We Happy Few: Redefining Community in Marketing

Aubrey R. Fowler III, University of Nebraska, Lincoln
Michael Krush, University of Nebraska, Lincoln

Community has seen an increasing level of interest with marketing scholars both as a context for a variety of consumer behaviors as well as a consumer behavior unto itself; however, the investigation into community has seen its share of challenges. We attempt to subdue these challenges by drawing upon various sociological, psychological, and ecological literatures to define community, offering suggestions for what constitutes community. We then outline various means by which marketing supports this definition and provide an overview of how this definition may aid our understanding of brand communities and the notion of a community’s brand.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13421/volumes/v35/NA-35

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Community has seen an increasing level of interest with marketing scholars both as a context for a variety of consumer behaviors as well as a consumer behavior unto itself. We have seen marketers investigate the impact community has upon various consumption activities (Cova 1997; Hill and Stamey 1990), the rites and rituals of various consumption communities (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993, Schouten and McAlexander 1995), and the process of how certain communities develop and grow around various brands (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig; 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Muniz and Schau 2005). However, despite this growing interest and the wealth of knowledge garnered by such studies, a consistent definition of community in the marketing literature is elusive.

As a result, there are three main challenges to the exploration of community in marketing. First of all, the notion of community is inexact in a definitional sense both in terms of how one identifies a community and in how it is distinguished from subcultures or other such social units. Second, a set of challenges arises when we attempt to outline the boundary conditions of what constitutes a community, and third, there is a need to consider the variations between different types of communities as well as the very least, the varieties of communal relationships that exist within communities. Our purpose is to attempt to resolve these challenges and provide a definition of community that allows marketers to move forward with an examination of community both in theory and in practice.

To do so, we first draw upon various sociological, psychological, and ecological literatures to understand the fundamental components of community. Collectively, these streams suggest that community is a social system that possesses two components, a structural and an inter-relational component, that exist between and amongst its inhabitants. We draw from Brint’s (2001) notion that community is driven by “aggregates of people.” These collections share something—be it a set of beliefs, ideals, desires, activities, or concerns—that binds them together; yet, we also believe that there is something more to community than simple collections of people. Brint’s definition, though thorough, remains vague in that it may also describe a family, a classroom, or a group of friends enjoying a camping trip.

Building upon the work of Giller (1984) who defined ecological communities as made up of smaller “guilds” or groups of animals, plants, and bacteria as well as the efforts of Cooley (1909), Durkheim (1893), and Simmel (1950), we argue that a community is formed when subgroups of intimately related people who are bound by strong ties develop relatively weaker ties with other subgroups of people. Ultimately, we arrive at the following definition: Community is a structured and inter-related network between groups of people where each individual group as well as the collective network of groups is bound together by relations that may include affect, loyalty, common values, personal concerns, common activities, and/or beliefs and where the tie strength of relationships within groups is relatively greater than the tie strength that exists between groups.

From this definition, we attempt to align the components of our proposed definition with the existing marketing literature on community. Then we apply our definition of community to marketing and, specifically, brand community. First, we find that marketing research has alluded to collections of distinct sub-groups that form a broader aggregate community (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Second, the extant literature suggests that marketing can facilitate ties between groups of consumers (Cova 1997; Price and Arnould 2000). For example, two of the main arenas in which marketing exhibits its ability to bind sub groups into a larger entity is through the utilization of brands (Muniz and O’Guinn 1995; Muniz and Schau 2005) as well as the construction of community between consumers (Celsi et al. 1993; Arnould and Price 1993).

We also submit that our definition of community aids in the conceptualization and identification of brand community. We argue that a brand community occurs when the brand facilitates the relatively weaker ties that bind subgroups together. We also make a further delineation. Specifically, we examine the ties within subgroups, suggesting that if the ties that exist within sub-groups are not a result of the brand but rather a result of other attributes associated with affect, loyalty, common values, etc., then it is not a brand community. In this case, the brand has been adopted by the community. We describe this structure as a community’s brand, arguing that if the brand is consequently removed from the community, the community would carry on without the brand. These brands, rather than assisting the formation and development of a community and its rituals, are invited into the community much as Kates’ (2004) informant suggests when he states “if a company chooses to acknowledge us, we will tend to shop there, or purchase that product with an almost blind devotion…Levi-Strauss has been in the community for years” (458).

Thus, we posit that certain communal bodies may in fact constitute both brand communities as well as a community’s brands. For example, The Harley Davidson subculture of consumption identified by Schouten and McAlexander (1995) appears to be a collection of various subgroups such as the Mom-and-Pops, RUBs, Dikes on Bikes, and Hard Core bikers (to name a few). Each subculture has strong ties within their specific groups based on such elements as loyalty, affect common values, personal concerns, common activities or beliefs; and these groups have adopted Harley Davidson as a community brand. However, when the various subgroups come together at Sturgis, the brand facilitates the between-group weak ties that bind these subgroups together. Harley Davidson’s marketing vis a vis the biker rally at Sturgis then helps facilitate a brand community.

Ultimately, we believe that community, both as a concept and a reality, is a complex and difficult web of human relationships within varying environments; and the importance of understanding such phenomena has been noted within sociology, ecology, psychology, and marketing. This paper is an attempt to provide one perspective that may aid in clarifying what community is in terms of its structure and the various types of community that may appear. It is our hope to take the study further and explore its ramifications within particular contexts.

References
852 / We Happy Few: Redefining Community in Marketing


Merton, Robert K. (1949), Social Theory and Social Structure: Toward the Codification of Theory and Research, Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.


