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Consumer Activism on the Internet: the Role of Anti-Brand Communities

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Consumer Activism on the Internet: The Role of Anti-brand Communities

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ABSTRACT

As a backlash against capitalism, there is a growing resistance to transnational brands and corporate globalization. To cite a few trends, consumers are opposing global brands and expressing concerns about corporate practices related to environmental issues and human rights. The purpose of this study is to investigate the current anti-brand social movement by examining consumer activist groups on the Internet. We identified three anti-brand websites for in-depth analysis: anti-Wal-Mart, anti-McDonald's, and anti-Starbucks. Based on 36 interviews and a two-year examination of anti-brand communities, we provide an understanding of why online anti-brand communities form, we explore the behavioral manifestations of such movements, and we discuss technological influences. The concluding section discusses our findings in terms of implications for theory.

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Brand names identify, label or symbolize abstract values such as quality, status, or reputation and are a means for differentiating one product, service, manufacturer or retailer from another. According to Dobni and Zinkhan (1990) "people buy products or brands for something other than their physical attributes and functions" (p. 110). Fournier (1998b) indicates that people buy brands because they have established loyal, long-term, committed, affect-laden relationships with particular brands. Consumers not only form relationships with their brands, they form relationships with other consumers that have similar brand preferences. This network of consumer relationships is called a brand community or consumption community.

Brand communities are networks of consumer relationships that situate around a commonly used brand. These communities create a sense of belonging among consumers and the brand becomes the central purpose and meaning for group interaction. As "brands attach meaning to a good" (Muniz 1997, p. 308), brands also have potential to symbolize negative perceptions associated with corporations. The antithesis of a brand community is an anti-brand community. In the same way that brand communities are forming around commonly used brands, anti-brand communities are forming around common aversions toward brands.

Similar to descriptions of brand communities (McAlexander et al. 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001), anti-brand communities typically focus on one dominant brand or corporation and are non-geographically bound communities based on a structured set of social relationships. Anti-brand communities could oppose specific brands (e.g., Jeep, Marlboro cigarettes), but could also oppose corporate brands (e.g., Wal-Mart, Procter & Gamble). In this paper, our focus is on the latter.

In anti-brand communities, consumers take on social activist roles by voicing their opposition to corporate domination. Anti-branding demonstrations are emerging as a new form of consumer activism and these activist strategies have received more recognition in recent years as consumer rebellion is viewed as a world-wide social movement (Bourdieu 1998; Dobscha 1998; Fournier 1998a; Holt 2002; Zavestoski 2002). The term social movement refers to "the coming together of relatively large numbers of people around a commonly held set of values or notion of rights (human and/or social) in order to bring about social change" (Dykstra and Law 1994, p. 122). Cohen defines social movements as "normatively

oriented interactions between adversaries with conflicting interpretations and opposed societal models of a shared cultural field" (Cohen 1985, p. 695).

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, consumer movements and marketplace rebellions are sometimes labeled as "consumerism." Ralph Nader (1968) defines consumerism as "a term given vogue recently by business spokesmen to describe what they believe is a concerted, disruptive ideology concocted by self-appointed bleeding hearts and politicians who find that it pays off to attack the corporations" (p. 27). More conventionally, consumerism emphasizes a consumer's right for protection against adulterated, deficient, or unsafe products and services. For Buskirk and Rothe (1970) "consumerism is attempting to tell industry something their research has not found, or that management has rejected or ignored" (p. 64). Kotler (1972) defines consumerism as "a social movement seeking to augment the rights and powers of buyers in relation to sellers" (p. 49). According to Kotler, consumerism is enduring and ultimately beneficial for both consumers and businesses. Consumerism mobilizes the energies of consumers, businessmen and government leaders to seek solutions and advance society, and ensures short-term and long-term values for consumers (1972).

Kotler (1972) identified three distinct waves of U.S. consumerism movements in the early 1900s, the mid-1930s, and the mid-1960s. According to Herrmann (1970), these three eras have important common characteristics. First, each movement occurred during economic and social unrest where rising consumer prices accompanied declining incomes. With limited financial power, consumers were forced to protest by joining efforts to voice their rights. Second, consumers began to fight for their own interests since they were hard-pressed by their declining purchasing power.

This paper explores a new, emerging social movement referred to by Holt (2002) as the "anti-brand movement." The anti-brand movement is similar to former social movements but it also has some unique aspects. First, the anti-brand movement represents a confluence of ideas. For example, the issues prominent in the anti-brand movement range from workplace equality and corporate domination to environmentalism and marketing propaganda. Historically, social movements emphasized one prevailing cause (e.g., women's rights, worker's rights, environmentalism) (Boggs 1986, Eyerman and Jamison 1991, Holst 2002). Second, the Internet has changed the way people participate in social action. The Internet has enabled anti-brand communities to proliferate online in unprecedented numbers. With World Wide Web capabilities, action strategies and coalition building are not restricted by space or time (Shepard and Hayduk 2002). These two unique characteristics represent a new kind of movement utilizing different resources and taking on broader goals.

The purpose of this study is to understand the nature of online, anti-brand communities as an emergent social movement. The investigation is guided by three research questions. First, why do online anti-brand communities form? Second, what behavioral manifestations are associated with anti-brand community involvement? Third, in what ways are emerging technologies influencing and interacting with consumer activist strategies? To begin, we offer a brief discussion of the anti-brand movement. Then, we present our findings based on 36 in-depth interviews and a two-year examination of anti-brand websites. In conclusion, we relate our

findings to the current consumer behavior literature and discuss implications for theory.

THE ANTI-BRAND MOVEMENT

Historically social movements have emerged in a geographical pattern, revolving around physical gathering spaces. Today social movements are transpiring in virtual space, which sets the stage for new forms of protest, organization, cooperation, and coalition-building. The Internet plays a major role in the anti-brand movement because it provides communication methods for people around the globe irrespective of geographical space and/or time zones.

In most cases, anti-brand communities originate and communicate solely in cyberspace. This virtual community is built around common social and political interests. Communities form online because people are able to come together, regardless of geographical proximity, and identify with a common need, goal, or identity. The community is situated around common detestations of corporate brand names. Various consumer groups form to support each other in their efforts to resist marketplace practices and globalized consumption patterns.

Traditionally, the interactions between marketer and consumer are viewed as an exchange-based relationship ascribing mutual benefits to one another (Kotler 1986). The brand serves as a conduit for marketers to provide consumers with identities that satisfy their needs, wants, and desires (Zinkhan and Martin 1987). The consumer purchases the branded good and is fulfilled. The collective actions of both consumers and marketers are thought to bring about balance in the marketplace by producing a dynamic dialectical relationship (Holt 2002). Although marketers may strive for a balanced relationship, there is a movement of consumers who engage in social action and argue against the imbalances of power in a profit-driven marketplace consisting of large, global corporations (Ozanne and Murray 1995). In the twenty-first century, many consumers view corporations as dominating and oppressive by means of imbalanced distribution systems or deceitful marketing tactics (Dobscha 1998). In an era marked by rapid globalization, corporations are perceived by some as using sophisticated promotional techniques to attach world-wide meanings to their brands. Consumers who internalize these meanings implicitly grant corporations the cultural authority to dictate their values, tastes, and preferences (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Ozanne and Murray 1995). Anti-brand communities consist of consumer groups resisting imposed meanings or values that are prescribed by a brand. In this way, the brand name serves as a negative symbolization by representing corporation domination.

METHOD

This study resulted in a two-year examination of consumer activists who participate in online anti-brand communities and self-identify as social activists. An initial investigation identified 104 anti-brand web communities. Web community characteristics were compiled indicating the number of active anti-brand members, the shared values within the community, common goals, and action strategies. From this list, three community cases were chosen for in-depth analysis using three selection criteria. First, the researchers selected communities that oppose popular, transnational brand names. Second, we identified online communities that had been in existence for more than ten years. Lastly, active communities with the highest number of regular participating members (e.g., daily interactions) were studied which ensured information-rich cases. Using this criterion, three online anti-brand communities were identified for further analysis: anti-Starbucks, anti-Wal-Mart, and anti-McDonald's.

Data were collected through 36 in-depth interviews with an equal number of participants from each community. In addition, online documents (e.g., chat logs, web pages, email transcripts) from the three web communities were analyzed for the following: (1) the content of conversation, (2) the promoted and dissuaded products/services, (3) the number of people discussing topics synchronously and asynchronously, (4) activities/events being arranged or protested, (5) formal and informal patterns of communication, (6) website graphics and pictures, and (7) symbolic or connotative meanings of words posted on the site and/or used in conversations. Using a constant comparative method of data analysis, individual case and cross-case analyses were conducted. Descriptions of interactions among consumer activists as well as quotes, documents, and artifacts were examined to provide a holistic description of each case. This descriptive data was used to establish common traits or themes across the three cases.

FINDINGS

Data analysis revealed four distinct reasons why anti-brand communities form: 1) to provide a social community comprised of members with common moral obligations, 2) to provide a support network to achieve common goals, 3) to provide a way of coping with workplace difficulties, and 4) to provide a resource hub for taking action. Behavioral manifestations include: 1) publicizing marketplace inequalities (e.g., unethical marketing tactics, unethical corporate actions), 2) informing fellow members about the rewards associated with a restrictive lifestyle (e.g., voluntary simplicity), and 3) constructing a new collective identity (e.g., in opposition to prefabricated marketplace identities). Technological advances provided by the Internet such as speed, convenience, anonymity, and virtual formation are enhancing consumer activist strategies.

Why Anti-brand Communities Form

Common Moral Obligations. The most salient reason why anti-brand communities form is to provide a social community comprised of members with common moral obligations. Moral responsibility is a sense of obligation to the betterment of society (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Community members collectively articulate matters of right and wrong with regard to corporate actions. Within each of the three anti-brand groups studied, a common entity (i.e., Starbucks, Wal-Mart, McDonald's) challenged community members' worldview of how a corporation should function. In response, moral systems are challenged and community members feel a common call to action. During interviews with anti-brand community members, words such as "oppressive," "exploiting," "destructive," "unethical" and "monopolizing" were used to describe the corporations they were fighting against. All 36 participants in this study talked about a personal commitment to fight against a corporation.

I cannot ignore what this corporation is doing to our environment, our children, and our future. I have to be an activist because I would feel guilty otherwise. (Betsy, anti-McDonald's)

It is up to us as citizens to join together to fight these bullies. (Mel, anti-Wal-Mart)

It is up to me to make a change. I know that my efforts are not in vain because every single thing I do will matter in the end. That is why we have to join together to become stronger. (John, anti-Starbucks)

I made the decision to give my time to this cause because I felt like it was important to me and my future. Joining with other people only makes it better. (Judy, anti-Wal-Mart)

At some point in time, our participants made a conscious decision to play an active role in their anti-brand campaign. Each participant decided that it was his or her responsibility to make a change. This moral consciousness compels them to bond with other community members in an effort to improve society.

Support Networks. Another prominent reason anti-brand communities form is to provide a support group to achieve common goals. It was evident, from the onset of this investigation, that a social support network existed within all three communities. Through nurturing social interactions via the Internet, each community resembled a support group, which also served to legitimize their fight for a common cause. These support networks have three common characteristics. They are based on a reciprocal exchange, they mimic a family structure, and they are purposive.

Anti-brand members are involved in a reciprocal exchange partnership with other community members because relationships are based on an exchange of ideas, advice, and support. Discussion boards, chat rooms, and blogs serve as a dynamic form of relationship building where the exchange of ideas mutually fulfills the social needs of community members. Relationships within the community are interdependent, meaning community members depend on each other to accomplish tasks for their common cause.

I connect with other anti-Starbucks people online. We rely on each other for support because as you know, most people I talk to on the street are infatuated with Starbucks. (Greg, anti-Starbucks)

We give advice and support to each other and that is the how we stay committed to our cause. (Freda, anti-McDonald's)

We rely on each other to get our message across. It is not just one person making a change, it is all of us working together to change our environment. (Betsy, anti-McDonald's)

I would not know what to do if it were not for this website. It helps me to know that I am not the only one fighting for my rights. (Casey, anti-McDonald's)

When asked to describe their anti-brand community, participants used similar terms such as "family," "friends," and "support" when telling stories about their website communities. Anti-brand communities provide the supportive, family-like environment necessary to achieve common goals. Community members teach, guide, and support one another in their common endeavors, developing relationships that resemble close friendships rather than mere acquaintances.

The relationships cultivated among community members are purposive in that they stimulate confidence through camaraderie. The confidence it provides individual members serves to be useful in accomplishing common goals; however, this camaraderie is not a result of planning. Camaraderie results from the group's coming together and uniting through their common needs, goals, and priorities.

This website gives me confidence to stand up for my beliefs. I know that I am supported by my online friends and that gives me the motivation I need to take a stand. (Michelle, anti-Starbucks)

I would not have the confidence to take on this multi-billion dollar company without the support from this website. They have become like part of my family. (Tom, anti-Wal-Mart).

Through continuous interactions, community members begin to develop a supportive and purposive social network that provides a framework for better understanding the world in which they live.

Workplace Challenges. Coping with difficulties at work is a major motivation for one-third of the participants in our study, who are current or previous employees of the company they oppose. Through pep-talks, sympathy, and personal counsel, community members strategize together about how to overcome challenging workplace issues such as demanding schedules, unfair pay, unsympathetic managers, or rude customers. In addition, the web community provides a social structure that is not provided at work, offering individual self-assurance and support. When corporations lack a supportive environment, findings suggest that employees search for and find solace from website communities.

Sometimes we need someone that is going to tell us the truth and someone that I can trust and that is what I find online. (Freda, anti-McDonald's)

Whenever I need something I just go to the website and ask somebody that has already been there and done that...there's always somebody that can give you advice for almost any situation that comes up. (Amy, anti-Starbucks)

Community members collectively create an environment where participants can be open and honest with one another. Employees search for answers in how to alleviate the stress of workplace challenges. Likewise, employees receive ad hoc solutions to problems at work. When employees do not receive support or guidance in the workplace, direction is sought from online community members. These negative workplace stories inherently influence other community members, adding reason to their cause.

Resource Hub. Sharing resources is an important means for creating and maintaining a community. For instance, the anti-Starbucks website was created to publicize Starbucks' unethical practices. Six months later, the website transformed into a central location for information sharing. With respect to Wal-Mart, the Internet served as a more efficient and effective means for reaching people and providing them with information (e.g., to resist expansion of new stores). Over time, the website became a locus for accumulating knowledge and building coalitions. The anti-McDonald's website was created to educate people about the McLibel court case (a trial that took place in Britain in response to a defamatory leaflet). By utilizing the Internet, the fight against McDonald's transformed from a localized campaign (e.g., one country) to a global campaign (e.g., 150 countries). In all three cases, the website was created to inform others by providing resources for getting involved or taking action.

Behavioral Manifestations

Publicizing Marketplace Inequities. Community members critique corporate actions and try to correct imbalances in the marketplace. Some community members believe that twenty-first century corporations adversely affect society, and they strive to create a new paradigm. For example, members of the anti-Wal-Mart community contend that mega stores use a type of "sprawl-math" to persuade small towns to entrust development to Wal-Mart. Community members remind one another that small towns do not prosper when large corporations dominate local communities, and they emphasize job losses and environmental degradation.

Companies like Wal-Mart and Home Depot utilize a form of “sprawl-math”, which only looks at gross impacts on a community—never of the net effect of their stores. Sprawl-Math is not taught in local school systems. It’s a form of developer’s calculator that had no minus pad to subtract out jobs lost, or revenues diverted. The real truth about Wal-Mart and Home Depot, and the rest of the sprawl-mathematicians, is that they represent a form of economic displacement, not economic development. (Al, anti-Wal-Mart)

Anti-brand communities create a virtual reality that fosters utopian thinking. These communities are visionary, creating ideal social and political schemes. The interactions among community members are based upon visionary ideals of urban planning, activist projects, and controlled consumption lifestyles.

We offer a place where people can come together and be valued for who they are and not what they own. I feel like our online community is a place of equality and true democracy. (Dave, anti-McDonald’s)

When we meet online, it almost feels like we are escaping our surrounding environment. So many people that I talk with think that Wal-Mart is great and I can’t understand why. They all want the lowest prices they can find. Yet they complain about outsourcing! I want to scream at them, ‘don’t you know that you are the cause of outsourcing!’ (Tom, anti-Wal-Mart)

We focus on developing ideal communities that are not cluttered with urban sprawl. (Marie, anti-Wal-Mart)

I hate my job and I am just sticking with it to finish school. Finding this online group helps me to tolerate my job and my nagging boss. I go online sometimes during my break and it helps me forget about the fact that I have to work four more hours. (Greg, anti-Starbucks)

The following is a quote from the anti-McDonald’s website illustrating one member’s critique of capitalism. The community member suggests that consumers are drawn into an endless and meaningless cycle of consumption. People are assigned roles and stereotypes that diminish independence.

From the day we’re born, until the day we die, we are expected to believe that money makes the world go round. We are meant to trust the authorities and experts who tell us that they have everything under control. Our lives are determined and exploited by the perceived need for money and status; dominated by the power and influence of companies, bureaucracies and laws to keep us in our place; marginalized by a traffic system based on cars and concrete; swamped by the mass media; and controlled and affected by all manner of remote institutions and decisions. In fact, people barely get a look in—they are just expected to go along with their set roles as obedient workers, dependant consumers and occasional passive voters. Such is the reality of capitalism and centralized government. At least we have each other. We provide our own escape from this subjugated world. (James, anti-McDonald’s)

Members believe that contemporary consumption practices distort reality, and consumers unconsciously participate in a consumer culture that automatically assigns roles and images that are subservient to corporations. In an effort to overcome cultural influences,

community members publicize that consumerism cannot always provide what it promises. In doing this, members create a utopian community.

Instructing Members in the Rewards of Voluntary Simplicity. Voluntary simplicity encourages freedom and expression based on individual choice. By choice, consumers design their own lifestyles (in opposition to lifestyles driven by consumption trends). Anti-brand websites provide an informal setting where community members teach each other how to engage in voluntary simplicity. Voluntary simplicity is “the degree to which an individual selects a lifestyle intended to maximize his/her direct control over daily activities” (Leonard-Barton 1981, p.244).

In this study, online discussions typically focused on common desires to limit consumption. Members instructed one another to avoid societal pressures, indulgences in materialism and unhealthy practices. Following is an excerpt from the anti-McDonald’s community conveying one member’s desire for simplicity.

McDonald’s promote their food as “nutritious”, but the reality is that it is junk food—high in fat, sugar, and salt, and low in fiber and vitamins. A diet of this type is linked with a greater risk of heart disease, cancer, diabetes and other diseases. Their food also contains many chemical additives, some of which may cause ill-health, and hyperactivity in children. Don’t forget too that meat is the cause of the majority of food poisoning incidents. In 1991 McDonald’s was responsible for an outbreak of food poisoning in the UK, in which people suffered serious kidney failure. With modern intensive farming methods, other diseases—linked to chemical residues or unnatural practices—have become a danger for people too. We need to rid ourselves of these unhealthy substances. Life is simplified when we take the time to take care of ourselves. What ever happen to whole grains and vegetables? We need to go back to the simple things that will make our lives last longer. (Betsy, anti-McDonald’s)

The website acts as a gathering place for individuals to become and feel authentic. Through a process of advising and counseling one another, community members engage in a course of self-improvement and self-purification. In this next illustration, another anti-McDonald’s member joins the online discussion about eliminating unhealthy foods. She explains how she acquiesced to eating foods that were high in fat. She finally took control of her own life by decoding marketing messages.

I lost 20 pounds by giving up all fast food, soda and candy. It sounds so simple and it is! Do I regret it? Not one bit! The USA is the largest fat country in the world. Gee, I wonder why? McDonald’s food is not only fattening, but the burgers have no doubt been frozen in the back of the store for a long time, and the only thing they do to the fries is take them out of the freezer and oil them. Tempting right? Well, I believe if we had healthier options maybe America would be thinner. I mean I was just following the crowd and doing whatever the media told me to do. Every time I turned on the television or radio I was bombarded with another fast food commercial. When I got hungry, the first thing I would think about eating is some fast food burger that I saw on a commercial. I was in this never ending cycle of consuming food that was giving me heart disease, high cholesterol, and obesity. I was being controlled by the mass media and told what I should and should not eat. Finally, I decided that I was not going to be controlled anymore. We’re told everyday that fast food tastes better than

healthier foods, and in reality healthy foods taste better and make us feel better. If you are thinking about giving up unhealthy foods—just do it. It is a simple way to improve your life and the rewards will pay off! (Margy, anti-McDonald's)

Anti-brand communities provide a supportive, family-like environment where voluntary simplicity is encouraged. Community members teach, guide, and support one another in their common endeavors, developing relationships that resemble close friendships. The common quest for a purified or simplified lifestyle bonds community members together and provides the motivation for achieving personal goals.

Constructing a New Collective Identity. Community members join in a collective process of identification. Along with evaluating society as a whole and seeking for ways to improve it, participants unite in a renewal of the self. This self-improvement venture is a group-driven process where the community becomes a catalyst for individual transformation.

I used to view myself as a McDonald's junkie, but then I realized how bad it was for my health. I was overweight and depressed and I finally decided that I was not going to do this anymore. The people I have met on the website have helped me with my new perspective. I feel better and I am losing weight....and I usually turn off the TV or turn the radio when I hear fast-food commercials. (James, anti-McDonald's)

Since I met other people who believe in the same things I do, I feel more confident. I know that I am not the only one out there who cares about society and wants to make a difference. (Judy, anti-Wal-Mart)

Anti-brand communities provide new identities and provide resources for constructing a desired self-image. For instance, community members strive to increase individual autonomy and enhance confidence in marketplace decision-making. Community members believe that individual purchases provide a means for exercising power by supporting or condemning corporate actions.

I have gained a lot of confidence in my shopping decisions since I started participating online. I feel like I am in control of what I buy. Instead of just shopping for bargains, I shop to support certain companies and that makes me feel good. (Judy, anti-Wal-Mart)

I felt like crap when my manager would talk down to me. I always felt like such a loser. But this group has helped me to see that I am not defined by where I work. Just because I work somewhere doesn't mean that I agree with their work ethics. I can't wait to get a new job. For now I'm just gonna keep believing in myself because I know that I have higher values than the company I work for. (John, anti-Starbucks)

Collective identity plays a central role in consumer activism and the group's vision of consumer justice. Shared meanings are constructed by the group, and the effort to overcome corporate influences is a group process.

Role of the Internet

The Internet serves as an innovative means for building coalition. Communities that situate in virtual contexts are more flexible and durable than physically situated communities because there is an ongoing availability of resources and a continuous

process of multileveled communication. The virtual space allows for fusion of various conversations, the linking of conversations across Web sites, and the archiving of discussions and other types of information for future reference (Shumar and Renninger 2002). Online anti-brand communities are built upon virtual social interaction and even though they are not geographically united, these groups still manifest common characteristics of community such as reliance upon one another (Selznick 1992), joint decision making (Wellman 1979), social identification (Tonnies 1887), standardized procedures for socializing and communication (Boissevain 1974), and commitments to each other and the group (Bender 1978). Just as in other human endeavors, the Internet provides a means to enhance speed, convenience, anonymity, and formation of anti-brand communities.

Speed. The Internet is radically shaping action strategies by expediting consumer activism endeavors. Speed significantly advances the abilities of consumer activist groups in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. For example, the anti-Wal-Mart community once relied on communication via a community newsletter which was sent out monthly. Now, the Internet provides a more efficient and effective means for information sharing. When events occur, community members can be updated instantly. Community members no longer need to rely on traditional forms of media (i.e., newsletters, newspaper, television) to communicate to large numbers of people. Instead, members are able to log on to the community website any time of day to get the most current updates. The online medium maximizes the potential for consumer activism because it is conducive to the world in which people live.

Convenience. The Internet enhances consumer activist strategies by making participation, information-sharing, and identification of social groups more convenient. Anti-brand members in this study participated in community activities on the job, on vacation, at home, or on the road. One member in the anti-McDonald's community participated in online discussions while commuting back and forth to work on the train. This was the only free-time available to participate in community discussions. The activities of everyday life in the twenty-first century are inherently dependent upon technology and accordingly, consumer activism is becoming more virtual. For most participants in this study, communication between members took place solely online. In other words, there is rarely an exchange of phone numbers or street addresses. Online social action communities are outgrowths of a society intertwined with technology. These new forms of social action are capable of influencing large numbers of people, developing skills to bring about social change, and making changes fast.

Community Formation. The Internet enhances the diversity of consumer activist groups. Historically, social movements formed around visible commonalities (e.g., age, race, nationality, sexual orientation); however, the anti-brand movement emphasizes inconspicuous commonalities. Members are evaluated on the basis of their contribution to the community.

I don't really care who participates in our group discussions. The only thing that I care about is their contribution. I believe it is important to value differences because we usually all have valid points. (Betsy, anti-McDonald's)

I have more culturally diverse friends online than I do in person. I feel like the Internet breaks down the barriers to building friendships because you value people for who they really are and not for how much money they have, what they look like, or where they come from. (Mel, anti-Wal-Mart)

Common interests and values are the bonding criteria for virtual activist groups. Diversity is an advantage to modern social movements because it stimulates "thinking outside the box," and diverse viewpoints facilitate creative and unique action strategies.

Anonymity. The Web offers many ways for masking identities. For several of the participants in this study, anonymous involvement influenced their decision to become "active members." For some social activists, the extent of anonymity determines the extent of participation. One result may be that individuals are more willing to participate in immoral or unethical actions.

Because no one really knows who I am, I feel like I can be a little more risky in my actions. Virtual social action is great because I can do things I normally wouldn't do in-person. (Tom, anti-Wal-Mart)

I could not participate in protests in-person because I'm an employee. But, I can participate as much as I want online because no one will ever know. I've donated over 100 dollars this year to the campaign. (Lucy, anti-Starbucks)

I like the fact that no one knows who I am. I feel like I can say whatever I want. I don't hold anything back. (Dave, anti-McDonald's)

Through masking identities, consumers are able to oppose major corporations with minimal threat of peer disapproval, employee termination, or legal ramifications. Technology is fundamentally enhancing social action strategies and coalition efforts.

DISCUSSION

This study underscores both negative and positive aspects of anti-brand communities in relation to the opposed firm. From a negative viewpoint, participation in anti-brand communities does not require much time or energy. As a result, these communities serve as a powerful consumer agency and information resource. Consumers have instant access to an empathizing audience and to historical accounts of accusations against the firm. These communities also provide social benefits as the Internet enables one consumer to connect with a group of other likeminded consumers. Their common negative stance against the firm unifies members, and as a community, the group has more marketplace power. The Internet enhances marketplace power by providing members with a speedy, convenient, and anonymous means of communication. With easy access and widespread communication, anti-brand communities have the ability to damage a firm's brand name.

Positive aspects of anti-brand communities for firms include the notion that these communities serve as a means for rejuvenating business functions. As has been argued in other anti-branding contexts (Holt 2002), this study makes a strong case for using these communities as "grist for the branding mill that is ever in search of new cultural materials" (p. 88). The Internet provides an open forum for discussion about branding activities and it also serves as a free marketing research tool. Communities of this nature can incite firms to recognize innovative branding opportunities and Wal-Mart is a company that is putting this idea into practice. For example, Wal-Mart counteracts resistance by demonstrating its dedication to local communities during store-opening ceremonies. As a creative means for building customer relationships, Wal-Mart invites the community to a grand opening that centers around personal testimonies from employees and retirees, greetings from local officials, and the giving away of prizes.

The opening festival is a preemptive defense against opposition. To name a few tactics, devotion to the country is represented

by the flag and by singing the national anthem. The county is represented by county commissioners. Religious interests are signified by an invocation at the opening of the ceremony. Schools are represented by members of the school board and grants are given to local community organizations during the ceremony. This community-building strategy is aimed at winning the trust of local consumers and reversing the claims of anti-Wal-Mart groups. Consumer activism has traditionally been viewed as a natural occurrence in society which provides opportunities to improve business functions (Buskirk and Rothe 1970; Herrmann 1970; Kotler 1972), and this is a prime example.

CONCLUSION

This study provides important insights about anti-brand communities and advances prior research in two primary ways: (1) it sheds light on the role of community when interpreting anti-brand motivations and behaviors; and (2) it focuses on anti-brand communities as a social movement with Internet capabilities. Web-communities provide a place for anti-brand consumers to gather and discuss marketplace practices and these groups inevitably influence consumption. The community reinforces negativity toward the brand and influences a member's attitude and/or decision to take action against a corporation. This research establishes the relevancy of the role online communities play in present social action endeavors and, with Internet capabilities, these communities are more powerful (e.g., number of participants) and progressive (e.g., technology-driven action strategies) than earlier social movements.

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