How Do Social Capital-Driven Consumption Communities Conceal Their Economic Interests?
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This multi-method interpretive study explores the intersection of social and economic capital production in consumption communities. Building on Bourdieu, it reveals how social capital-driven communities employ four nuanced strategies of concealing their economic interests. Engaging these strategies allows communities for incorporating economic activities under the primacy of social capital production.

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ABSTRACT
Consumption communities face the challenge of dealing with economic influences while staying true to their community values. Building on Bourdieu’s theory of capital, this interpretive study addresses the intersection of social and economic capital production within social capital-driven consumption communities. The study explores the concealment strategies that consumers use to protect their communities from contamination through economic influences. Drawing on two data sources, the study reveals four distinct concealment strategies—from total denial, through re-articulation and partial appropriation, to teleological alignment—differing in degree to which consumers concealing economic capital production within the community. The study contributes new theoretical insights into consumers’ concealment strategies and documents how pursuing these strategies allows social capital-driven consumption communities for incorporating economic activities under the primacy of social capital production.

INTRODUCTION
Social capital is a key notion in consumer culture theory. Social capital concerns “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to (...) membership in a group” (Bourdieu 1986, 248). Consumer researchers have used this influential notion to illuminate for instance, how brand community members build social capital as part of their value-creating practices (Schau, Muhiz, and Arnould 2009), how virtual problem-solving community members produce social capital on both individual and group levels (Mathwick, Wiertz, and Ruyter 2008), or how subcultural consumers defend their field-dependent social capital against pejorative stereotypes (Arasel and Thompson 2011). For Bourdieu (1986), individuals build social capital by establishing, maintaining, and defending long-term social relations and mutual obligations with their social peers. One particular characteristic of social capital is that it is a “disguised” (252) form of economic capital that paradoxically produces its most influential effects to the extent to which it hides economic roots. Therefore, for individuals to build social capital requires proactive ‘concealment’ of potential economic calculations. How does this concealment of economic activities work for consumption communities such as brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001) and subcultures of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander 1995) that draw their consumer appeal predominantly from social (rather than economic) exchanges? Which (if any) concealment strategies do members of these social capital-driven consumption communities use to protect the ‘innocence’ of their social relations?

Prior consumer research has occasionally addressed the intersection of social and economic production within consumption communities. Bonsu and Darmody (2008), for instance, find the rhetoric of “well-intentioned commercialism” (363) which Second Life residents use to justify commercial success. Kozinets (2002a) documents anti-market strategies such as the reinforcement of a “No Vending Rule” (24) within the Burning Man community. In the context of community-supported agriculture (CSA), Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007) report on consumers who defy “commodity fetishism” (142) through practices of de commodification” (142) as a response to corporate co-optation. And Weinberger and Wallendorf (2012) explain how intracommunity gifting serves the post-Katrina New Orleans’ community to rebuff undesired commercial influences.

These studies have produced important insights into the intersection of social and economic capital production in consumer research. However, prior research has not yet systematically addressed the strategies through which consumers’ conceal potential economic activities within social-capital driven consumption communities.

To address this gap in knowledge and to reveal a comprehensive range of concealment strategies within social capital-driven consumption communities, I conducted an interpretive study drawing on two data sources. The first data set consists of netnographic data (Kozinets 2002b) from two social capital-driven online communities—the outdoorsenien.net community (www.outdoorsenien.net) and the veganelinke.antispe community (www.veganelinke.antispe.org). The second data set consists of eight academic articles that explicitly or implicitly address the intersection of social and economic capital production within consumption communities. I analyzed these data using a qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2002), through which I inductively built and iteratively refined categories of how these communities conceal economic influences (aspects of economic capital production such as self-interest, profit maximization, competition, private ownership, or wage labor (see also Bourdieu 1986)).

The study reveals four concealment strategies that social capital-driven consumption communities tend to use when confronted with economic capital production. I differentiate the strategies by the degree to which consumers conceal economic capital production—from total denial, through re-articulation and partial appropriation, to teleological alignment.

To best reveal these findings, I first review the notion of social capital in sociology and existing consumer research studies that directly address the intersection of social and economic capital within social-capital-driven consumption communities. Then, I present a set of four concealment strategies and show how consumers use these strategies to manage economic capital production within the confines of their communities. Finally, I discuss these theoretical insights and conclude with outlining paths for future research.

THEORY ON SOCIAL CAPITAL
Bourdieu (1986) offers the first and most deliberate analysis of social capital. For him, social capital is “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to (...) membership in a group” (Bourdieu 1986, 248). In contrast to other forms of capital (e.g. economic or human) social capital possesses an intangible character that resonates in structures of relationships (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988; Portes 1998). Consequently, social capital is an influential asset that individuals accumulate through continuous investments in relationships to family, friends and associates (Putnam and Goss 2001; Woolcock and Narayan 2000). For Bourdieu (1986), individuals build social capital by establishing, maintaining, and defending long-term social relations and mutual obligations with their social peers. Social capital investments are associated with a high degree of uncertainty because of indefinite obligations, vague time horizons, and the potential danger of ingratitude or noncompliance to reciprocity expectations (e.g. exchanges of gifts or mutual visits) (Bourdieu 1986).

However, according to Bourdieu (1986), the notion of social capital, its inner structure and way of functioning is inseparable from that of economic capital. Economic capital is “immediately and directly convertible into money” (monetary capital) (Bourdieu 1986, 243). Economic theory has devoted itself to this (one-sided) inter-
pretation of capital which constrains the universe of exchanges to commercial exchanges. Thus, today, economic capital is the most obvious and direct form of capital characterized by capitalist tenets such as self-interest, profit maximization, competition, private ownership, or wage labor (Bourdieu 1986).

Despite the ostensible independence between social and economic capital, Bourdieu systematically elaborates on the interplay between economic and social exchanges in appropriating capital. For Bourdieu (1986), all forms of capital, including economic, social and cultural, must be understood as “accumulated labor” (241). Thus, both forms of capital are highly related—even transferable into each other. Social capital, for instance, is converted into economic capital when members of a social network gain privileged access to special investment-tips or job offers by making use of previously established social obligations. Transferability is due to one particular characteristic of social capital—it is a “disguised” (Bourdieu 1986, 252) form of economic capital. Paradoxically, social capital produces its most influential effects only to the extent that it conceals its economic roots.

Although Bourdieu (1986) addresses the significance of ‘concealment’ in the accumulation social capital, he does not fully address how this dynamic unfolds.

**CONSUMER RESEARCH ON THE INTERSECTION OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CAPITAL WITHIN CONSUMPTION COMMUNITIES**

Consumption community research also sheds a theoretical light on the intersection of social and economic capital, but with a focus on communal rhetorics and practices that protect the community from contamination through economic influences. Investigating the Web-based virtual world of Second Life, for instance, Bonsu and Darmody (2008) find evidence of residents that “traverse communal and commercial boundaries” (364) when they turn a communal idea of creating animal avatars into a commercial success story. However, facing the mingling of community-driven ideas and commercial agendas, Second Life residents frame commercial success as a communal enrichment. Bonsu and Darmody (2008) mark these rhetorical efforts as “well-intentioned commercialism” (363).

Kozinets (2002a) investigates the Burning Man festival, a community-oriented anti-market event which is specifically designed to offer participants a social space that is distanced from market logics. Burning Man’s gift economy, the “No Vending Rule” (24) and the prohibition of brand names are illustrative mechanisms of how the Burning Man community frames the event as uncommercial. Although Kozinets concludes that the Burning Man community still “materially supports the market” (20), the set of communal-resistive practices and rhetorics demonstrates participants’ perception of commercialism and economic exchanges as contaminating threat within the community.

Similarly, participants of the CSA market niche interpret commercialism, capitalist motifs, and modern “commodity fetishism” (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007, 142) as threats that have the potential to contaminate consumers’ sacred alternative market system. Thus, CSA farmers and consumers jointly strive for controlling the commercial nature of their food products through decocommodification practices which relate CSA food to “symbol[s] of natural splendor and ecological harmony” (142).

Weinberger and Wallendorf’s (2012) multi-layered analysis within the context of the Mardi Gras festival reveals how intra-community gifting serves the post-Katrina New Orleans’ community to rebuff undesired commercial influences. The authors detail how post-Katrina New Orleans’s geographic community repaves the damaged “intersection of moral and market economies” (77) through traditional practices of intracommunity gifting. In particular, they show how moral economy logics either harness or reject market economy logics in intracommunity gifting, depending on the giver’s local cultural knowledge and community membership. The study reveals that commercial sponsorship—only to certain moral confines—is legitimated within communal boundaries.

Taken together, these studies suggest that the relationship between social and economic capital production is an important and delicate one for consumption communities. These consumption communities draw their appeal from social capital production (i.e. building relationships, pursuing social exchanges, freely sharing knowledge) and—to different degrees—from their denial of economic capital production. As the above authors show, consumers put much effort in protecting the community from contamination through economic influences. Seen through the lens of Bourdieuian capital theory, the appeal of such social capital-driven consumption communities largely thrives on the members’ ability to conceal present and emerging economic interests and thus remain ‘purely’ social entities.

However, despite these important insights into the intersection of social and economic capital production in consumption communities, consumer researchers have not yet systematically explored the full range of consumers’ concealment strategies—representing a potentially relevant endeavor for community perpetuation.

**METHOD**

This interpretive study draws on two data sources. The first data set comprises empirical data from an ethnographic investigation (Kozinets 2002b) of two social capital-driven online communities - the outdoorsein.net community (www.outdoorsein.net) and the veganelinke.antispe community (www.veganelinke.antispe.org). Online communities offer “a novel medium for social exchange between consumers” (Kozinets 2002b, 63) and allow obtrusive access to consumers’ discursive and interactive encounters at the intersections of social and economic capital production. Pursuing the goal of revealing a comprehensive range of communities’ concealment strategies and assuming that online consumption communities with diverse (political-ideological) backgrounds might react differently to economic capital production, I searched for communities that have potentially divergent political orientations, but evolve particularly around social rather than exchanges.

The outdoorsein.net community and the veganelinke.antispe community have different fields of interest and community goals, however, they both draw their appeal from social exchanges to experience and consume a “linking value” (Cova 1997, 297). Outdoorsein.net has its roots in 1999 and since then the community has developed into a 20,000-member flourishing online community. It exhibits passionate discussions about nature, outdoor sports, and advances an independent and creative outdoor consumption. This community provides a fascinating environment to study the range of concealment strategies which consumers use to respond to economic influences since the community shows elements of both economic and social capital production. On the one hand, community members are engaged in testing commercial outdoor equipment, in jointly innovating and branding products; On the other hand, community members feel inspired by their social, communal network and their independence from corporate influence (Füller, Lüdtke, and Jawecki 2008). Veganelinke.antispe’s 1,300 members are motivated to fighting capitalism. Since 2006, this forum has offered a dialogue platform for community members who discuss progressive movements against all sorts of oppressions such as capitalism, sexism, racism or speciesism. The official anti-capitalist orientation of
the veganelinke.antispe community promises a fascinating context to study consumers’ strategies to conceal economic influences.

Data collection within the online communities proceeded through screening and observing the fora’s archives and resulted in a data set of 4,008 posts from 47 threads. I particularly included those discussions in which community members were confronted with aspects of economic capital (i.e. self-interest, profit maximization, competition, private ownership, or wage labor).

The second data set consists of eight published academic articles. These articles, explicitly or implicitly, deal with the intersection of social and economic capital production within consumption communities. Consumers within these communities primarily draw their appeal from social rather than economic exchanges. With the exception of Bonsu and Darmody (2008) all articles were published in the Journal of Consumer Research (Giesler 2008; Kozinets 2001, 2002a; Mathwick et al. 2008; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007; Weinberger and Wallendorf 2012). The combination of empirical netnographic data and data from journal articles provided fruitful grounds to reveal consumers’ concealment strategies within consumption communities.

I analyzed these two data sources using a qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2002). I identified concealment strategies through isolating consumers’ efforts to conceal economic influences within social capital-driven consumption communities. These influences refer to (aspects of) economic capital production such as self-interest, profit maximization, competition, private ownership, or wage labor (see also Bourdieu 1986). I moved back and forth between the two data sets and exposed the inductively emerging categories (concealment strategies) to iterative refinement.

**FINDINGS**

Four focal concealment strategies emerge from my analysis. I differentiate these strategies with respect to the degree to which consumption communities conceal economic capital production. The degree of concealment varies according to consumers’ level of refusal and legitimization of economic influences within the community. Figure 1 summarizes the findings followed by a detailed description of each concealment strategy.

**Concealment Strategy One: Denial of Economic Capital Production**

The strategy of denial of economic capital production is the most direct form of concealment. Community members use this strategy to demonize economic capital production and rhetorically frame corporate players as “industrial monsters” (Giesler 2008, 747) or legal community owners as “demigods” or “wizards” (Bonsu and Darmody 2008, 362). In my data, community members use three expressions of denial: 1) Actively repelling economic capital production; 2) waiting until the (economic) turbulence passes by; and 3) relocating the community into a new, uncontaminated realm.

**Actively Repelling Economic Capital Production.** The outdoorseneten.net community actively repels the capitalization of a community project in which community members plan, organize, and design the construction of an outdoor-cooker. The project starts out without any economic agenda. However, when individual community members suggest the idea of cooperating with a commercial investor to sell the outdoor-cooker to the mass market, an emotional discussion emerged. Does the community betray its spirit when converting a community project into profit-opportunities? The initiator of the outdoor-cooker project finally holds an arousing plea for the social benefits of the project to the community.

“I proposed a project herein, because of the idea of producing a low-priced and improved product that is currently not available in the market. And because I was convinced of the fact that one could even make this project better through challenging a community of enthusiasts to develop a perfect product. With all the accumulated know-how and the ideas of a creative community…Beyond this original idea I had the idea that the community would profit from this product too: more members (product would serve as a promoter externally), more reputation for the community, more ideas… and so on and so on…Why do I write this? Because I perceive the idea of this project is endangered.” (community member, outdoorseneten.net)

The initiator perceives the commercialization of the communal project as a threat (“endangered”) to the community. Finally, the community refuses capitalizing on the marketability of an improved outdoor-product and thus actively repels economic capital production. The community upholds the primacy of social capital production and community spirit, and consequently, conceals economic

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**Figure 1: Concealment Continuum**

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<th>Degree of Concealment</th>
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<tr>
<td>High</td>
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<td>Actively Repelling Economic Capital Production</td>
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<td>Re-Articulation of Economic Capital Production</td>
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**Expressions of Concealment Strategies**

- Actively Repelling Economic Capital Production
- Re-Articulation of Economic Capital Production
- Partial Appropriation of Economic Capital Production
- Telesological Alignment of Economic and Social Capital Production
capital production. In a more general tone, community members of the veganelinke.antispe community debate the possibilities of how to consume best in an exploitative capitalist system. In favor of social capital production within and beyond the confines of their community, participants propose to actively repel economic capital production of cooperations through boycotting.

“For sure, our togetherness is improvable and as long as it is improvable I strive for improvements. I make a small contribution through my consumer behavior and boycotts.” (community member, veganelinke.antispe)


Waiting Until the (Economic) Turbulence Passes by. Community members that wait until the (economic) turbulence passes by practice a less aggressive expression of the concealment strategy of denial of economic capital production. In his investigation of the war on music downloading in which downloaders and representatives of the music industry negotiate the price of music downloads, Giesler (2008) introduces the notion of “outpeacing” (747) as a graceful exercise of passive consumer resistance. A similar form of concealment appears within the Second Life community. Bonsu and Darmody (2008) report on the prevailing inequality and hierarchical structures between the regular residents (“creative consumer masses” (362)) and the Lindens (corporate owner) of the virtual platform.

“Even though they [the residents] recognized this inequality in the world, many residents pointed to the fluid nature of this structure, believing that it was only a matter of time before the tables turned in their favor” (Bonsu and Darmody 2008, 362).

Again, community members appear suspicious about economic influences within their community and perceive corporate power as contaminating. However, the community does not deny economic capital production by actively resisting the economic influence, but by sitting it out peacefully.

Relocating the Consumption Community. A third expression of denying economic capital production implies the relocation of the consumption community into a new, uncontaminated realm. The case of community-supported (CSA) agriculture investigated by Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007) serves as the most illustrative example. Agents of the originally antihierarchical organic food movement respond to the economic contamination of corporate co-option through relocating the communal realm of social capital production into a new CSA market—an “emotionally and existentially engaging communal project” (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007, 139). Similar to idea of relocating a consumption community into a pure social realm, community members in the veganelinke.antispe community discuss the idea of moving to and living on self-sufficient farms in an attempt to escape from capitalist market exchanges. Patterns of relocation emerge in Kozinets’ (2002a) Burning Man festival which can be read as a community-oriented anti-market event, staged remote from civilization, specifically designed to offer participants a social space that is distanced from market logics.

Concealment Strategy Two: Re-Articulation of Economic Capital Production

Second, community members using the strategy of re-articulation of economic capital production also perceive economic influences as threat to the community. Yet, consumers do not repel, but rhetorically re-articulate aspects of economic capital production that are indirectly supportive of community members’ interests and morals. Consumers re-articulate external service providers or commodi-

“Something is notably nice: The man who is producing your shoes individually customizes them. He looks at your feet and you directly feel that he has lots of experience. He does not want a quick deal, but he wants to do his trade how he thinks that it is right. It is an adventure to meet someone like him these days.” (community member, outdoorseiten.net)

Community members refer to Mr. Geiger as an “artist” who takes his artistic license to create and improve details of his handmade hiking boots. In associating commercial commodities with arts, outdoorseiten.net community members deny market-players’ commercial interest and conceal the transactions’ economic character. Thus, community members prevent the community from economic contamination. Among the consumption communities analyzed patterns of decommodification are prevailing (Bonsu and Darmody 2008; Giesler 2008; Kozinets 2002a; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007; Weinberger and Wallendorf 2012).

Sacralizing a Commodity. Sacralizing a product or service is a second expression of re-articulating economic capital production. Members of the Star Trek subculture, for example, identify with the anticapitalist nature of the Star Trek universe and appreciate its “utopian sense of the communalism” (Kozinets 2001, 72). However, the Star Trek universe is part of a multi-million dollar industry and Star Trek fen constitute active participants. In response to this overwhelming economic irritation which is, in effect, an inherent component of Star Treks subculture’s existence, participants engage in sacralizing practices by framing Star Trek rhetorically as a religion. Kozinets (2001) reveals:

“Legitimizing articulations of Star Trek as a religion or myth underscores fans’ heavy investment of self in the text. These sacralizing articulations are used to distance the text from its superficial status as a commercial product.” (Kozinets 2001, 67)

Kozinets’ analysis of consumers that read Star Trek as religion or myth involves the idea of concealing an economic agenda that threatens to contaminate Star Treks subcultural “moral and inclusive community” (82). Members of the Harley-Davidson subculture of consumption are similarly engaged in sacralizing efforts as a response to economic influences.

Concealment Strategy Three: Partial Appropriation of Economic Capital Production

Consumers using the concealment strategy of partial appropriation of economic capital production deliberately embrace 1) selected marketing tools or 2) financial support to leverage their social capital production. Community members do not use tools and support un-
reflectedly, but take both out of their initial economic context and imbue them with communal spirit to conceal economic influences.

**Embracing Selected Marketing Tools but Imbuing them with Communal Spirit.** Consumption communities appropriate economic capital production through embracing and adjusting selected marketing tools. For instance, the outdoorseiten.net community organizes community competitions such as “best travel report”, “wiki writing competition”, and “best photo competition” or pursues a project in which community members design and create a community logo. Thus, the outdoorseiten.net community makes use of basic tools that are closely related to economic capital production, but appropriate them for the cohesive needs of their community. The playful competitions and logo development processes encourage social exchanges and foster bondings among community members. Following vignette from the logo development threat shows how community members within the outdoorseiten.net conceal the logo’s economic character through imbuing it with communal spirit.

“*Hm, everything is initiated from users. Noneone is making profit with it with the logo batches; it is something that is done by and for the community. It is just nice when the forum is showed to the world.*” (community member, outdoorseiten.net)

The community does not conceal economic capital production in general as it draws on its equipment, however, community members cover the tools’ inherent economic character and revitalize them with a social agenda. The embracement and adjustment of selected economic tools is empirically supported in the veganelinke.antispe community in which community members similarly discuss and organize the need for community stickers.

**Embracing Financial Support but Framing it as Gift.** Embracing financial support but framing it as gift constitutes a second expression of the strategy of partial appropriation of economic capital production. Communities take advantage of group members’ financial resources accumulated in the external commercial market. Community members accept this economic encroachment in form of financial resources but rhetorically frame the financial support as gifts from insiders which provide opportunities to encourage social capital production. Thus, internal agents with financial resources, although strongly involved with commercialism, do not contaminate community. For instance, Kozinets (2002) reports on impressive art installations at the Burning Man festival which are essentially gifts from participants to the community:

“My fieldnotes capture a fireside conversation with “Giovanni Maximi,” an artist (a millionaire businessman in his life outside Burning Man), late one evening... It is worthwhile to note that, as indicated by Giovanni’s personal wealth, status at Burning Man is often constructed from conditions requiring considerable economic standing in the outside commercial realm”. (Kozinets 2002a, 28-29)

Empirical support of this concealment strategy can be found in Weinberger and Wallendorf’s (2012) investigation of the Mardi Gras geographic community in which rich krewe members give - officially noncommercial - parades to the community. These gifts, although sponsored through crew members’ real-life commercial involvements are not considered as stemming from the logic of economic capital production.

**Concealment Strategy Four: Teleological Alignment of Economic and Social Capital Production**

The strategy of teleological alignment of economic and social capital production shows the least degree of concealment. In these cases, community members show how certain economic activities are useful for relevant community goals and consequently for community perpetuation. Community members conceal detrimental side effects of such economic activities by 1) emphasizing the higher goals that they support (e.g. survival of the community) or by 2) focusing on functional goals (e.g. testing outdoor-material). Thus, the community conceals the flaring up of economic capital production through justifying it with a mutual goal-orientation.

**Emphasizing Higher Goals of the Consumption Community.** One expression of teleological alignment of economic and social capital production revolves around community members’ effort to emphasize higher goals of the community. Goals are, for instance, the survival of the community or the maintenance of the community as a vibrant, inspiring and emotionally attracting space. If economic activities assist in accomplishing these goals, community members seem to refrain from framing them as threat. For instance, after Hurricane Katrina had destroyed parts of New Orleans in 2005, a public discussion emerged whether to hold or to skip the traditional Mardi Gras celebration that was set few month after the catastrophe. Local community members, personally strongly involved with the rituals and inherent meanings of the celebration, but generally skeptical towards commercial influences within the Mardi Gras, use the logic of social and economic capital to argue for the realization (survival) of the Mardi Gras communal festival:

“[MardiGras]is essential for the spirit of New Orleans, because...”

“Plus it pumps a lot of money into the economy, which they need. A lot of jobs, all the people who build the floats and make the costumes, and sell all the junk you throw.” (Weinberger and Wallendorf 2012, 88)

Bonsu and Darmody (2008, 363) use the notion of “well-intentioned commercialism” to capture Second Life residents’ rhetorical efforts to legitimize commercial success. Similarly, Burning Man participants justify high ticket fees through its contribution to the “good of the Burning Man community” (Kozinets 2002, 20).

**Focusing on Functional Goals of the Consumption Community.** Communities conceal economic capital production through teleologically aligning it with social capital production when they legitimate economic capital production efforts with functional goals of the community. They legitimize and even welcome the aspects economic capital production to the extent that it helps to reach functional goals of the community. For instance, members of the veganelinke.antispe community support an advertising campaign that follows the logic of economic capital production. However, community members conceal this economic influence by focusing on functional goals of the community—to spread the idea of vegan life and equality between humans and animals.

“United Creations has created a really interesting and professional advertisement campaign, together with the Austrian vegan society. The basic idea is that not all people that eat vegan live according to clichés.” (community member, veganelinke.antispe)

Interestingly, the limits of unmolested concealment appear exhausted within the confines of this community. Some community members start reflecting on the campaign and complain about its lack of criticism on capitalism. Members of the outdoorseiten.net
community who are primarily engaged in discussing, testing, and improving outdoor products appear to positively evaluate the fact that profit-driven outdoor manufacturers might read their test reports. Community members perceive themselves as outdoor experts and being used by corporate manufactures as “beta tester” is a meaningful step toward the goal of creating improved outdoor products.

DISCUSSION

This study illuminates the strategies that consumers in social capital-driven consumption communities use to manage the intersection of social and economic capital production. Grounded in Bourdieu’s (1986) notion of capital, I investigated how these consumption communities face the challenge of dealing with economic influences while staying true to their community values.

The study contributes three insights to consumer (culture) theory. First, this research uncovers a set of four concealment strategies that social capital-driven consumption communities tend to use when confronted with economic capital production. These strategies range from total denial of economic capital production, through re-articulation and partial appropriation of economic capital production, to teleological alignment of economic and social capital production. Each concealment strategy manifests through different expressions, and differentiates to the degree to which consumers conceal economic influences. The degree of concealment varies according to consumers’ level of refusal and legitimization of economic capital production within their community.

This comprehensive range of four concealment strategies integrates prior findings of consumption community research dealing with the intersection of social and economic capital production. For instance, the “No Vending Rule” (Kozinets 2002a, 24) within the Burning Man community is an illustration of the first, most direct, concealment strategy. This official rule can be read as an institutionalized mechanism that helps the community to actively repel economic capital production. CSA participants that are jointly engaged in emotionally decontextualizing CSA food products (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007) make use of the strategy of re-articulation of economic capital to conceal the market niche’s commercial nature. And “well-intentioned commercialism” (Bonsu and Darmody 2008, 363), which serves Second Life residents to justify commercial success, illustrates the concealment strategy of teleological alignment of economic and social capital production.

Two expressions of the isolated concealment strategies emerged exclusively from empirical netnographic data. First, social capital-driven communities embrace selected marketing tools such as playful competitions or creative logo development processes, imbue those with a communal spirit, and thus leverage the community’s social capital production. Second, social capital-driven consumption communities legitimate aspects of economic capital production to the extent that it helps the community to reach functional goals (e.g. spreading the word of vegan life, testing outdoor material, etc.).

Although this study proposes a first step towards a comprehensive range of concealment strategies, depending on the context, other social capital-driven consumption communities might use slightly different strategies (or expressions). Locating the strategies on a concealment continuum implies the potential existence of further concealment strategies that differ in the degree to which communities conceal economic influences.

Second, this research contributes consumption-specific empirical evidence to Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of concealment of social capital. The diversity of four concealment strategies exhibiting multiple degrees of concealment suggests that concealment is a more nuanced concept than previously assumed.

Third, the study empirically supports the idea that concealment is one focal strategy for managing social capital-driven consumption communities’ various interfaces with economic capital production. Building on Bourdieu (1986), the study shows that social capital-driven consumption communities conceal economic capital production through moving back and forth between repelling and—to certain extents—legitimizing economic capital. Thus, the study suggests that engaging these concealment strategies allows consumption communities for incorporating economic influences under the primacy of social capital production—yielding a potentially important dynamic for community perpetuation.

To conclude, these insights are of particular interest for Western society that is said to suffer from a loss of community spirit (Putnam and Goss 2001). The pluralization of lifestyles and attitudes available within society hampers a joint value creation among people. Thus, Western society faces the danger of social dissolution (Dubiel 1998; Heitmeyer 2004; Putnam and Goss 2001). However, societal cohesions (or ‘social capital’), solidarity, community spirit, and the ability to build community are central resources of healthy societies (Weidenfeld 2001). This study implies that cohesive forces still permeate Western society. But today, social capital might prevail in micro socio-cultural spaces such as (online) consumption communities and might comprise potentially new consumption-specific dynamics such as the necessity of concealing economic capital production on behalf of community perpetuation. Future research should address these new consumption-specific aspects of social capital production—conceding potentially relevant insights into the social glue of Western society.

REFERENCES


