolutionarily and is constantly being renegotiated and in flux. The study of Schau et al. (2009) served as an important point of departure in a practice-based assessment of online consumer communities. However, their study focused on value creation, and thus dealt with the consumers’ collective meaning-making only superficially. In our approach, we concentrate on the diverse (discursive and non-discursive) online brand community practices, incorporating both texts and community related social practices that occur ‘in-real-life’. Thus, in our view, the discourses and practices themselves are the constantly emergent and dynamic ‘brand’ that arises from these resulting multiple meanings and readings.

The concept of the *social apparatus*, as introduced by Foucault (1977) and further developed by Deleuze (1992), refers to the interlinked and competing discourses and practices that continuously create and destroy meanings while simultaneously defining the rules by which any utterance can emerge within a certain social context. Previous research has treated the notion of value in a brand community as something emanating from any social practice in a relatively unproblematic fashion (e.g. Schau et al., 2009). Instead, we argue that consumers engaged in discursive acts

provide the discursive competition that always creates value for some agents while destroying the value of others, thus continuously renegotiating their place within the social apparatus. The practices governing the different utterances thus guide the evolutionary discursive base of the emergent social apparatus. They converge only on the higher level of the emergent and ever-changing whole of the social apparatus; not in any single discourse (i.e. not one brand, as previous literature suggests). However, our aim is not to suggest that the brand discourse cannot be the most important discourse shaping the social apparatus/community – quite the contrary. We wish merely to question the notion of it being the dominant (or even only) driver of consumer activity within the brand community. As the brand community becomes understood as a social apparatus, it follows that an actor’s cultural capital is no longer drawn from familiarity or activity on behalf of the brand, for example. An actor's ‘capability to act’ within the community stems from cultural capital from many discourses and practices and is constantly in flux. These discourses and practices must have sufficient relevance and acceptability within the social apparatus in order to act as discursive resources or raw material for the actor. We attempt to clarify our framework in image 1:

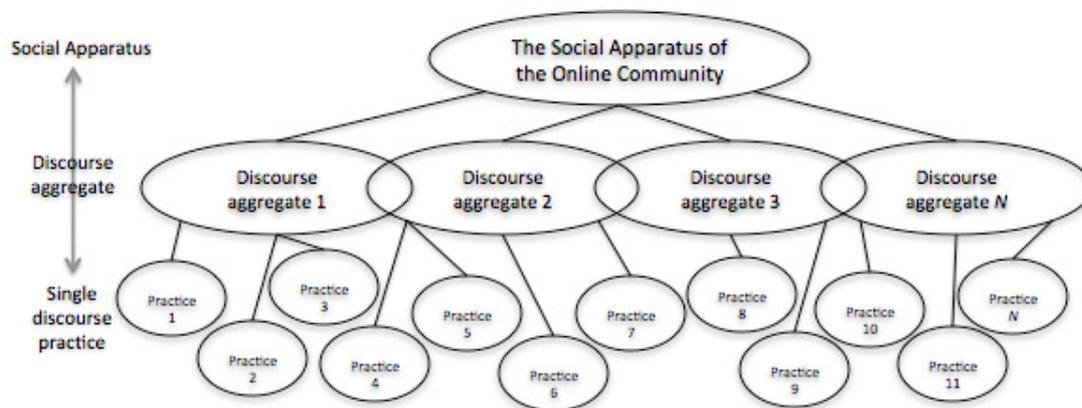


Image 1 - The aggregation of discourses into a social apparatus, as discursive practices draw from diverse cultural resources

Methodology

In extant netnographic studies (e.g. Kozinets 1998; 2002; 2006; 2009), the linkages between various online discourses and practices and their 'otherness' have not been extensively explored (i.e. how discourses and practices from one community or site influence those of another). Our view is one of immersive netnography which entails 1) going beyond the immediate online context, 2) compiling a research team with familiarity with the social apparatus (autoethnographic members), and 3) uncovering the Other via an interest in other social apparatuses that influence the discourses of the social apparatus under study. Through such a holistic approach we wish to highlight that the brand’s meaning is more constituted by what it is not (through its multiple differences) than what it is, as noted by Fournier (1998).

The online brand community ‘Stealth Unit’ (SU) (www.stealthunit.net) was the focus of our netnography. SU began in 2001 as a site for a small circle of Finnish urban electronic music enthusiasts, DJs, and producers, and has grown into more than 5000 registered members and contributors as well as an undisclosed number of followers emerging as a diverse hub ‘urban lifestyle’. Discussion ‘threads’ range from electronic music and related parties to politics, philosophy, fashion and contemporary social phenomena. The first and second authors have been avid followers and contributors, since 2001 and 2003, respectively. This level of immersion and contribution both online and offline gives us a unique autoethnographic understanding of the discursive practices and the evolution of the community from a small site heavily centered around a single discourse into a site of diverse discourses on the aggregate/collision, social apparatus level.

Findings & Discussion

We drew on our autoethnographic understanding to identify key aggregate discourses, each containing specific discursive and non-discursive practices. For closer analysis, an excess of 300 discussion threads with varying lengths were analyzed for this study alone. We categorized the dimensions within the practices (discursive and non-discursive) of the social apparatus as 1) explicit and singular and 2) implicit and serial. The different discourses in the social apparatus range from 3) directly relevant (e.g. the brand discourse and its immediate others) to 4) indirectly relevant (discourses that contribute only peripherally and may not be obvious even to engaged members). In previous research, the main interest has been mostly on the explicit utterances and practices that are seen as 'directly' defining the brand's meaning (the brand discourse). However, not paying attention to the less obvious and somewhat 'meta' utterances that emanate from many discourses and practices limits the researcher's understanding of the complexity and inter-linkages between the discourses. Any utterance uttered within the social apparatus is a result of different discursive and non-discursive practices negotiating and colliding. It is important to note that any given utterance within the social apparatus should be read as a series, meaning that an utterance may or may not contain and represent discursive elements (including practices) from highly relevant to the brand discourse or its immediate others or more peripheral discourses to the brand. In other words, an utterance can rarely be described as purely explicit (1) or directly relevant (3) to the brand discourse, rather there will always be elements that are implicit (2) and emanate from the indirectly relevant discourses (4) that have guided the utterance.

The first example is an illustration of an utterance closely inclined to the 1) explicit and singular and 3) directly relevant. These discourses often deal with internal relations (of users) within the social apparatus, as well as the 'Otherness' of the apparatus.

"Has gone? This is what its always been like, the 'bitter wanker' and 'appreciation' threads intertwine into an overall confusion and machismo? Well, the wisdom has always been out on Stealth and always will be. In praise of stupidity and jungle music. [...] [Fu]'ck what a stupid thread and a wrong opinion!!! (kuilu, on 13.1.2010)

This was uttered in the thread 'Dear United Stealth-ers', which was originated to explicitly discuss how the member felt about the current state of the community. Through this explicit charismatic utterance, the poster is showing contempt and disapproval of other discussants. The utterances 'in praise of stupidity' and 'wrong opinion' are ironic takes on internal lingo. They denounce the inner circle of culturally endowed members (by position), and uses cultural resources from other discourses (in his case, knowledge of other online community practices to show that the discursive practices of SU are 'nothing special') to usurp their position.

The second example is an utterance that is 1) explicit and singular and 4) indirectly relevant. These discourses often deal with distinctly cultural, societal, political and intellectual topics. These discourses and their practices reproduce the social apparatus in more implicit and nuanced, yet still highly influential and relevant ways.

"In all seriousness, I've noticed that for many young adults the situation goes that once you bought something expensive, or your personal finances are otherwise stretched to their limits, ecological, fair trade, organic, and such becomes secondary. When the month's bills and loans are paid for, lidl suddenly becomes quite all right." (Dixoff, on 19.8.2008)

This discourse is only indirectly relevant to the SU brand, yet is highly relevant for the understanding of the social apparatus. The inherent cynicism in the post (and subsequent concurring utterances to it) paint a distinct portrait of the socioeconomic position of a typical member of SU and subsequently the brand's position in society as whole. Also, the content of the posting can be considered to be controversial when understanding the left-leaning, green/urban sympathetic

tendencies of the community, which shows that this discourse is not established as “untouchable” and that this discourse’s negotiation within the social apparatus is ongoing and its position unstable.

The third example is an utterance that is 2) implicit and serial as well as 3) directly relevant.

“An 80s electrohouse video where mustachioed men are cycling with fixie bikes wearing raybans and messenger hats on their way to Siltanen [a bar closely affiliated with the electronic music scene and the SU community] to grab a beer. Good video, but geez.” (Quu, on 14.1.2010)

To understand this utterance, one needs to appreciate how, for example, the aesthetics of 80s electrohouse, moustaches, fixie bikes and Siltanen have emerged as symbols or even cultural icons within SU. In no means has SU originated their meanings, yet it has adopted them as integral elements of its higher order brand (the social apparatus). These meanings are elusive and while directly relevant, they are not accessible without cultural capital outside the single brand discourse.

The fourth and final example is of an utterance that is 2) implicit and serial as well as 4) indirectly relevant. These are usually ironic displays of the discursive practices of the social apparatus. Thus the practice of the utterance supersedes the content of the utterance itself.

“OH BY THE WAY D.O.A. READERZ AND DRUMZ INC CORP PEOPLES TEH IMAEG PUT ON SHIERT IN TEH PAINT PICTUR IS BECAUSE OF "DRUM 2" WHICH IS FULLY GLOBAL YOU CAN SEE IT OF SOME OF TEH LINES IT IS VERY DISTINCTIVE HARDCORE EDGE TO IT KTHXBAL.” (internet, on 15.1.2008)

Postings of highly implicit and indirect nature require considerable amounts of cultural understanding before they can be situated within SU. Posting in all capital letters, intentional misspelling, and the ‘KTHXBAL’ are discursive elements or practices that are quite commonplace in online communities globally. However, that these utterances can be made in SU is important. Here the power of the discursive practice is more important than the content of the utterance, which in this case has very little impact to the social apparatus or the brand. Also, even in this utterance the references to ‘D.O.A’ [Dogs on Acid, a similar UK-based online community] and “DRUMZ” [a US-based brand, that became an inside joke, due to a very public controversy involving SU], serves as a reminder of the immediate Others, both positive and negative, with relevance to the brand.

Discussion & Further Research

Through our autoethnographically oriented immersive netnography, we have attempted to illustrate how discourses and practices in online brand communities have become increasingly diverse, fleeting, and unstable (in terms of progression through cultural capital accumulation and value). We have attempted to show how research in online brand communities can benefit from an expanded ontology of the community as a site of various discourses and practices - the social apparatus. This view brings about new interest in how actors in a social apparatus use and further accumulate cultural capital by drawing on cultural resources from the discourses of other social apparatuses, and how these competing discourses thus both create and destroy value in a nonlinear fashion. While netnography has been previously hailed as a cheap and quick way to ‘do’ ethnography and achieve qualitative data from the online consumption context, our research shows that as people’s online behavior becomes increasingly complex. For managers and researchers, netnography should not be seen as a silver bullet, with which copious amounts of relevant consumer engagement and understanding is easily achieved. We argue that embeddedness for both the researcher and manager alike need to be as (if not more so) immersive as any account of traditional ethnography, and be complemented with other measures of empirical work, such as in-depth interviews of relevant community members IRL, if any profound interpretative understanding is to be achieved.

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