Brand Scouting: Co-Creation of Value in the Football Manager Community

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ABSTRACT
This paper enhances our understanding of collective value co-creation in the context of brand-centered communities. Our study is based on a netnographic exploration of the Football Manager (FM) game community. We introduce the concept of brand scouting and describe how it extends and goes beyond current theorizations of value co-creation.

INTRODUCTION
Previous research has highlighted the blurred distinction between production and consumption and the diversity of ways through which consumers engage in value co-creation with companies, either as individuals or at the collective level. However, the exact process of collective value co-creation, the roles of consumers in the process and the reasons for consumer participation remain somehow unclear.

The aim of this paper is to further explore how and why consumers participate in value co-creation in the context of brand-centered communities. Our study is based on a netnographic study of the Football Manager (FM) game community and interviews with key community members. The FM game is a football management simulation game. The task of gamers is to act as football managers by taking control of a football team of their choice, in any league of the world, and manage team tactics and squad selection, player transfers, and other duties associated with the football manager post (Crawford 2006). Gamers build their imaginative football management careers through the temporal progression of the game. Given its simulation character, one of the most important and fulfilling aspects of the FM game is its capacity to offer a realistic representation of the football world. To achieve this, each year the company releases a new edition of the game, containing the latest information on the football world. This information is stored in a huge database upon which the game is based. The FM Greek online community is a fan-site affiliate Greek community, but is not officially associated with the company that creates the game, namely Sports Interactive.

Our findings illustrate how members of the FM community participate in the co-creation of the FM game through the concept of brand scouting. We conceptualize brand scouting as the cyclical process through which brand and/or product enthusiasts are committed, as members of a brand-centered community, to providing unpaid research work for the brand in the form of scouting undertaken within and beyond the confines of the community for the sake of enhancing their consumption experiences. We further describe how the process of brand scouting extends and goes beyond current theorizations of value co-creation.

THEORY
Consumer research has long argued that there is no clear distinction between production and consumption as they take place simultaneously and appear to have a cyclical relationship (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Value co-creation has proved a popular topic of interest across numerous fields, and researchers have highlighted the diversity of ways through which consumers participate in value creation with companies (Cova and Dalli 2009). Value co-creation has become an all-encompassing term which portrays any type of brand value that is inherently co-produced with consumers (Vargo and Lusch 2004; 2008). The underlying logic of value co-creation is the active role of consumers in the process, which often occurs through their direct interactions with companies and/or brand offerings (Grönroos 2008; Grönroos and Voima 2013).

Consumer researchers have most commonly explored value co-creation in the collective context of brand-centered communities (Cova et al. 2015; Cova and Pace 2006; Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001; Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder 2011; Schau et al. 2009). Brand-centered communities emerged as a result of the neo-tribal ethos of postmodern consumer society (Maffesoli 1996; Cova 1997). Neo-tribal marketing theories posit that consumers form temporary groupings which often revolve around shared passions and emotions for certain brands, products, services and/or consumption activities (Cova and Cova 2002). Brand-centered communities are neo-tribal groupings that exhibit three core characteristics: consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions; and moral responsibility (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001). Value co-creation within brand-centered communities deals with how consumers as members of these communities co-create the symbolic meaning of brand consumption (Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder 2011). In this sense, consumers add value to the brand through their immaterial labor within the confines of the community, that is through the contribution of affective and cultural resources to brand value (Cova and Dalli 2009).

Various streams of research have focused on different aspects of value co-creation within brand-centered communities. First, due to their voluntary contributions for the benefit of the brand, members of brand-centered communities have been theorized as prosumers (Xie et al. 2008), working consumers (Cova and Dalli 2009; Zwick et al. 2008), and more recently brand volunteers (Cova et al. 2015). A common element of these theorizations is that they account for the degree of exploitation or emancipation that emerges from consumers’ interactions with companies for the sake of brand value creation (Ritzer 2014). However, the actual reasons for voluntary consumer participation in the co-creation process remain under-explored. Second, researchers have focused more on the range of consumption practices that form part of the value co-creation process and take place within brand-centered communities (Muñiz and Schau 2005; Schau et al. 2009). Schau et al. (2009) identified nine consumption practices that consumers perform within the community to enhance brand value. Recent consumer research has extended this line of inquiry to delineate the roles of consumers within the co-creation process and the potential benefits that consumers acquire from the outcomes of the co-creation process (Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder 2011). Nevertheless, the actual steps of the co-creation process and the roles of consumers within the process are blurred. Third, researchers dealt with the potential benefits that consumers acquire from the outcomes of the co-creation process (Cova and Cova 2012; Xie et al. 2008). Xie et al. (2008) forwarded a view of value co-creation in which consumers co-create value with companies for the development of products that then become consumption experiences.

We argue that previous studies do not fully explicate the actual process of collective value co-creation within brand-centered communities. Moreover, the exact roles of consumers as value co-creators and the reasons behind their participation remain unclear. We aim to further delineate how and why consumers participate in value co-creation within the context of the FM game and the FM community.
METHOD
An interpretive approach was followed. Data were drawn from a ten-month netnography within the Greek FM online community and long interviews (McCracken 1988) with key FM community members. The netnography followed the guidelines suggested by Kozinets (1997; 2002) and subsequently addressed concerns and recommendations for conducting trustworthy netnographic research. After a period of ‘lurking’ in the FM community, the lead author identified himself as a member of the community by registering on the site and posting on the community forums, stating his role and the scope of the research. Textual data were gathered from all the active forums of the online community, which contained approximately 700,000 posts at the time of the research, and were publicly accessible (Langer and Beckman 2005). Data collection involved observation of the community and iterative searches of the posts available in the community (Arsel and Bean 2013). The process of collection continued until we reached theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Interviews with FM community members provided a further source of data on the value co-creation process and the symbolic meanings of their FM consumption (Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder 2011). Five community members were recruited on the basis of how long they had been community members, their community membership status and how active they were within the community research team. All participants were interviewed online via direct chat programs and interviews lasted approximately one hour. Grand tour questions and floating prompts were used throughout the course of the interviews (McCracken 1988).

The data were analyzed by applying a constant comparative process (Glaser and Strauss 1967) of coding, categorizing and abstracting (Spiggle 1994) in order to develop emergent themes. Initial themes, which emerged from the netnography, were utilized as a guideline to categorize interview data (Schouten 1991). To ensure trustworthiness of the findings, we relied on triangulation across the netnographic and interview data, and on extended observation of the community context (Kozinets 1998; Wallendorf and Belk 1989). All participant names were changed to ensure confidentiality. After being informed about the study, interviewees filled out and signed a consent form where they stated their voluntary participation.

FINDINGS
The FM community can be theorized as a brand-centered community (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001). Our netnography illustrates the existence of a team of FM community members who conduct football-related research both inside and outside the limits of the community. The aim of this team is to ensure that the FM game can be played within the confines of the FM community. Members of the FM community also utilize their perspective (e.g. in terms of player and staff attributes and characteristics, football leagues and teams per country, information about the worldwide football market and regulation changes). Research reports are then sent to Sports Interactive which updates the game’s database, either in new or existing versions through the release of modification files. Members of the FM research team play the improved versions of the game, thus entering into a form of evaluation of their own work.

We introduce the concept of brand scouting to capture this complex and multi-faceted process of value co-creation (Figure 1). In partial alignment with the term’s meaning within the football world, we define brand scouting as the cyclical process of collecting, analyzing, reporting and evaluating football information and data related to the FM game, within and beyond the confines of the community. The cycle of the brand scouting process is maintained through the ongoing changes of the Greek football world which need to be reflected in the upcoming versions of the FM game. We illustrate members’ roles within the FM community research team (head researcher, assistant researcher, and other researchers) and also describe how community members engage in brand scouting to enhance their gaming experiences.

‘I scout, therefore I play’: The FM research team
The FM community research team consists of three types of football researchers who undertake brand scouting, namely head, assistant and other researchers. This team of researchers is normally responsible for collecting data for one or more football team (including their players and staff members, their attributes, characteristics and so on) that participate in the Greek Football Leagues. Numerous forums exist, within the community, dedicated to brand scouting for each of the 66 teams in the Greek leagues, and the collected data are shared with the FM research team. In a process of analysis that resembles the constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss 1967), new data are added or excluded for each football team until the development of the final data report which is then sent to the company, Sports Interactive. The research undertaken by the members of the FM community research team is one of the key reasons that makes the game so realistic and, hence, enhances members’ gaming experiences. This is clearly appreciated below in Buz’s quote, when he was asked whether the game could be so realistic without the voluntary work of its fans.

Buz: “No, not at all and this is the case in Championship Manager, the rival game, which is also a very nice game but the database sucks. And the database is a big issue, if it wasn’t so representative, I wouldn’t like the game. This is mainly because in Championship Manager, there are not research teams in each country like in Football Manager, I think...there are people who voluntarily help for the research. When you do something you love, you do it well. It’s not random that big football teams ask for the database before even the game is launched or the fact that Mourinho [prominent football manager] has said that he plays FM also”.

(interview)

Buz mentions that the game’s realistic database is a key aspect of his meaningful gaming experience. Realism is highlighted as a key difference between FM and its main rival, Championship Manager. Buz puts some of the issues with the Championship Manager game down to a lack of cooperation between research teams and fan communities. By stating ‘when you do something you love, you do it well’, Buz acknowledges that the research conducted by the members of the FM community is because of their passion for the FM game. The results of brand scouting are clearly translated into fans’ perception of a realistic database, yet this also goes beyond the confines of the FM community. As Buz points out, there are football teams who ask for the game’s database even before the game is marketed and even well-known managers (e.g. Jose Mourinho) have stated that they play the FM game. By enlisting these prominent examples, and especially by using the phrase ‘it’s not random’, Buz wants to focus on how realistic the game is and emphasize the worth of the work conducted by the members of the FM research team.

Members of the FM community engage in value co-creation in order to co-construct and improve their own gaming experiences (Xie et al. 2008). The intertextuality of the FM game with the real football world (Crawford 2006) is the main driver for FM members to participate in value co-creation, both inside and outside the limits of the community. Members of the FM community also utilize their
gaming experiences as a form of evaluation of their own research work, on the grounds of improving (that is, make close to reality) the next versions of the FM game.

The mythical status of the head researcher(s)

Being a head researcher is the ultimate role that a member can have within the FM community. Head researchers deal with the management and coordination of all the collected information and data and their diffusion within the FM research team. Head researchers directly communicate with the company to provide the final data report (Grönroos and Voima 2013). They are also responsible for selecting the members that will be appointed as assistant researchers. Tim comments on the role of the head researchers in the FM community.

Tim: “For the head researchers, I have to say that they are doing a very good job. They deal with all the teams in Greece, even the local ones, by posting news, signings, etc. They really try hard in order to have a better representation of the Greek League and its players. It’s their hobby, their passion. I have heard that one of the head researchers created his own database for the game in 2000–2002 versions in order to provide a better representation of the Greek League...then they created the site [FM community]. They became an affiliate of Sports Interactive and you know the rest”.

(interview)

Tim appreciates the work of the head researchers. His language reveals respect for these members who are trying to improve the FM game. Tim also evidences that these members, who actively deal with research, do it because of their passion for the FM game. He provides the example of one of the head researchers who used to release unofficial databases of the game. Tim’s statement ‘I have heard that he created his own database’ suggests that such stories may have achieved mythological status. In Tim’s narrative, the logical sequence of the head researcher’s passion for the game is followed by the formation of the FM community and the fact that later the community was officially recognized by Sports Interactive as one of its fan-affiliates. His phrase ‘you know the rest’ clearly indicates how proud he is of the evolution of the community and the role that the head researchers play in the co-creation of the FM game.

Being an FM assistant researcher and the role of other researchers

The process of becoming an assistant researcher and the duties involved are complex. Those with assistant researcher ambitions are required to watch matches of the team she/he chooses to scout, to have a good knowledge of the FM game, to follow the rules and guidelines set by the head researchers, to be online several hours per week in order to communicate with the FM research team, to follow the deadlines set by the FM research team, and finally to also collect data about the youth teams of the team she/he chooses to scout. It is also expected that assistant researchers will watch live football matches of the team and gain inside information from players, staff members, and so on. Candidates for the position of assistant researcher are required to undertake a trial period of brand scouting before securing it. Accordingly, all those members of the FM community who aspire to be assistant researchers and enter into a trial period, or those members of the FM community who participate occasionally in brand scouting are termed here as ‘other researchers’. The quotes of other researchers, Tony and Alex, are presented here.

Tony: “Guys, I could do the scouting of Atromitos team. I know the coach of the team and I can watch the team’s home games for free. I promise, as a fanatic football manager gamer, that I will do perfect work”.

(forum)

Alex: “[...] I would like to be responsible for the scouting of Anagennisi Karditsas. I think that you don’t have scouts for this team. I live in Karditsa, I can watch the team live and I have a good knowledge of the game and the database as I am a gamer for several years. I do not have any inside info for the team and I haven’t proved that I am worthy of becoming a scout but this can easily change if you give me the chance”.

(forum)

Tony seems to understand the requirements in order to transit from the position of the other researcher to that of the assistant researcher. He aims to show that he is in a better position compared with other researchers; ‘I know the coach’, ‘watch the team’s home games for free’. By stating his passion for the game, ‘fanatic football manager gamer’, Tony aims to demonstrate that he knows very well how the game functions and that his passion for the game will be reflected in his brand scouting duties, ‘I will do perfect work’. Accordingly, Alex elaborates why he should qualify as a scout; living in the city of the team he wishes to scout, playing the game for several years and having a good knowledge of the FM game. However, Alex also recognizes that he does not fully meet the requirements of brand scouting since he doesn’t have any inside information for the team and no previous experience in this task. Alex’s desire, ‘if you give me the chance’, also illustrates the complex process of becoming an assistant researcher of the FM community research team.

DISCUSSION

This paper further enhances our understanding of the process of collective value co-creation, the roles of consumers within the process, and the reasons behind consumer participation through the concept of brand scouting (Figure 1). In particular, our work extends previous consumer research on the value co-creation processes (Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder 2011; Schau et al. 2009). We delve deeper into the process of value creation to investigate the exact role of consumers as providers of value (Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder 2011). Our findings illustrate how value is co-created outside the community (data collection), inside the community (data analysis), how value is transferred to the market (data report), and how value is consumed and evaluated from community members (data evaluation). We also showed how consumers engage in value creation in order to enhance their own gaming experiences (Xie et al. 2008). It is through their voluntary work that consumers pursue the common purpose of getting satisfaction from their consumption experiences (Cova and Cova 2012).

We contribute to emerging understandings of working consumer conceptualizations by exemplifying how these consumers are brought into play within the context of the FM community. Consumers not only produce immaterial labor within the FM community (Cova and Dalli 2009) but also participate in the production of actual labor undertaken beyond the confines of the FM community. Issues of double exploitation then become much more complex (Cova and Dalli 2009; Ritzer 2014; Zwick et al. 2008). In contrast with Cova and Dalli (2009), members of the FM community are able to exploit and evaluate the tangible benefits obtained from their labor by playing the new versions of the game. They compromise and undertake unpaid work for the sake of meaningful gaming experiences (Cova and Dalli 2009).
et al. 2015). In the context of the FM community, double exploitation is masked through the process of brand scouting. It is balanced and mediated through members’ sense of obligation (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001) to the work undertaken from the FM community research team.

Finally, we challenge current theorizations of the nature of value co-creation (Grönroos 2008; Grönroos and Voima 2013). In the context of the FM community, direct interactions between companies and consumers are not the key aspect of the co-creation process. The only type of direct interaction and control that the company seems to exert over the community (Cova and Pace 2006) is through the head researchers. We argue that the experiential interaction that members of the FM community have with the FM game is the key driver of value co-creation. Their hunger for realistic and, subsequently, meaningful gaming experiences is what brings them into the value co-creation game in the first place.

REFERENCES


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### Table 1: Illustrative data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data collection-analysis-report-evaluation</th>
<th>‘I scout therefore I play': The FM research team</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dan:</strong> “The process of scouting until the data are incorporated into the FM game: a) There are certain rules and limitations for the collected data, which are set by the head researchers, b) scouting involves personal judgment; For the attributes and characteristics that correspond to a football team and its players, for example, c) a discussion and opinion exchange takes place between the researchers in the FM community research forum, d) the data are then reported to the company and incorporated into the game’s database, e) the game is then tested from the company’s testers, the head researchers and selected scouts, f) all the necessary corrections are made, g) after the release of the updated version, the game is evaluated from all the users and feedback is collected, h) the same process is repeated all around”. (forum)</td>
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<td><strong>Lem:</strong> “I would like to have more interaction with the players in the game (in training, when you make substitutes, when they make transfer offers for them and you want to keep them in the team, when you want to explain them why you placed them in the transfer list)” (forum)</td>
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<td><strong>Tim:</strong> “I buy the authentic version. Actually this year I bought it authentic because I watched how much time and work the guys, that deal with research in the Greek community dedicate, and I thought it was the right thing to do”. (forum)</td>
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<th><strong>The mythical status of the Head researcher(s)</strong></th>
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<td><strong>Lino:</strong> “Help us make more realistic the Greek football Leagues! Read the instructions carefully before anything you post!” (forum)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Agis:</strong> “You don’t need any approval to participate in the research forum. This is why it exists at the first place...so that anyone can post his opinions, which are evaluated and taken into consideration in the final report...The only requirements to post there is to be objective and not to cause problems, and to follow the rules...So, join the research forum and post your opinions”. (forum)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Jack:</strong> “We examine all the cases. It’s not so simple to choose someone [recruitment of researchers]. How many times did you watch Akratitos [Greek football team] playing last year? I need specific data and suggestions” (forum)</td>
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<th><strong>Being an FM assistant researcher and the role of other researchers</strong></th>
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<td><strong>Lakis:</strong> “Guys, if it’s possible, I want to scout Akratitos [Greek football team]. Of course, I would prefer to scout Panathinaikos [famous Greek football team] but it’s obviously not possible. I live near Akratitos’ football stadium and my grandfather is part of the team’s council””. (forum)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nikos:</strong> “I would like to take charge of the scouting of Pantharakis [Greek football team] because I live in Komotini [the football team’s home] and I will have the chance to watch the team live and possibly get some inside information” (forum)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>John:</strong> “How is it possible that Estoyanoff [Greek football team attacking player], who has ‘humiliated’ all of the defenders of the Greek Football League, has only 13 dribbling and 13 crossing [player attributes]??” (forum)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>David:</strong> “I wonder why Christodolopoulos [Greek football player] appears in the game as a wonderkind [FM player profile] and who is responsible for this. I really can’t see how his profile [in the FM game] is reflected with his real profile and value” (forum)</td>
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