Creative Consumers in Online Consumers Networks: Exploration of Theoretical Implications

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This research examines the concept of creativity through an analysis of the collaborative, collective efforts of consumers working together online. In the process, it seeks to contribute to: (1) mutating conceptualizations of “consumers,” “consumption,” “creation” and “production,” (2) burgeoning understanding of online communities, and (3) initial typologies for understanding the divergent forms of consumer creativity present online. Our central contribution to this discussion is to offer a subtler typology of online creativity behavior that encompasses a range of online “consumer” activity and discussed the roles of relationships, rules, and re-aesthetization of “work” (the three Rs) and their theoretical impact theories.

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SESSION SUMMARY

This session aims to stimulate debate and research development by providing three contrasting perspectives on contemporary creativity and the emerging role of consumers in interpreting, socializing, and even completing creative acts. Consumers are triggering traditional boundaries of creativity, by stretching its application domains and making creativity a diffusely relational construct. Consistent with this boundary stretching, consumers are playing active roles in street art reconstruction of social identities of public spaces, as well as substituting as content providers in cyber networks through open source software communities. Evidence also shows consumers’ manipulation of fashion products by means of creative exploitation of fakes. In other words, interpretation, symbolic elaboration and innovation are not only part of production, but acquire even greater emphasis as part of consumption stages and contribute to the affirmation of what Paul Willis addresses as “Common Culture” (1990). Thus, the lines between and roles in production and consumption are becoming more blurred as consumers creatively alter, interpret and give meaning to products and experiences. And this interaction process continues as these new output are then consumed and produced by other consumers. So, there is a continuous dialogical creative process and evolution. In fact, if artists are typically celebrated for the leading role they play in innovating and bringing their arts to market, the after life of creative objects is definitely under-explored.

Dialogical creativity represents a complementary lens in the understanding of market dynamics around the production and consumption of creative artifacts in socially complex and multifaceted environments. Through this framework, in fact, authors of this special session aim at contrasting the historically dominant approach to creativity, which polarizes attention over the moment of creation and leaves creative opera orphans of their second parent: the consumer. This raises questions about the traditional definitions and roles of producer and consumer as consumers take increasingly creative roles in “producing” products and experiences.

Elaborating on Willis findings (1990), the dialogical dimension of creativity calls to action the consumers who, at least, contribute to the transformation of artistic contents in three ways:

1. through interpretation. “What has been forgotten is that circumstances change cases, contexts change texts. The received view of aesthetics suggests that the aesthetic effect is internal to the text, and a universal property of its form. […] We want to explore how far grounded aesthetics are part, not of things, but of processes involving consumption, processes which make consumption pleasurable and vital” (Willis 1990: 20). Consumers are actually part of a process of cultural production, as far as they provide original meanings and participate to metabolizing and transferring those meanings;

2. through individual identity construction and negotiation. Consumers also take part to a process of selection and appropriation of creative artifacts, which are fundamental levers in constructing and socializing individual identity. “Being human–human be-in-ness–means to be creative in the sense of remaking the world for ourselves as we make and find our place and identity” (1990: 11);

3. thorough sharing and tribalization. Finally, if individual identity construction represents a process that, far from excluding dynamics of socialization, still is mainly focused on the individual self (ego-centered processes), consumers of creative artifacts can also be engaged in the elaboration of contents they wish to share with anonymous others or members of subcultural tribes (etero-directed processes).

The general orientation of the session is interpretive, in bringing together papers dealing with street art movements, fashion products (both original and fakes), and internet open source sites. These works, which cover different domains in arts and creativity, present common file rouge in framing creativity as dialogical dynamics of producers and consumers of creative artifacts, to the point their pretended distinctive roles tend to vanish and shadow one into the other.

In detail, the first paper addresses the appropriation of public spaces by street artists, and questions the role played by citizens as consumers of street arts, arguing the impact played on the completion of those works and the modification of their meanings. The second contribution refers to the “post-original” phase of fashion innovation, and enlightens how fakes can be deployed both by producers and consumers as an ongoing critique to original fashion products. Finally, the third paper examines, overviews, and then offers a typology the different types of creative activity and actors that exist on the Internet. Building upon this categorization and interpretation of online creativity (currently commonly glossed in the media as “Web 2.0”), the presenters offer theoretical understandings about creativity, consumption, and production, and also about online consumer communities and what they actually do.

In this light, current session is devoted to consumer behavior researchers interested in innovation, creativity and postmodern consumption. In addition, this work should appeal to consumers themselves, whose agency is more fully recognized and empirically explored through extensive investigation in various contexts that combine fashion market, public spaces, and virtual places.

ABSTRACTS

“Use of Public Spaces as Creative Acts. Phenomenology of Street Art in a Cross-Cultural Perspective”
Stefania Borghini, Luca M. Visconti, Laurel Anderson, John F. Sherry Jr

Contemporary forms of street art in Europe and US are reshaping the ways of experiencing and consuming public spaces of the past decades. Almost waiving any narcissistic attempt to affirm their identity or, simply, to protest against a certain established social order, modern street artists are changing the aims of their creative products and acts. Recognizing the social ecology, their creative responses are developed within the context of the commercialization of public space and their consumption of this public space. Thus these street artists are both consumers of the public space and producers in a continuing process of creative symbolization. In order to address a consciousness of sense of place and, most of all, a renovated awareness of the role of arts and emotions in ordinary life, they are moving toward new forms of creativity that bring a strong sense of gift-giving and altruism.
Respecting the beauty and adorning the dull and ugly corners of modern towns, they establish new ways of communication with citizens-consumers, and re-enthanc the value of “poor art”, such as poetry and graffiti. Their efforts encapsulate and even overcome the value of symbolic creativity and grounded aesthetics (Willis, 1990). Their creative acts are efforts to make the consumption of art readily available to all.

Through an extended ethnography based on participant observation, in-depth interviews and internet observations, our study analyzes the multiple forms of creativity and messages that street artists are developing in several cities in particular: Milan, San Francisco, London, Phoenix, and Dublin. The internet observations extend these observations to many other sites.

Our data show a rich and complex network of practices that are arising all over the world. The analysis and discussion of findings allow us to unpack the nature and the meanings ascribed to different forms of creative acts performed by these artists:

a) Tag, a reply of the original practices of street art born in New York in the Seventies. It consists in painting nick-names or other words of rebellion. Public space is used to protest against the ugliness of social world;

b) Writing, a pure practice of exercise related to the need of self-affirmation and communication within the community of peers; the aim is to paint nicknames achieving bigger and more beautiful forms through incremental progress and innovation;

c) Sticking, the practice of sticking and spreading drawings and symbols in public spaces; it influences the way consumers can use public space in order to communicate with their audience;

d) Stencil, the replication of the same form or symbol in multiple places. The meaning of the act is related to its diffusion. The value of this personal “logo” can be known and recognized only with high replication. This logic has a high resonance with marketing practices of advertising and branding;

e) Poetic assault, the emerging practice of writing poetry on public spaces (walls, parapets, rolling shutters, mailboxes, and any other space that can be considered anonymous, ugly or dull) and giving it to the neighborhood, to the people walking in the streets, to students, workers and so on;

f) Urban design, a system of several spontaneous street art projects with the aim of improving the aesthetics of the architecture of public spaces or parts of the urban design.

We found that the existing creative acts can be classified into several categories and dichotomies: singular/collective, self-affirmative/altruistic, critical/celebrating, protest/aesthetics.

In these complex webs of meanings and intents, some specific forms of street art (i.e., poetic assault and urban design) are strongly reshaping the way street art has been practiced up to now. A sense of altruism and critical thinking are 1) transforming the consumption of public space and 2) celebrating new ways of consumption.

Fighting against a common view of interpreting public spaces as “no places”, street artists are trying to communicate to their communities and through continuing the creativity process, produce a renovated sense of place based on shared experiences, values and, most of all, on the sense of beauty and the respect towards forms of art like painting or poetry.

Despite the variety of aims and practices, an interesting trend is emerging: the attempt to communicate about life, emotions, common utopias and the essence of things through a creative gift.

According to the rules of some groups of street artists, creative acts are anonymous and cannot have a signature. There are no copyrights for the artists. But consumer response is stimulated through posts on their websites, positive comments from passers-by, and a rising interest in this creative use of public spaces.

This approach toward forms of “humane creativity” (Aleinkov, 1999) is strictly intertwined with the consumption practices of the artists. Encouraged by the initial positive feedback and reactions from consumers and local media, some groups are investing in new forms of communications and encouraging new forms of consumption. They are criticizing marketers’ strategies by applying practices and languages of marketing and advertising. De-constructing official brand logos, packaging, and labels, they work in order to inform consumers about the meanings and consequences of marketing practices. Without a specific deliberate attempt to protest against the market, they prefer to work in order to help consumers to be aware of their consumption acts and choices.

Looking for almost unintended consequences of their creative acts, some artists are adopting a “waiving” attitude. In the name of a shared renovated awareness of the role and potential of public spaces, they accept the loss of control over their creative acts and the role of anonymous artists in order to increase the interest in the consumption of aesthetics, beauty and poetry within their towns.

The contribution of this study is twofold. First, it highlights contemporary creative practices that are shaping consumption patterns, relationships with brands and the marketplace. A new ecology of creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988) thus emerges when we consider the impact on consumption. Secondly, it identifies new ways of production and consumption of public spaces that are transforming the sense of place and collective identities (e.g., Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977; Giddens 1991;Augé 1995;Thrift, 1997).

“Innovation, Creativity and the Post-Original: Reproduction and Knock-offs in the Luxury Sector”

Jamy Annamma Joy

Innovation in the marketing and consumer literature is often presented as a break with the past – a moment of creating the new. This is particularly the case in discussions of totally new to the world products or discontinuous innovations. There is an assumption here that the original is a non-controversial value creating event. Anything that happens after is seen as a post-event activity. Value is thus positioned as an eternal object. In intellectual property debates for instance, the creative moment is seen as the main value producing moment and all else that happens after as mere repetition or reproduction. Even in circumstances where innovation is described as process, novelty is not critically examined. In that sense then, both innovation and innovation management essentialize “originality” and oversimplify the origin of value in the “original.” In the fashion industry the concept of innovation and originality is particularly interesting since fashion by definition changes constantly.

In this paper we extend Rehn and Vacchani’s (2006) idea of the “post-original” in the examination of fakes and reproductions of luxury goods. We argue that a consideration of the after life of products through its transformation as fakes or reproductions allows us to reflect on what constitutes innovation in the first place. Fakes and reproductions can be seen as the “other” in the definition of the original and calls into question the idea of permanence associated with the original. The effort to call something an innovation—moralizing on its newness and originality— is also an attempt to negate the “other.”

This discussion of the original and fake becomes even more critical in the context of the digital economy where it is all about multiple originals /copying with little cost and effort. There is no
distinction between originals and copies. In pre-digital contexts on the other hand, a copy does not have the cache of the original and is seen as an inferior re-casting of the original. The idea of the “post-original” is an attempt to get away from such thinking. It questions the assumptions of the eternal object/event and introduces the idea of impermanence and uncertainty into the notion of the original.

Walter Benjamin (c.f. Benjamin 1968, Buck-Morss 1989) is perhaps the most prolific source on the concept of the original and copy and argues that emergent creativity can be understood in the after life of products—the ways in which things acquire meaning. Innovation must be interrupted in order to become meaningful. He explains this further through the idea of ruination, remembrance and redemption. Once an object is incorporated into a person’s life, it becomes stripped of its ideology and is in a sense un-masked; the term ruination is used to explain this process. Remembrance is the process of memory creation through use and elaboration of meaning. It is in remembrance (mental recasting) that we find the object’s after life—the commercialization of the innovation. It is also through this process that redemption happens—what is forgotten about the object can be brought back in memory and re-examined. In this process the “other” can be re-thought and re-cast as an ongoing critique of the original. The reality of innovation is not in the process of creation so much as in its after life. There is little value in searching for the primal meaning or essentializing specific moments of creation. Instead Benjamin argues for a dialectic engagement with the life of the object where there is no final point nor any point that deserves more attention than another.

In the examination of fakes and reproductions we are doing precisely this—looking at the after life of an object in order to understand the ontology of innovation itself. According to Baumol (2002) an innovation is an invention brought to market. But this is too simplistic. Markets are not homogenous and what works in one might not work in another. If we were to re-think the role of the “original” in terms of particular contexts, we can understand the importance of fakes and reproductions in developing new paths that the after life of the original takes. In the process we bring to the fore the problems of moralization that accompany the taken-for-granted assumptions associated with the “original.”

“Creative Consumers in Online Consumers Networks: Exploration of Theoretical Implications”
Robert V. Kozinets and Andrea Hemetsberger

Much creativity research is cognitive psychological and focuses on the individual level of analysis. However, a considerable amount of consumer creativity is transpiring through interactions of networks of consumers as they communicate visually and textually, share community and forge culture. This research examines the concept of creativity through an analysis of the collaborative, collective efforts of consumers working together online. In the process, it seeks to both extend and complicate notions of “consumers,” “consumption,” “creation” and “production” by demonstrating some of the ways creative acts are inherent in online “consumption” activities. It also contributes to our burgeoning understanding of online communities and their role as “consumption” communities. Finally, this presentation contributes to current understanding by offering an initial typology for understanding the various kinds of consumer creativity present online.

Consumer creativity is by no means a new phenomenon. Moreau and Dahl (2005) note that innovative consumer behavior is actually an integral part in the daily life of every consumer, not a rare activity. Yet, until recently consumer researchers have hardly ventured into this aspect of consumption or prosumption (Moreau and Dahl 2005). Moreover, even recent investigations into consumer creativity have neglected the collaborative side of creative consumer cultures and its implications for altering both marketing theory and managerial practice (e.g., Burroughs and Mick 2004). While management scholars emphasize the enormous innovative potential of online communities for new product development (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004; von Hippel 2005), new insights that theorize the implications of networked creativity are still in their nascent form. In recent research, (Hargadon and Bechky 2006) emphasize a key point: collective creativity takes on a quality distinct from individual creativity. The rise of particular kinds of online creativity reflects an important qualitative shift in the nature of the creative process.

Online consumer creativity is clearly still under researched. In this presentation, we assert that the creativity and productivity of consumers online is exceptional and is beginning to offer major managerial challenges and opportunities that deserve further theorization. Online, consumers are writing and sharing their texts, distributing their various podcasts and vlogs, programming and debugging software together, editing and altering commercial mass culture, creating news, parodies, and satire. Together, consumers are creating sophisticated work—the outcome of an aggregation of collective expertise that is difficult to match elsewhere (Baggazi and Dholakia 2002; Cova, Kozinets and Shakar 2007; Kozinets 2006).

Our central contribution to this discussion is to offer a typology of online creativity behavior that encompasses the full range of “consumer” activity. We are still in the data collection stage and this preliminary framework will be subject to considerable modification prior and probably subsequent to the presentation. We separate out two important dimensions of online consumer creativity. First, we consider the regularity of the contribution: is the creative contribution something that occurs irregularly and with generally low frequency, or is it something that occurs often, in a fairly regular or even permanent-seeming format? The other dimension is collaboration. In this we consider whether the creative contribution occurs with a high level of collaboration between consumers, or whether it is generally the work of only one or a few consumers using only minimal feedback from one another and from the greater communities to which they seek to contribute.

At the base level we consider those with only sporadic contribution and with a low element of collaboration. These “Sidekicks” are generally those who would post, comment upon, or add feedback to an already created work such as a message threat, posting, or blog. At the next level are those who create content for others on the Internet on a semi-regular or dependably regular basis. For these “Sources,” collaboration is generally limited to a collaborative posting, perhaps inviting some general feedback from readers in response. Much online creativity falls into this category, which would include most bloggers and many vloggers. Next, we consider those project groups who gather together for particular projects, such as publishing a zine, creating a video, debugging a program, or erecting a particular web-site. These “Project Mobs” are purposeful, and possess high collaborativeness but low-moderate regularity. At the furthest level of creativity contribution are consumers who gather into organized semi-permanent collectives, which we term “Hives.” These “consumers” are industrious, diligent, and regular, and would include groups such as ongoing Open Source software communities, local Star Trek episode production groups, vlog and podcast production teams, and so on. These Hives have very interesting implications for business and marketing that have begun to be recognized in theorizations of “entrepreneurial consumer tribes” (Cova, Kozinets, and Shakar 2007).

Our typology and theorization link to organizational network theory and suggest that we cease theorizing particular kinds of online consumer creation as a type of leisure activity or a play-
ground for unsatisfied and bored individuals. Very much in the tradition of the medieval craft guilds, creative online communities contain masters, apprentices, and journeymen. Expertise is an essential prerequisite for creativity and therefore highly supported in the guild-like “Project Mob.” Internet technology provides uncountable opportunities to provide information, tutorials, and build up platforms for knowledge exchange and file sharing. In few other places can John Doe simply ask a prominent expert for help and get a near-instant answer, or invitation to join in. The guild system also provided customers with some assurance of quality, because guild members would engage in evaluating each other’s products. Online creative artwork is constantly challenged by evaluations from peers and from the public in an attempt to produce top quality work. Creative online cultures therefore establish peer reviewing systems (as is the case with the Open Source Software movement and its communities). The peer reviewing system combines a source of institutional power with a caring oeuvre. It is an aspect of socialization that underpins Hives and Project Mobs, and perhaps brings Sources together into leadership positions within these social forms.

In further examination, we consider the role of “the three Rs”: Relationships, Rules, and the Re-aesthetization and re-enchantment of creative “work,” and the implications of these altered understandings for our theories of consumers, communities, and creativity.

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