Online Livestreams, Community Practices, and Assemblages. Towards a Site Ontology of Consumer Community

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Online livestreams, community practices, and assemblages. 
Towards a site ontology of consumer community

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ABSTRACT

Extant research on consumer community assemblages and practices needs to be complemented by an understanding of community sites. We examine online livestreams from the Dota2 game community to show that multi-level sites allow for assemblage heterogeneity without requiring alignment, and that community practices might be universal but depend on specific sites.

CONSUMER COMMUNITY: ASSEMBLAGE OR PRACTICE?

Consumption communities are a long-standing and central object of consumer research. Over time, a large number of very different communities have been analyzed through a broad spectrum of theoretical lenses. Not surprisingly, many different qualities and descriptors have been worked out, even though authors by and large agree on a core set of commonalities (Chalmers Thomas, Price, and Schau 2013). There are even a number of alternative classification systems according to which different types of communities can be sorted, possibly calling for a typology of typologies (Schau, Muniz, and Arnould 2009; Canniford 2011; Chalmers Thomas et al. 2013; Närvänen, Gummesson, and Kusela 2014). Across this multiplicity, two currently predominant and paradigmatic perspectives can be detected: the assemblage theory view exemplified by Chalmers Thomas, Price, and Schau (2013), and the practice theory view exemplified by Schau, Muniz, and Arnould (2009). Broadly put, the former perspective examines the elements which form communities in order to identify the structural forces that shape how communities develop and influence markets. In particular, communities are conceptualized as “an assemblage of diverse actors” or “social entities that are ‘patterned networks of heterogeneous materials’” (Chalmers Thomas et al. 2013, 1011). The dynamics of community are seen as effects of features of its elements; such as consumers’ needs or actors’ resources. In other words, assemblage approaches start with the ‘What’ of communities. The second perspective, in contrast, zooms in on the ‘How’ by asking how “collectives exhibit community-like qualities” and “how they create value” (Schau et al. 2009, 30). The nature and effects of communities are thus derived from the characteristics of the core routine activities that sustain them. Both perspectives share key insights and can be seen as complementary. For one, both emphasize that individual consumers’ intentions or actions are not sufficient to explain community phenomena and thus acknowledge the importance of the cultural, technological and emotional dimensions. Moreover, the heterogeneity of community actors and resources highlighted by the assemblage approach is reflected in the different elements that are seen as shaping practices in the practice-based view. Further, assemblage views explicitly assume that it is in and through practices that the various elements of actor-networks come together to produce the social reality of consumer community. Rather than rivalling each other, we argue that both tacitly presuppose one another. Practice approaches tend to take the broad availability of uniform compatible elements as given, although the circulation and align-ability of elements themselves often depend on specific conditions or processes (Shove et al. 2010). When zooming in on practices, in other words, they trust that assemblages of actors and resources are already in place. Assemblage approaches, in turn, put much faith in the orderly and smooth operation of the practices through which the network is upheld in spite of heterogeneity and power play (Bajde 2013). If community dynamics and effects are the result of an interplay of the What and How, one could say, then each perspective focuses on just one side by presupposing the unproblematic givenness of the other. While this procedure is arguably inevitable, we hold that instead of remaining fixed on either approach, consumer researchers need to attend in more detail to the concrete circumstances that are required for community resources to be reliably mangled into community practices (Hill, Canniford, and Mol 2014). Prompted by our empirical case at hand, the present study seeks to remedy this oversight. In addition to the What and How, we ask about the Where and When of consumer community. Working towards a site ontology of consumer communities, we examine the sites in and through which consumer community manifests in the case of an online gaming community, because we contend that the affordances and constraints of these sites have formative influences on both community practices and community assemblages.

A SITE ONTOLOGY OF CONSUMER COMMUNITY

We borrow the concept of the site from Schatzki (2002, 2005, 468) who broadly defines it as “a type of context” in which “context and contextualized entity constitute one another.” Various sites have been studied in consumer research. One example is a public discourse which forms the context on which each single newspaper article (or discursive move) draws, and which is ultimately made up of the totality of discursive moves (Humphreys 2010). Unlike approaches that seek to demonstrate how a phenomenon is determined by some external and pre-given entity (e.g. the rationality of agents or stable class structures), site ontologies acknowledge the reflexive and performative nature of sociality, thus arguably avoiding the pitfalls of individualism or structuralism (Reckwitz 2002). Sites of consumer community that have been studied so far include tribes (tribal rituals and gatherings are both constitutive of and constituted by tribes; Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar 2007), brand community practices (practice performances are expressions of practices, which are in turn bundles of repeat performances; Schau et al. 2009), networks of heterogeneous members (actors in a network are members by virtue of the community which is in turn comprised of members; Chalmers Thomas et al. 2013) and community websites (the web is the totality of webpages, which only exist as part of the web; Kozinets 2007). Because sites are contexts and an event can stand in several contexts at once, these different theoretical accounts of the sites of community do not necessarily contradict one another. But since a site is an “arena that surrounds or immerses something and enjoys powers of determination with respect to it” (Schatzki 2005, 468), different types of sites require the attention of the researcher depending on the phenomenon in question. Mechanisms through which sites shape communities are manifold: they can ease certain performances while constraining others; augment some aspect while masking another; problematize issues or normalize them; function to erect boundaries or transgress borders; exert power or challenge it. Per our definition, e.g. self-printed magazines or online forums are sites on which communities manifest through performances that draw on community resources. Thus, we do not claim that such sites of community have not been taken into account until now. While physical gatherings or face-to-face interaction are still routinely being presupposed as the
most vivid, authentic, or real site of the performance of community (Chalmers Thomas et al. 2013; Martin and Schouten 2014), the role of different media and especially the internet has since long been acknowledged. Following in the footsteps of such advances, we study the nature and impact of what we identify as a novel type of site of consumer community: online livestreams.

FROM WEBSITES TO STREAMSITES

Like most aspects of consumption, communities are influenced by the process of mediatization (Lundby 2009), the progressing transformation of social practices through the influx of media technology. With regard to the internet, communities have been quick to take advantage of new technological possibilities, yet also conservative in sticking to certain well-established forms (e.g., simple hierarchical text-only forums are still the backbone of much community activity). Websites are the dominant form of sites in which online community manifests. Per our definition, websites are asynchronous, that is, turn-based and permanent online media environments. Community performance proceeds in turns as for example forum entries, wiki entries, or videos are posted one after another and then remain accessible in their original form (often for years). The technological infrastructure parses community performance into units of actions and reactions which are distributed only as already completed acts. In our view, websites thus do not allow for interaction (coeval and joint conduct) in a strict sense. We suggest that many typical qualities of online communities result from this, for example their ability to collect detailed documentations, plan events or develop complex new solutions or products (Kozinets, Hemetsberger, and Schau 2008; Chalmers Thomas et al. 2013) – but also a tendency for conflicts and antagonisms (Giesler 2008; Lueddicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010). If these qualities are indeed due to websites’ structural co-determination, then they are bound to evolve as a new form of online site emerges.

We are currently witnessing the beginning of another important step in the evolution of online consumption communities. Livestreams enable consumers to attend live events from around the globe and engage audiences via multi-layered feedback architectures (Dholakia and Reyes 2013; Seo and Jung 2014; Woermann and Kirschner 2014). Online livestreams are live broadcasts of audio-visual content on the web in which several forms of interactive media like chatrooms, webcam video, twitter feeds, and more converge into a continuous stream of content. The focal activity of the Dota2 gaming community we studied consists of live casts in which the audience uses interactive media to co-create the content of the stream, e.g. by chatting with the presenter, voting for the next game or action, embedding links to YouTube videos or pictures, as well as donating during the show. These screen practices create “synthetic situations” (Knorr Cetina 2009) which stretch over spatial, temporal and social boundaries whilst synthesising several communication media and perspectives at once. Building on Goffman’s (Goffman 1969, 122) definition of a social situation, we might say that the media environment of streamsites “extends over the entire territory within which mutual monitoring is possible.” Because they include feedback channels, streamsites constitute a “screen-reality” (Knorr-Cetina 2009) for each individual participating in the synthetic situation.

METHODS AND CASE

Our study draws on 3 years of participant observation in the gaming community that has evolved around the computer game Dota2, currently one of the most widely played games with over 1 million concurrent players per day (Warr 2015). In addition to playing, consumers also watch professional players compete against each other in online or live tournaments that have to date awarded over 28 million USD in prize money. Our study focuses on online livestreams showing Dota2-related content. Established research practices of Netnography (Kozinets 2009) primarily focus their attention on data provided by websites. Therefore, the methodological stance in researching streamsites has to differ in some respects. Our engagement ranged from watching and recording different online-livestreams to participating in the chat or playing online on the same field as respective streamers. A dual or even triple monitor setup that is common in the community, for example allowed us to participate in an online match and watch another player’s stream at the same time, making it possible to adjust our strategy accordingly, or to interact with the community of a stream channel via its chat. With the help of screen-capture software we recorded our own conduct as well as the action on the screen. This heavily mediatized research environment allowed us to focus on our engagement in the site whilst recording and thereby archiving other perspectives of what is going on. In a second step we used this data to recombine the different perspectives of the observed by relying on the knowledge we acquire due to our deep engagement. The main corpus of our data from the Dota2 community consists in 957 hours of screen capture video collected during 3 years of participation in online livestreams, contextualized by 6 day-long video-aided participation in community events, 8 interviews with industry professionals and gamers, as well as netnographic data from community websites.

Figure 1 shows a screenshot from a popular Dota2 livestream, illustrating the media architecture through which gameplay, video technology, audience and caster are pulled together and assembled into an intelligible site of community. The focal video content visible for the audience is a copy of (a part of) the caster’s own screen – in this case a game of Dota2 he is currently playing. Special streaming software transmits the signal via a broadcast platform like twitch.tv, together with the casters’ audio comment. The platform adds a chat window to the video stream through which the audience members continuously talk to each other. The caster can see the chat on a separate screen and will at times respond to the discussion via text or voice. Further, audience members can subscribe to the stream channel or donate small sums of money (typically 1-25) through services like PayPal. These actions will in turn trigger an automated alert message on the stream, programmed by the caster. This technology creates a multi-layered feedback channel media architecture that shapes and frames the possibilities of how viewers and caster co-create the content of the stream. For example, if the caster gets a donation, a mini-video (a gif) is automatically shown which typically contains a reference to a meme, a joke or saying developed by the community. Additionally, an automated voice reads a message send in together with the donation. In this way, the donator can e.g. thank the caster for his work, but also tell a joke or suggest an activity for the streamer or the community.

FINDINGS

On-site Practices

Figure 1 exemplifies the different layers of communication that impact the viewing experience of livestreams. Beyond being mere channels of communication, the different windows the stream combines are the site of the performance of community. As table 1 shows, the (brand) community practices found by Schau et al. 2009 to be key for the performance of community can all be found on Dota2 livestreams. In addition to these universal practices, however, we also observed community-specific practices such as troll-
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Figure 1: A screenshot from the popular Dota2 stream Wagamama showing a live game the caster is playing, the caster (bottom left), the chat and a overlay providing contextual live data (e.g. current viewers).

Successful cast must not react to the 'noise' in the chat, such as trolling—him- or herself while casting, it will either be a casual game), and a

Users in order to reach a high level of proficiency. For example, the

Interaction in the chat. All three practices—gaming, casting, and chatting—must often be conducted separately by different

Other hand on the insightful or entertaining cast provided, as well as one the interaction in the chat. All three practices—gaming, casting, and chatting—must often be conducted separately by different users in order to reach a high level of proficiency. For example, the game itself requires full focus from the player (if the caster is playing him- or herself while casting, it will either be a casual game), and a successful cast must not react to the ‘noise’ in the chat, such as trolling. Another example of how value-creating practices are bound to sites is the in-game chat that is technically available to players, but is hardly used because the separate chat system offers richer community practices, and because chatting in-game would severely harm gameplay. Crucially, the community practices described in table 1 are nevertheless dependent on the coeval performance of gaming, casting, and chatting. Only because the streamsite enables the mutual observability of their synchronous performances, a live gathering of the community can occur on the stream. Synchronicity and observability, however, are not just given, but established and organized by the site architecture.

Sited Assemblages

Similar to our argument that studying community practices require attention to community sites because practices can be site-specific, we hold that institutional perspectives focusing on how resources are mobilized within heterogeneous assemblages need to pay attention to sites. As our example shows, certain resources might require a particular type of site in order for an assemblage to produce or exchange it. For example, Kozinets et al. (2008) have shown how different forms of consumer creativity occur relative to particular types of sites (e.g. wikimedia vs. blogs). In contrast to prior accounts, which assume either that translation must occur between distinct (parts of) networks (Giesler 2012) or that obligatory points of passage exist which can control and manage touchpoints (Martin and Schouten 2014), our case shows how certain sites that are different from interactions or websites, enable co-presence and collaboration between heterogeneous and even antagonistic networks in real time. As a detailed analysis reveals, this is because separate but interlinked media channels allow for distinct communication routines and thus (community) practices to be performed coevally and with the option of, but not a necessity for, sustained or regular ‘synch’ or mutuality. Unlike in a face-to-face talk, for example, a caster on a stream must not always visibly understand what is happening in-game, and (s)he can also choose to ignore what is being posted in the chat for longer stretches of time. Nevertheless, (s)he can and will also share a conversation with the chat, or become fully attuned to and emotionally immersed in the in-game action (e.g. to the point of shouting at the screen, or crying), or play a game with the community members. In other words, the streamsite affords network homogeneity and shared performance of practices, but it does not require it constantly. Because the different performancescapes (Tumbat and Belk 2013) which the layered media channels offer are functionally and structurally de-coupled, they are stabilized in that they are to a large extent shielded from problematic or destructive mutual interference. Criti-
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Table 1: Brand community practices in Dota2 livestreams. (based on Schau et al. 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Data Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welcoming</td>
<td>In figure 1: “Emreelik: How are u ladies and gentlemens”; “Slemvap: and how are you?” Every new subscriber is automatically greeted by a bot.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathizing</td>
<td>In figure 1: “Euphor1e: fine, just headache whole day :S” – “Slemvap: wah, no good!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governing</td>
<td>As indicated by the sword-icon, acts as a moderator in the chat, he enforces social norms and can ban users.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelizing</td>
<td>The caster regularly encourages the audience to follow or subscribe to his channel or to donate. Jokes or dismissive comments about rival games like League of Legends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justifying</td>
<td>Re-framing computer gaming as eSports. The caster reading out a message from a subscriber that the community saved his life during a time of depression.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staking</td>
<td>The community follows a status hierarchy based on in-game prowess: Newbies -&gt;Casuals-&gt;Competitive- &gt; Pro. Special events such as “Newbie Tuesday” are held.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milestoning</td>
<td>Members self-describe based on in-game achievements, e.g. “My name is Waga and I’m 7k MMR.” In figure 1, the “Sub counter” records the number of new channel subscribers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Badging</td>
<td>In figure 1, chat participants who are subscribers are identified by a symbol.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documenting</td>
<td>In figure 1, the total viewer count (&gt;12,000,000) of the channel is shown, as well as the followers. A “Donator Leaderboard” and a weekly announcement of the highest donations by the caster.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grooming</td>
<td>Optimal game strategies, the honing of personal skills and the right technological set-up are core themes across all gaming livestreams.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customizing</td>
<td>Most streaming software and the game Dota itself was developed by the community. Fan art, modding and inventing new community-specific memes are core activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commoditizing</td>
<td>Trading in-game items, item betting, donation practices that are similar to service transactions (“10$ Donation = 1h extra streaming”); the controversies these cause.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

...incidences in our data make clear that these borders are vital for the functioning of the stream as a site of community, because said borders between the different performance systems are being policed and repaired whenever they are unintentionally or purposefully broken. In our view, assemblage approaches do not offer a satisfactory conception of how different networks or assemblages relate to each other, especially because it entertains the rather abstract notion that all nodes in a network are in fact ‘black-boxes’ which, if opened, can reveal that they themselves consist of a sub-level network (Bajde 2013; Martin and Schouten 2014). Not only is there a paucity of empirical cases demonstrating the viability and indeed necessity of this complex understanding; it also raises the question of how such multi-level networks relate to each other: how do they conflict, share resources, or co-evolve? Our discussion of streamsites points to a viable answer at least for the realm of consumer community. An eSport livestream is an assemblage composed of various elements or actants such as software, consumers, players, and media channels. However, key elements such as the computer game, the chatroom, or the donation system are themselves complex and wide-ranging networks that have their own structures, dynamics, hierarchies and arguably even time horizons. If one would indeed treat them as black boxes when looking at the stream as an assemblage, their conviviality and the processes of reciprocity that are crucial for the livestream phenomenon would disappear from view. In a way, black-boxing networks would mean missing out on the very liveness of livestreams.

**Outlook - From virtual place to sites**

The virtual as a place or space is the key theoretical metaphor that has structured research on forms of online consumption since the early 1990s (Kozinets 2002; Kozinets et al. 2008, 2010). Expanding on prior work by Dholakia (Dholakia and Reyes 2013; Zwick and Dholakia 2006) and Knorr Cetina (2009; Knorr Cetina and Preda 2007), we argue that the dominant metaphor of virtual worlds or online spaces is ill-suited to understand livestreams. Conceptualizing community performance as occurring in a single shared space like a website implies several general conditions which might be necessary for face-to-face interaction orders (Goffman 1983), but are not without alternatives when it comes to other sites. They include a shared focus of attention, the collaboratively established possibility of mutual intelligibility, and an at least superficially shared consensus, or the absence of open conflict. In the current literature, it is either tacitly presupposed that these conditions are being met, for example in that shared rituals are defined as core elements of tribes (Cova and Cova 2002); or else it is assumed that for example frame alignment practices must be invoked to remedy this lack (Chalmers Thomas et al. 2013). Our research shows that it depends on the site in which community is performed whether or not these conditions are indeed necessary or even feasible. As our empirical examples in table 1 make clear, the different layers of the site architecture that get synthesized in a livestream operate in relative independence from one another: sometimes they share a focus of attention (e.g. the chat and the cast both discuss the same in-game events happening at that moment), but often they do not (chat, caster, and game avatars are engaged in separate and idiosyncratic conversations, practices and time flows). The streamsite allows for the coeval performance of several different practices conducted by separate, heterogeneous actors or assemblages of actors (e.g. the caster, the eSports athletes, and the chat participants). At the same time, it also retains key neces-
sity of community coherence and collaboration, in particular their mutual observation capability and their mutual communication addressability. Having shown that the forms and effects of both community practices and community assemblages are dependent on community sites, we thus argue that further attention to the ways in which community sites enable and configure coherence, collaboration, communication, co-creation and ultimately consumption will allow future studies to better understand the paradoxes of both assemblage heterogeneity and practice universality.

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