Consumer Entrepreneurs: a Netnographic Study of Facebook’S Next Top Model

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Following the stream of research on audience participation in media culture and the current interest in entrepreneurship in consumer tribes, this working paper focuses on fans who attempt to overcome the limited chances for participation in a particular institutional field. The project explores consumer entrepreneurship in the context of the grassroots Facebook competition for aspiring fashion models based on the reality TV hit “America’s Next Top Model.” The objectives of the project are to 1) refine our understanding of fans’ producerly consumption activities and their relation to consumer entrepreneurship, and 2) examine the implications for marketers and other institutional members.

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generalized reciprocity were witnessed when self-enforcing social norms encouraged such behaviors (e.g., Bó 2007; Kandori 1992). The Freecycle group offered rules to ensure reciprocity and social norms helped enforce it. Guidelines were offered for the number of “Wanted requests” an individual could post; the frequency of repeat requests; and the requirement of placing an Offer before a Wanted post. Further, Moderators promote reciprocity by monitoring Offers-to-Wanted ratios and sending notes to those who practice negative reciprocity. 

Community and Trust. Research on kinship groups has observed that there is maximum trust and minimum social distance among people who engage in generalized reciprocity (Sahlins 1972). Despite critiques of Internet communities as “faceless and fleshless” (DeGraff, Wann, Naylor and Robin 2001, 61) and arguments suggesting reciprocity may diminish among larger communities (Hyde 1983), Freecyclers repeatedly referred to the group as community and felt connected to other members. The connection, however, mirrors relationships of “limited liability” (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001); nothing more is expected from members other than to donate and request items, and to tip up those items on time. Still, members discussed a consciousness of kind (“atypical consumers”) that manifested itself as a shared identity, which fostered trust (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001).

Motivations & Benefits For Use. Although predicated on environmental activism, when asked why they use Freecycle, members repeatedly and passionately referred to receiving free stuff (egoism) and the “life” left in their goods and the possibility of sharing with others who needed them rather than environmental motives. This sort of generalized reciprocity is similar to that observed outside of kin groups—especially from those with wealth when they shared goods with those in need (Udehn 1996). Rather than leaving goods on the curb or donating to charity shops, Freecycle members wanted to know that someone would really benefit from their goods. Thus, the perceived need was an important part of this generalized reciprocity. Giving to those who demonstrated the most need in their ‘stories’ was a common practice. Thus, the deserving heuristic was applied, much like in dispositional strategies with family members (Price, Arnould, and Cerasi 2000). Throughout the gift process, Freecyclers sacrifice monetary reward in favor of a feeling of helping others.

In sum, the existence of generalized reciprocity appears to operate in a contemporary online community. Different from traditional kin-based reciprocity, this forum allowed ‘strangers’ to freely give without expecting anything in return from the recipient. Rather, the group itself experiences reciprocity and perpetuates the gift exchange. Through this continuous exchange members appear to practice a new form of altruism while fulfilling the egoism of commoditization (Belk 2007). Freecycle is not a form of escape from the market (Kozinets 2002); the community remains firmly entrenched in the market (Arnould 2007).

References

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“Have you always thought that you would do a better job than the girls on ANTM and CNTM and have always wanted to enter the competition? Well now you can!! Get ready for this competition! Inspired by America’s and Canada’s Next Top Model, we are going to have our own Facebook Model Search.”
Silvia3, founder of the Facebook’s Next Top Model Competition

3Pseudonyms are used to preserve informants anonymity.
Consumer Culture Theory has an established tradition of examining consumers’ creative appropriation of marketers’ offerings (see Arnold and Thompson 2005). Concepts such as co-creation (Vargo and Lusch 2004), countervailing market responses (Thompson and Coskuner-Ballı 2007), interagency (Kozinets et al. 2004), textual poaching (Jenkins 1992), and prosumption (Kozinets 2007) are part of that tradition.

Following the stream of research on audience participation in media culture (e.g., Jenkins 1992, 2006; Kozinets 2001; 2007) and the current interest in entrepreneurship in consumer tribes (Cova, Kozinets and Shankar 2007), this working paper focuses on fans who attempt to overcome the limited chances for participation in a particular institutional field. The project explores consumer entrepreneurship in the context of the grassroots Facebook competition for aspiring fashion models based on the reality TV hit “America’s Next Top Model.” One objective of the project is to refine our understanding of fans’ producerly consumption activities and their relation to consumer entrepreneurship. A second objective is to examine the implications for marketers and other institutional members.

Background

On May 20th 2003, supermodel Tyra Banks launched the reality television series America’s Next Top Model (ANTM). Now in its 10th cycle (season), ANTM has become a worldwide phenomenon broadcast in 90 countries (www.channelcanada.com/Article1140.html) with franchises in 40 including (www.tyrbanks.com) Australia, Britain, Canada, China, Germany, Israel, Norway, the Philippines, and Russia.

On ANTM, viewers are exposed to the transformation of everyday young women into potential top models as they compete for the chance at a modeling career. The show opens up a window—albeit a limited and potentially distorted one—on the modeling industry and allows viewers to learn about the norms and practices of the field via exclusive footage of high fashion photo shoots, runway shows, casting sessions, and advertising production.

Fashion modeling reality TV first appeared on North American screens only five years ago. Its emergence and popularity constitute a novel reality for the modeling field in that its production practices are increasingly being commodified (Sadrai-Orafai 2005). Fans’ enthusiasm for the show paired with new affordable technologies and the possibilities of the Web 2.0 are resulting in producerly consumption activities ranging from fan fiction to wikimedia (cf. Kozinets 2007) to grassroots modeling competitions.

Method

Countless blogs (e.g., www.topmodelgossip.com), online discussion boards (e.g., www.fansofrealitytv/america-s-next-top-model-10/), and social networking groups (e.g., Addicted to America’s Next Top Model) devoted to fans’ interest in ANTM can be found on the Internet.

The focal site of investigation for this project is the Facebook’s Next Top Model Competition (FNTM). This competition was launched in March 2007 by a fan of ANTM, an 18 year old high school student who created an outlet where aspiring models can compete for modeling exposure. In less than 5 days, the group grew from 100 members to 900. One year later, the FNTM competition, now in its third cycle, counts more than 3,000 members, making it the largest and most popular group of its kind on Facebook.

This paper is part of a larger netnographic (Kozinets 2002) project on the fandom of fashion modeling reality TV. I became interested in this grassroots competition while I was researching the different fan groups devoted to ANTM. My initial interest for this specific group was triggered by its professionalism. For instance, just like on television, contestants vie for “real” modeling prizes including photo shoots with professional photographers.

I made my entrée in June 2007. I contacted the founder and posted a comment to disclose my identity as a researcher. I since have been monitoring the activities of the group on a weekly basis. The data collected so far is comprised of a formal online interview and informal ongoing email exchanges with the founder, discussion threads, pictures, and posts. I plan on conducting additional interviews with members such as judges and contestants in order to reach theoretical saturation.

From the start, I have been engaged in an iterative process that is the hallmark of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998). My interpretation of the data is constructed through continuously moving between the literature and the individual postings, chunks of postings, entire discussion threads, interview data and the emergent understanding of the data set.

Preliminary Findings

Producerly consumption and consumer entrepreneurship

Not all fans actively engage in creative appropriation of the object of their fandom. Those who do, however, help co-create new meanings and products for other fans to appreciate. They add layers to the consumption experience of the original market offerings. In the FNTM group, fans who are aspiring models and those who are aspiring judges compete for a spot in the competition. The remaining members of the group can vote for their favourite contestants—an important difference from the television show—and share their critical evaluations of the different modeling performances.

On the one hand, consumer entrepreneurship surfaces on the part of the aspiring models who promote their potential and manage their trajectory in the competition. On the other hand, judges and lay-members alike participate in the management of an outlet for aspiring models to gain exposure, build photographic experience and win significant help to start a modeling career.

Implications for marketers and producers

These consumer entrepreneurs are reworking the traditional institutional arrangements of the field by expanding its modes of entry. They are also challenging—to some extent—the established legitimizing process typically experienced by fashion models.

Closer examination of the ripple effects of producerly consumption that results in consumer entrepreneurship should further our understanding of the co-creation paradigm.