Consumer-Bloggers Mobilized in Marketing Campaigns: a Study of Opinion Leaders’ Authenticity Management in a Streetwear Community

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Our research addresses how bloggers influential among streetwear and skateboard aficionados manage their authenticity through online presentations of self as they participate in marketing campaigns. Our findings from netnographic and ethnographic data reveal five main practices that consumer-bloggers use in constructing selves they consider authentic.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1011939/volumes/v40/NA-40

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Understanding Diversity in Consumer Influence and Contextually Embedded Influencers

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Paper #1: Consumer-Bloggers Mobilized in Marketing Campaigns: A Study of Opinion Leaders’ Authenticity Management in a Streetwear Community
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Paper #2: Institutional Dynamics when Consumers Coalise in Aestheticized Product Markets
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Paper #4: Learning the Language of the Market: Contextual Influence and the Use of Code Switching in Online Consumer Acculturation Platforms
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SESSION OVERVIEW
For decades, the topic of how consumers influence other consumers has been of vital interest to consumer behavior and marketing strategy scholars. They have explored it through studies of word of mouth (e.g. de Matos & Rossie 2008; Dichter 1966), of the flow of product information through networks (e.g. Lee, Cotte, and Nosworthy 2010), of opinion leaders and opinion followers (e.g. Silk 1966; Coulter et al 2002), of market mavens (e.g Feick and Price 1987), of leader users (e.g. Kratz and Lettl 2009; Schreier, Oberhauser, Prugl 2007) and of peer influence (e.g. Watts and Dodds 2007). Indeed, more than 190 consumer and marketing research studies have been published in the 28 peer-reviewed journals and conference proceedings reviewed for this session. Not surprisingly, a considerable amount of knowledge has accumulated. Relatively little attention has been paid, however, to understanding the diverse ways in which influence is (co) produced, especially within different kinds of consumption communities. Moreover, we lack understanding of the diverse ways that consumers come to have and to maintain influence and what the effects of their influence practices may be. This oversight is particularly problematic given the explosive growth in online communities in which consumers with shared consumption interests may congregate. Our objective in this session is to shed new light on the very nature of consumer influence and on factors and processes that make some consumers more influential than others in online contexts.

The general orientation of this session is toward seeing influence as a contextually embedded and collectively co-constructed phenomenon. We anticipate some similarity across contexts, but we seek to understand the diversity, both in what influence means, and in what makes consumers influential in online communities that have differing norms and practices, that interact on different kinds of platforms and that share interests in products, practices, and problems with differing characteristics.

Likely audience
Scholars interested in word of mouth, opinion leaders and followers, peer influence, and consumption communities will all find fresh insights in this session.

Issues and topics to be covered
In the first two papers of the session, a primary issue of concern is how influential consumers produce and maintain their influence. Savignac, Parmentier, and Marcoux, study the authenticity management tactics of lead bloggers in a somewhat countercultural community focused on skateboards and the street-wear that skateboarders favor. Dolbec and Fischer highlight how curatorial practices are crucial in an aesthetic community. The latter study, as well as the final two in the session, illuminate the diverse means by which influence can be co-created. Dolbec and Fischer highlight the emergence of an alternative taste structure that deviates from that of mainstream fashion. Smith focuses on how opinion leaders in an online investing community provide antenarratives with which followers engage to help make sense of unstable markets, and Schau, Dang and Zhang analyze “code switching” in the influence process in a community populated by migrants seeking to understand US markets and marketing practices.

Why the session is likely to make an important contribution
The session will make an important contribution because it complements and moves beyond previous work that has studied influence in the form of encouraging or discouraging new product acceptance, or general psychological, demographic and socio-graphic characteristics of those whose transmit word of mouth or who are regarded as lead users, influencers or opinion leaders. It does so by focusing on contextually situated and materially shaped practices within diverse communities, where new product adoption is but one of many issues relevant to participants. Together the papers in this session will broaden and deepen our understanding of the concept of influence, of the ways in which consumers can come to be influential, and of how influence is sustained.

Furthering the conference mission of appreciating diversity
This session furthers the mission of appreciating diversity first by focusing on online communities that involve consumers from diverse countries, ranging from China (in the community studied by Schau et al) to French Canada (in that studied by Savignac et al) to regions as disparate as the Philippines, France, the UK, and Japan (in that studied by Dolbec and Fischer). The session also furthers the conference mission by involving researchers who originate in multiple countries: Canada, China, and the United States. Diversity is also represented in the mix of scholars, from masters and doctoral students, to junior faculty, to senior faculty. Finally, diversity is reflected in the mix of qualitative (see Schau et al) and qualitative methods and in the varied theories used across the papers.

Stage of Completion of Each Paper
All data has been collected and analyzed for each paper, and working versions of each have been drafted.
Consumer-Bloggers Mobilized in Marketing Campaigns: A Study of Opinion Leaders’ Authenticity Management in a Streetwear Community

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Recent research (Thompson 2006; Kozinets et al. 2010) has shown that consumer-bloggers, acting as opinion leaders in online communities, can have a substantial influence on their audience. Prior research efforts have been concerned with identifying optimal narrative strategies that can be used by bloggers when participating in a WOM campaign (Kozinets et al. 2010), and with the perceived credibility of bloggers as information sources (Kumkale et al. 2010; Eisend 2010). In contrast, our research focuses on how influential bloggers manage their authenticity through their online presentation of self as they participate in marketing campaigns. We ask: Do influential consumer-bloggers feel their authenticity threatened by the commercial pressures they face? And if so, what practices do they engage in to build and maintain authenticity, with what effect?

We know from previous research efforts that the concept of authenticity relies on perception of others (Beverland 2006; Rose et Wood 2005). More precisely, an individual may be perceived as authentic if his or her actions reveal his “real” self (Arnould and Price 2000). We argue that the literature has yet to address how influential consumers perceive the social construction of their influence within a community and, as a consequence, how they build and manage an authentic self. We find, in particular, a paucity of research about the processes and practices of authenticity management online. We are particularly interested in the context of consumer-bloggers acting as opinion leaders in their virtual community of consumption as they increasingly face potential communal-commercial tensions when getting involved in marketing campaigns (Kozinets et al. 2010). Our paper addresses these gaps by focusing on consumer-bloggers’ perspectives on online authenticity and their strategies to maintain an authentic self.

The qualitative methodology used for this research project follows Kozinets (2010) recommendations about the netnographic approach. Specifically, data was collected through combining a netnography of six influential blogs with offline in-depth interviews with each consumer behind these blogs. The participants were all members of Montreal’s streetwear community, i.e. an on- and off-line community formed around a common interest in streetwear fashion (e.g., sneakers), urban art, and skateboarding. The first author, a member of the community, engaged in offline observation of the community as well. Our netnography was concerned with these opinion leaders’ approaches in discussing products and brands on their blogs (both sponsored and non-sponsored products) and their presentation of self as influential members of the community. Through the in-depth interviews, the first author investigated further the relationships between these consumer-bloggers and their audience, made of community members, outsider-consumers and marketers.

Schau and Gilly (2003) argue that the Internet offers the opportunity for web users to plan, refine and even rebuild their presentation of self. Our results show that consumers acting as opinion leaders are greatly preoccupied with conveying an authentic self to their audience. To that effect, our research findings show five main practices mobilized by consumer-bloggers in order to construct an authentic self. First, by adopting an informal tone (1) in the writing process of their blog entries, and thus remaining true to the communal norms, our bloggers felt they improved the authenticity of their online self. Also, by publishing original content as opposed to simply sharing existing content (2) and contextualizing in detail the subjects of their blog entries (3), our bloggers perceived that they were strengthening the authenticity of their self-presentation. Publishing blog entries that reflected their offline reality (4) was also perceived by bloggers as instrumental to the construction of an authentic self, as was displaying field-specific capital and expertise around the subjects discussed on their blogs (5). These strategies seem to be effective considering the increase attention these influencers received from both consumer and marketing manager audiences. In conclusion, this research extends consumer behavior knowledge by demonstrating that consumer-bloggers evolving in a virtual community of consumption are not only concerned with the perception of their readers, but also attempt to maintain their influence by actively managing what they perceive as their authentic self.

Institutional Dynamics when Consumers Coalesce in Aesthetized Product Markets

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumer researchers are increasingly interested in marketplace dynamics – understanding what leads to the creation of new markets (Ansari and Philips 2010; Humphreys 2010a, 2010b) or to significant changes in existing markets (Giesler 2008, 2012; Scaburato and Fischer forthcoming; Thompson and Coskuner-Bali 2007). Prior market level research has examined the role of consumers to a limited extent, often emphasizing marketers as the main agents of market dynamics (e.g. Giesler 2012; Humphreys 2010a). Research that has looked at consumers’ roles in market dynamics has largely focused on those who want to challenge the market, either based on ideology or unmet needs (e.g., Coskuner-Bali 2007; Scaburato and Fischer forthcoming). Little attention has been paid to the unintended consequences for markets that may ensue when ‘contented’ consumers, not seeking any particular form of market change, interconnect with one another because of their shared interests in and enthusiasm for a product category. Interconnected consumers have been presented as value creators for particular brands (Schau, Jensen and Muniz 2009) and as brand co-producers (Fuller et al. 2008), but no prior research has examined the market-level implications of interactions by avid, interconnected consumers. We aim to fill this gap, focusing on an aestheticized market, where aesthetics are the products (Entwistle 2002), and inquiring about the processes by which the actions and interactions of interconnected consumers leads to institutional level changes in the market.

The context of this study is the fashion industry. We used a multi-method qualitative approach. Our data set is composed of field notes and observation following an 18-month long netnography on an outfit sharing website, lookbook.nu, combined with interviews with 13 fashion bloggers and participants in lookbook.nu, journal articles from major fashion magazines and websites, leading world journals and interviews with industry actors, and data gathered from leading online fashion forums and fashion bloggers. We employed institutional theory (e.g., Greenwood et al. 2008) as our theoretical lens to facilitate a market-level analysis, which we combined with field theory (Bourdieu 1984; 1991). We draw on concepts such as institutional logics, institutional work, mimetic isomorphism and concepts of symbolic capital derived from Bourdieu’s perspective to make sense of the marketplace dynamics and sources of changes we observed. Our findings provide a process-oriented analysis which identifies different, inter-related processes and institutional impacts for each.

First, consumers need an easily accessible platform through which they can connect and share their passion for products in a category. Platforms such as online forums, sharing and curating websites, and easily self-publishable discussion sites (e.g., blogs), are
first created by enthusiasts. When multiple such platforms have been created and are widely embraced by consumers who share their tastes and opinions, a new type of institution can be said to have emerged in the field. These institutions allow consumers to emulate practices engaged in by other categories of actors in the institutional field, e.g., consumer-produced photo shoots, ultimately re-distributing the locus of institutional work. Second, some consumers, through their creative contributions in such forms as fashion critiques, fashion creations, street photography, and outfit photo shoots, and through the “fans” they accrue, gain greater symbolic capital in the eyes of other actors in the field. Such consumers may convert their existing capital to enter the field of fashion in producerly roles. Others may develop “bridging” capital, combining high and low fashion, acting as facilitators between those two subfields by translating high fashion looks into everyday fashion. Third, platforms where consumers congregate can become important institutional players, as a growing range of institutional actors, such as designers, model agencies and industry publications, are influenced by what is being said and done on those platforms, and, in the case of publications, citing the interventions of consumers on those platforms. More, companies begin to mimic the platforms created by consumers to appropriate the latter under their own brand. Fourth, powerful market actors further contribute to the legitimization of consumer-created trends by sponsoring those who started them, emulating the platforms consumers created, using consumer-generated pictures to sell their own products, inviting influential consumers to industry events, featuring influential consumers in mainstream fashion publications, and citing them as inspiration. Fifth, a niche economy develops around the new tastes represented by interconnected consumers. A growing number of online retailers are now catering to those, answering to the rapid changes for new tastes and emerging trends. Ultimately, some of these trends get diffused in mainstream fashion.

Our research shows the unintended consequences which can alter an aestheticized market when interconnected consumers increase the level and the visibility of their participation in the market. While consumers cannot escape markets when they wish to do so (Kozinets 2001) they can profoundly alter those they wish to participate in.

Never-Ending Stories: Opinion Leadership and Antenarratives in an Online Investment Community

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumer researchers have studied opinion leadership for decades (c.f. Silk 1966), investigating aspects including characteristics and dimensions of the concept (e.g. King and Summers 1970; Flynn, Goldsmith, and Eastman 1996), its relationship with network structure (e.g. Kratzler and Lettl 2009; Lee, Cotte, and Noseworthy 2010) motivations and antecedents (e.g. Feick, Price, and Higie 1986; Stokburger-Sauer and Hoyer 2009) and its effects, especially on the diffusion of innovations (e.g. Leonard-Barton 1985; Iyengar, Van den Bulte and Valente 2011). Researchers have also identified activities in which opinion leaders engage: the acquisition of knowledge about categories of interest, word-of-mouth behavior, and advice-giving on product search, purchase, and use. However, few studies actually observe opinion leaders in action; one exception is Kozinets et al. (2010), who focus on word of mouth involving online product seeding. The dearth of research that observes how opinion leaders interact with others suggests there is an opportunity to refine our understanding on what opinion leaders actually do.

This study seeks to broaden our understanding of what opinion leadership entails.

It does so by investigating opinion leaders and other participants in an online investment community, Seeking Alpha. Investing is an increasingly important consumer research topic (c.f. Morrin et al. 2002; Hirsto 2011). Seeking Alpha positions itself as “the premier website for actionable stock market opinion and analysis, and vibrant, intelligent finance discussion.” It hosts more than 300,000 blog posts, written by more than 4,000 contributing investors. The site tracks and publicizes “opinion leaders,” deemed as such based on how many page views their posts received during the preceding 90-day period. This study draws on more than 3,000 blog posts, and all ensuing discussion, from 26 contributing investors posted over the 90-day period of November 28, 2011 to February 26, 2012. These investors were the “opinion leaders” over this time period for the most read category in the community, “Long & Short Ideas.” This category includes 7 subcategories (e.g. long ideas, IPO analysis, options, etc.). All “opinion leaders” in the sample ranked in the top 5 most read authors in at least one of these 7 subcategories.

Based on my analysis, I offer some novel answers to the question ‘what do opinion leaders do?’ Specifically, I find that they construct and facilitate the evolution of “antenarratives.” Antenarratives are “non-linear, incoherent, collective, unplotted, and pre-narrative speculations, a bet, that a proper narrative can be constituted” (Boje 2001: 1).” They differ from traditional narratives, possessing neither plot nor coherence, and being inherently speculative since they arise in the flow of experience that occurs before narrative closure (Boje 2001; Barge 2004). Collectively drafted, antenarratives emerge in a variety of contexts (e.g. organizations (Vaara and Tienari 2011); advertising campaigns (Grow 2008)). Investing appears to be a context in which antenarratives that help to make sense of unfolding events are particularly welcome, perhaps because ‘the market’ is constantly evolving, presenting itself as a “continuous knowledge project for consumers” (Zwick and Dholakia 2006) and because one purpose of investing is to speculate on ‘the market’, and make a bet on one’s mastery of its logic. In an online community context, these bets are proposed – and sometimes taken up – as well as collectively debated, refined, reformed, discarded and resuscitated with the next analyst upgrade, quarterly report, management shake-up, economic forecast, rate cut, etc.

My analysis also indicates that opinion leadership is not strictly about influencing product decisions, but also about influencing others’ participation in marketplace storytelling, a phenomena that is important both to those who are interested in value co-creation and those who are interested in the movement of the stock market, which rises and descends with the information and stories that envelop it. My analysis reveals that participants in Seeking Alpha – who only infrequently admit to being influenced in terms of stock buying or selling – are regularly enticed by the “opinion leaders” to participate in the authoring of antenarratives through commenting and unique posts. The factors that appear to be associated with this type of influence (revealed through higher reader participation) in this context include a content focus on “cult stocks” (e.g. Apple, Sirius XM, Annaly Capital Management) within the community, the use of inter-textual referencing, and the inclusion of personal investing anecdotes and positions.

My paper offers a significant complement to the extant literature on opinion leaders and the ways in which they exert influence over others. It elaborates on antenarrative storytelling as one key behavior of online opinion leaders and discusses how influence pertains to activities like storytelling and not just purchase decisions. It also explains how opinion leaders in such a community exert influence. It thus enhances our understanding of online consumer influence and influencers.
Codes are defined in the sociolinguistics literature as community-level communication systems (Gumperz 1982) and code switching as a communicator’s systematic and deliberate shifting between codes during a single communicative episode (Coumas 2005; Heller 1988). The most common community-level communication system is a language and code switching occurs between languages. For example, immigrants from China may switch between speaking Chinese and speaking English in a single communication event such as a face-to-face conversation in a grocery store. We show that code switching allows the cultural entrant to both understand market phenomenon of the host locale and recognize it when it appears in host language communications. Interestingly, we also find that code switching may persist beyond the initial learning stages to become the manner in which influential communications about brands, price discounts and bundling promotions are conveyed.

Our study is situated in an online forum, MITBBS (http://www.mitbbs.com/) which serves as an influential acculturation platform where Chinese immigrants and foreign nationals interact to discuss the rules and norms of the American marketplace.

We combine netnography, a qualitative method of manual thematic forum analysis (Kozinetz 2009) with an established computational linguistics method to trace the discourse on the acculturation platform MITBBS specifically, the market-oriented sub-board, “PennySaver.” The netnographic method is used to obtain the general patterns in the data; the computational linguistics method is used to generate quantitative analysis results to determine the magnitude of the phenomenon. The data reveal that the message board is an influential acculturation tool. We demonstrate that one specific linguistic strategy dominates the process of learning the market: code switching. Code switching behavior occurs at the language-level and at a sub-cultural level with a shared code developed among participants on the acculturation platform regarding American retail protocols and marketing promotions. This discovery of a shared code on the acculturation platform echoes a recent study that discovered language, dialect and brand level codes operating in quick service restaurants and beverage bars (Schau et al. 2007). We illustrate the manner in which code switching is used by contextually embedded influencers to teach market rules and collaboratively strategize ways of extracting maximum value in market transactions. We also show that code switching, while expected in early learning stages, becomes a robust norm for these influencers to communicate market-level phenomenon to susceptible novice consumers.