Commodifying the Self: Online Social Networking Profiles As Brand Communities

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This exploratory paper asks whether online social-networking sites, such as Facebook, can be thought of as brand communities in which the individual is the brand and her social network is the brand community. This paper extends conceptualizations of brand community beyond goods and services by applying it to individuals as brands. This paper also seeks to understand how online profiles are branded, who the customers for these brands are, and how the brand identity and brand community are promulgated. It also explores the degree to which online communities represent a challenge to critiques of postmodern community as inauthentic, mass and depersonalized.

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From motorcycles and cars, to the X-Files and Xena: Warrior Princess, brand communities can emerge and coalesce in the most varied and surprising of places. (Kozinets 1997; Muniz & O’Guinn 2001; Muniz and Schau 2005; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) In the six years since Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) explicated the concept of brand community, the model has been applied to a number of different brands and goods, but rarely has it been applied to the context of people. While numerous studies have explored the boundaries and functions of brand community, both online and offline, they have been restricted to the context of tangible goods, such as Macintosh computers (Belk and Tumbat 2002), or experiential products, such as the television program Star Trek (Kozinets 2001).

The research proposal outlined here addresses this shortcoming by applying the concept of brand community to a new context, one in which the individual consumer is the brand. Specifically, it argues for exploring the degree to which individuals think of their online profiles on social networking sites like Facebook as self-branding and the degree to which these profiles represent brand communities. The research uses as its foundation a definition of brand community as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand.” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412)

Methodologically, it argues for the use of qualitative methods, specifically focus groups or in-depth interviews with young adults who use Facebook regularly. Focus groups are well suited to exploratory research that is still in the beginning stages. Based on these group interviews, this paper explores the meanings individuals attribute to their profiles, the way in which these profiles represent the individual as a brand to be marketed, and the manner in which this self-branding fosters a community or social network around the individual-as-brand.

While most young adults might not explicitly think of themselves as brands or their online profiles as marketing campaigns in support of brand communities, Facebook users doubtless carry out significant message framing and maintenance work. Indeed, about two-thirds of Facebook users log on daily to update their online profiles and to check the updated profiles of their peers. (Arrington, 2005) As well, members of this generation are used to-and are not entirely put off by—advertising’s encroachment into most aspects of their daily lives. While their impression maintenance may not be overtly construed as ‘brand’ management, the motivations are not dissimilar. Just as Harley-Davidson must carefully craft and monitor its public image, so too must individuals with online profiles on social networking sites.

This paper defines social network sites as a collection of online profiles that allow users to paint carefully circumscribed and easily updated electronic portraits of themselves. A fundamental dimension of the profile, and therefore of the self, entails the extent of social connectedness someone claims, as evidenced by the number of links to ‘friends’ someone purports to have.

Following Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), brand community is conceptualized as comprising three components or attributes: consciousness of kind, or a sense of connection between members and a shared knowledge of belonging; shared rituals and traditions, or common actions that help socialize new members into the community while perpetuating a shared history and consciousness; and moral responsibility, or a sense of shared duty or obligation to the community.

As a brand community centered on an individual, online social networking profiles offer valuable insight into the tension between the often conflicting notions of traditional and postmodern communities, a tension raised by Tommies (1887/1957) in his distinction between Gemeinschaft (community) and Gesellschaft (society). The former is seen as natural, real and organic, whereas the latter is seen as depersonalized, mass and inauthentic. Indeed, the modern consumer society is often blamed for the demise of intimate, premodern community. At the same time, social networking sites are often decried for the false or shallow communities they create. Online relationships in this sense are seen as tenuous substitutes for meaningful offline interactions. But thinking of these online networks as brand communities suggests, just as Muniz and O’Guinn found with their research, that at least to some degree, real community can be found in these unlikely situations. Just as a community of Saab owners is a legitimate, noncompensatory kind of community, so too are brand communities that revolve around an individual and their online self or brand.

As a way of exploring online profiles as a form of brand community, this paper also seeks to understand how profiles are branded, who the customers for these brands are, and how the brand identity and brand community are promulgated. Do these profiles reinforce the brand to existing ‘consumers’ thereby maintaining already established social networks, or are they efforts at winning new converts to expand the social network or brand community? If they are efforts at capturing a greater slice of the social network pie, then who represents the competition and are individual profiles pitted against one another? Lastly, by highlighting the self as a brand and social interconnectedness as a desirable attribute, does it offer a form of resistance against the homogenizing forces of mass marketing or is it...