1. Consensus Formation and Conflict Management in Self-Organized Online Communities

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This paper investigates how a self-managed community of consumption, (outdoorseiten.net) manages conflict by means of a democratic decision-making process. We examine disputes that arise within the community and whether and how members with divergent opinions subordinate themselves to the common community goal. Heterogeneity is purportedly valued as source of innovation, but in this community, management of conflicts actually favors homogeneity by privileging member consensus over innovation, leadership, and efficiency. Our research confirms some dialectical tensions found in previous research on contested consumption (Lüdicke and Giesler, 2008), and explicates how decision and conflict management works within user-organized communities.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

This session brings together three papers that delve into issues of heterogeneity in brand communities and consumption-oriented (activity centered) communities. Until recently, researchers primarily emphasized the “homogeneity of people united by a common commitment to a particular set of consumption items or activities” when exploring brand and consumption communities (Schouten and McAlexander 1993, p.389). Increasingly, practitioners and consumer culture researchers alike recognize the import of examining more closely the elements and structure of heterogeneity in brand and consumption communities (Cova, Pace, and Park 2007, Fournier and Lee 2009). Nevertheless, an understanding of heterogeneity and structure within brand and consumption communities is still in its infancy. We recognize that sometimes oppositional tensions within a brand community can contribute positively to identity enactment and community growth (Fournier and Lee 2007; Muñiz and Schau 2005; Schau and Muñiz 2002). However, substantially different brand meanings among sub-tribes within a brand or consumption can thwart corporate brand strategy (Cova et al. 2007). The session redresses the gap in our understanding of heterogeneity in brand and consumption communities. Specifically, our session examines the strategic management of heterogeneity within three different consumer collectives characterized as: brand community, consumption community and consumer collective. Each community is further characterized by differing levels of naturally emerging heterogeneity, a differing presence of brands within the collective and vastly different strategies for managing heterogeneity.

The first paper focuses on the outdoorseiten.net (ODS) community. In this German-speaking online forum of more than 13,000 members, community members discuss topics related to outdoor sports and develop user-generated equipment considered superior to commercial offerings and labeled under the community’s own brand and logo. The community operates with a democratic ethos and shares a broad grand narrative about both outdoor lifestyle and user-generated innovation. Heterogeneity is purportedly valued as source of innovation, but in this community, management of conflicts actually favors homogeneity by privileging member consensus over innovation, leadership, and efficiency. Consensus is rallied to resist the intrusion of commercial brands and endorsements in the forum, maintaining the exclusivity and perceived superiority of the community’s own brand and logo.

The second paper examines the consumption community centered on running. This community implicates many brands simultaneously, has high levels of naturally occurring heterogeneity, and no shared grand narrative. In fact, this community is characterized by multiple incommensurate discourses related to ideology, values, structure, and membership criteria. Strategically, multiple brands play off and exacerbate heterogeneity, fracturing the collective. The collective attempts to navigate the tensions of this heterogeneity in order to preserve the advantages of diversity. Some brands and community segments gloss the homogeneity stressing a unified grand narrative, while other brands and community segments highlight incommensurate grand narratives that threaten the fabric of the community itself. In contrast to focusing on a user community that promotes homogeneity and consensus among heterogeneous users, this research highlights the strategic intent of both users and firms to manage community heterogeneity.

Lastly, we come full circle to the third paper that focuses on a collective with a strong grand narrative, where strategic management of naturally emergent heterogeneity is entirely user-controlled and brands are all but absent. In the online Anorexia Nervosa community, the grand narrative that binds the community is potentially lethal to the consumer creator and disreputable within the broader social framework. In this high stakes context, disputing the grand narrative within the community could contribute to the overall welfare of the community. However, the community uses a two-fold strategy to manage heterogeneity. The first, and most common, strategy is to quash and/or eliminate evidence of dissent, leaving an historical record that wholly supports this tragic grand narrative. The second component of the strategy is to gloss homogeneity by embracing the assumption of the silent majority’s consent and endorsement of the grand narrative. This contributes to the user experience that the grand narrative is totalizing and broadly embraced, when in fact that is not the case in the larger society and is unlikely to be true even in the limited online collective. This shows the dark side of online communities that allow for people to believe that purely pathological and marginalized discourses reign supreme.

Our session benefits from the expertise of Avi Shankar who serves as our discussion leader to animate a discussion of the implications of heterogeneity within consumer collectives. We expect this session to appeal to consumer culture researchers concerned with subcultures of consumption, brand communities, social networks, and consumer-brand relationships. Since all three of the papers investigate communities as a resource for consumer identity work, consumer researchers interested in consumer identity are also likely to be interested in the session.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Consensus Formation and Conflict Management in Self-Organized Online Communities”

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In online communities, like-minded people with similar interests get together virtually to exchange experiences made with specific products, share problems, and come up with ideas about how to modify existing products or even develop new ones. In brief, creative consumers attracted by new products and innovation can often be found in online communities that are centered around common interests (Kozinets 1999; Kozinets 2002; Lynn et al. 1997; McAlexander et al. 2002; Muniz and Schau 2005; Sawhney and Prandelli 2000; Verona et al. 2004). One such community is “outdoorseiten.net” (ODS), an online message board dedicated to outdoor sports. In this German-speaking forum more than 13,000 members discuss topics related to outdoor sports and equipment. Besides sharing their experiences with existing products, members discuss ideas for product improvements and even realize their ideas in the form of physical prototypes. For the members of the community, the developed products not only compete with but are typically considered as superior to commercial offerings. Self-made gear and equipment belong to the community’s own “outdoorseiten.net” brand and are labeled with the community’s logo. We investigate
how the community finds a consensus for key decisions through a
democratic decision-making process. Data reveal how disputes that
arise in key decisions require members with divergent opinions to
subordinate themselves to the common community goal, and po-
tential consequences that arise at individual and community levels.

Examples found in the ODS forum illustrate that although the
community is marked by an atmosphere of friendship, trust and
joint decision-making, under some circumstances the community
is confronted with and has to overcome serious conflict potential.
One such example is the development of the “forum 42 tent.” In
this project, the community developed an outdoor tent together with
the German company “Wechsel tents.” All key tent decisions (size,
design, materials) were specified by community members through
a democratic process, such as open polls. Participants had to accept
the decisions supported by the majority of the developers’ team.
The project initiator and original moderator of the “forum 42 tent”
project was replaced by another community member because he tried
too hard to realize his own ideas. Ultimately, he left the community
frustrated. This shows the consequences that arise when members
interfere with the community’s democratic values.

Another topic which led to serious discussions among the core
leaders of the community was the question, whether the community
should be open for advertisements of commercial companies. While
one of the founders of the community endorsed advertisements,
other long-time members strictly refused this possibility. In their
eyes they were not compatible with the overall objective of being
an entirely independent source of all outdoor-related information.
Also in this case a dispute and hefty discussion arose between the
members which in the end led the founder to leave the community.
This example also illustrates that conflicts within the community
may not only have influences on single members but also on the
community as a whole. The issues with regard to advertising were
one of the main reasons that in 2006 the community established a
registered, non-profit foundation. The main intention of doing so
was to ensure the community values and culture and to distribute
the decision-making power but also the responsibilities among
various members. Also, the objective was to make the community
less vulnerable towards decisions and actions of single individuals.
With the ODS foundation also leadership roles were established.
Every year a Board of Directors is elected, which is in charge of
administrative and strategic tasks. However, power of the Board of
Directors is limited when it comes to day-to-day or content issues in
the forums (O’Mahony and Ferraro 2007). Authority is still in the
hands of the community members and project teams. Everyone com-
munity member is able to and actually engages in communicating
and decision-making. In general the management can be described
as consensus oriented and basic democratic. Of course this leads to
the fact that sometimes it takes quite a long time to find consensus
and not always all members agree with the decisions of the major-
ity. In case of serious disagreement between the ODS community
and an individual, severe means are taken to protect the community
and its values (Triandis 1985). These range from tolerating, ignor-
ing, admonishing and rebuking up to banning members from the
community without any exceptions not even for its founders. Our
research sheds light on consumers conflicts encountered in self-
managed communities of consumption confirming some dialectical
tensions found in previous research on contested consumptions
(Lüdicke and Giesler 2008). It adds to a better understanding on
how communities and self-organized networks function, and how
decision and conflict management works within communities.

“The Consumption Implications of Contested Community”
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The term ‘consumption oriented community’ refers to a broad
range of collectives that center around some form of consumption.
While marketing and consumer research has explored a variety of
communities that fall into the broad category of “consumption ori-
ented community” two categories of communities have dominated
the literature: brand communities and subcultures of consumption.
Subcultures of consumption, introduced by Schouten and McAlex-
der (1995), refer to “a distinctive subgroup of society that self-
selects on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product
class, brand, or consumption activity” (p. 43). These groups are
characterized by “an identifiable social structure, a unique ethos,
or set of shared beliefs and values; and unique jargons, rituals,
and modes of symbolic expression” (p. 43). Brand communities,
a special subset of subcultures of consumption focused around a
single brand, were first theorized in depth by Muniz and O’Guinn
(2001). They defined these groups as specialized, non-geographi-

bound communities based on a structured set of social relationships
among admirers of a brand.

Both brand and non-brand focused communities have been ex-
plored from the perspective of community members, demonstrating
how the focal brand and/or activity impacts members and how their
consumption choices and behaviors are impacted by membership in
these communities (Algesheimer et al. 2005; Martin et al. 2006;
McAlexander et al. 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Muniz and
Schau 2005; Schouten et al. 2007; Schouten and McAlexander 1995)
. The interactions between brand communities and firms has also
been extensively examined, with work describing how to build these
communities (McAlexander et al. 2002), how they bring value to
the firm through purchase behavior (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006),
how the communities create value by engaging in specific practices
(Schau et al. 2009), how they influence new product adoption and
loyalty towards competitors products (Thompson and Sinha 2008),
and how communities respond to the strategic actions of firms, like
brand extensions (Avery 2007).

Surprisingly, there is a dearth of knowledge about the inter-
actions between non-brand focused subcultures of consumption
and brands and other corporate resource providers. We propose
that a primary reason for why there is a vast level of inequality in
the amount of research addressing brands for brand communities
compared to that of non-brand focused subcultures of consumption
is that these groups are often treated as conceptually equivocal in em-
pirical examinations, with researchers glossing over the differences
between these groups (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Thompson
and Troester 2002). While a broad discussion of the theoretical
differences between all these communities is beyond the scope
of this paper, we assert that the theoretical melding of non-brand
focused subcultures of consumption and brand communities has
resulted in a limited understanding of how non-brand subcultures of
consumption operate and how firms and brand interplay with these
communities. Specifically, the role of brands and other corporate
entities is vastly different within these two communities. Within
brand communities, the community forms around a single brand.
On the other hand, non-brand subcultures of consumption form
around a consumption activity, and then multiple brands play a role
within the community, with no single brand dominating the ethos
(as is the case with a brand community). As we will show later,
the structural position of brands within communities, as well as
the presence of multiple brands within a community, has important