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Value Creation and Consumption: When Consumer Creativity Generates Value in Online Forums

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We argue that value creation results from consumer creativity, a socio-cultural phenomenon which is inherent in all acts of consumption. We explore consumer creativity using conversation analysis in an online forum and show how consumers integrate resources to create value. Consumer creativity can be encouraged and harnessed by managers.

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ABSTRACT

An effect of the digital economy has been to provide consumers with almost unlimited ways to customize their consumption activities. They can craft each consumption experience to fit specific contexts, needs, emotions and other factors. A teenager's night out is documented and shared with her friends in a series of selfies posted on Snapchat. With augmented reality technology, combinations of designs and colors can be tried on before an in-store visit, or a friend's opinion solicited in real time. These examples highlight the fact that consumption is, at its very core, a creative activity. Beyond the product or service itself, creativity is in the experience: alone or with others, privately or in public, physically or virtually, now or later, home-made, customized or factory-made... These are only the most obvious of the infinite ways in which consumers creatively craft or design each of their consumption experiences.

The present research explores the role of creativity in the mechanisms through which consumers create value in their consumption activities and experiences. Hennessey and Amabile (2010) define creativity as involving 'the development of a novel product, idea, or problem solution that is of value to the individual and/or the larger social group' (p 572). Previous researchers (Kleinaltenkamp et al., 2013) have suggested that there is a need to better understand how consumers integrate resources to create value. As consumers engage in increasingly creative activities and experiences, it is important to understand what value consumer creativity brings to brands and how it can be encouraged and harnessed.

THE SHIFT TOWARDS CUSTOMER-DRIVEN VALUE CREATION

Value and value creation are complex concepts (Karababa & Kjeldgaard, 2014; Payne et al., 2008). Recent research in Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) and Service Dominant Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) has helped redefine value as a multi-faceted phenomenon that results from the relevance of an experience to a customer (Priem, 2007). Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) and Lusch and Vargo (2006) argue that customers create value in the process of their consumption experience. In the service research literature, Solomon et al. (1985) point to a 'dyadic' interaction and use role theory to explain the interactions between customers and service providers. In her study on servicescapes, Bitner (1992) further develops this perspective by examining the respective roles of consumers and service employees and the physical environment of the service encounter. Pine and Gilmore (1998) argue that the production of economic value has shifted over time, from the extraction of commodities, to the production of goods, to the delivery of services, and, finally, to the staging of experiences. They advocate building consumer participation in the design of experiences, though the role of consumers remains a fairly passive one in relation to the entire consumption experience. The same shift towards recognizing value creation as driven by consumer experience is also found in the recent strategy literature (Adner & Zemsky, 2006; Priem, 2007; Priem et al., 2013; Zander & Zander, 2005).

Extant research in SDL has focused on resource integration as the core process of value creation or value co-creation in consumption (Akaka et al., 2012; Kleinaltenkamp et al., 2012; Lusch and Vargo, 2006; Vargo et al., 2008). Resource integration is an *individual* process performed by a consumer using his or her own resources to actively access, adapt and integrate external resources (Akaka et al., 2012). Resource integration is also an *interactive* process, in which consumers access, adapt and integrate each other's resources, in effect exchanging resources (Vargo et al., 2008).

Given its interactive nature, value creation is augmented when it takes place within a network and enhanced by different platforms and touchpoints (Normann and Ramirez, 1993; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Ramaswamy, 2011). In other words, the broader the range of resources a consumer can easily access, the greater the potential value. In this respect, the emergence of online platforms of exchange, from specialized websites and online forums to social media, has allowed consumers to extend their networks and to generate and diffuse new and creative ideas. This has resulted in the development of new consumer experiences, a more active and interactive role for all stakeholders and greater value creation (Ramaswamy, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

The present research uses conversation analysis (Sacks et al., 1974) applied to an online forum, the *Epicurious.com* platform, to study precisely how value is created, more specifically how resources are integrated, in an online forum. The objective of the study is to show how a consumer sharing cooking tips contributes to the creation of value for the community by integrating resources—in the form of knowledge, attitudes, emotions, and more.

We use conversation analysis (CA), a new methodology in the field of consumer research, but one that enjoys a distinguished legacy in other social sciences (Goodwin & Heritage, 1990). CA allows an in-depth analysis of meaning in the context of a conversation: an audience member's response to a participant's contribution provides an analysis of that contribution (Levinson, 1983, 321). At a second level, the structure of the conversation itself also provides important meaningful and valuable elements as participants take turns to contribute to the overall conversation (Clark, 1996, 388). CA has traditionally been used for face-to-face conversations, but productively used in recent years for online interactions, both synchronous and asynchronous (Herring, 2012). In our case, CA is particularly productive in exploring how individual consumers work with each other to integrate resources and create value through their conversation. More specifically, it allows us to label each post for the action(s) it performs within the conversation, based on how it contributes to the joint value-creating project of the conversation itself. In other words, each post is meaningful not just in its content, but also in the role it plays in the conversation, either by building on what has been posted before (e.g., acknowledging someone's contribution before building on it), or by preparing for what will be posted later (e.g. asking for advice). CA can be combined with a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to categorize data and detect broader patterns. In this study, we analyzed data from five long conversation threads which each took place over 12 months or more. Threads were purposely selected for their length – longer threads indicating more active conversations over a longer period of time and providing richer data.

DATA ANALYSIS

Across the five threads on the *Epicurious.com* forum, we identified 30 specific types of actions revolving around problem-solving and the introduction of creative ideas in the form of experiences, ideas, knowledge, opinions and such. These actions fall into three categories: "soliciting", "sharing" and "acknowledging," which actually form the structure of the conversation. The actions and categories are documented with examples from the full data set in the Appendix. Our findings show how value is created every step of the way in these problem-solving conversations.

The first level of analysis is the content of the conversation itself and the actions undertaken by participants in interacting. The second, more abstract, level is the structure of the conversation (Clark, 1996, 388). The two levels of analysis are represented in the Appendix as actions and categories. We review them in turn.

The data extract shown below, selected as representative of the data corpus, is taken from a long thread (51 replies over the course of 15 months), entitled "*Thanksgiving ....not too soon to start thinking*" in which the first contributor (GLG1) solicits tips on how to roast two turkeys in a regular-sized oven. In the third response to her question, R shares the fact that her family always roasts a separate turkey breast alongside the full turkey. Later, another participant, MK lets us in on a friend's "*secret*":

> *"She usually has between 16 to 20 people for thanksgiving... And she let me in on her secret. She roasts 1 whole bird...for "display" and the night before will roast turkey breasts, and some thighs and drumsticks... At serving time - she displays the bird, and take it back to the kitchen for carving - where she pads the platter out with... (sic)"*

Here, MK implicitly acknowledges GLG1's challenge and shares a solution. Her contribution results from accessing a memory of her friend's practice. She characterizes it as "*the way out of this dilemma*," showing that she has adapted this information to the situation at hand, thus performing "a transformation or reorganization of incoming information and mental structures" (Moran & John-Steiner, 2003, 23). She integrates the information into this thread by commenting on the strategic aspect of her friend's practices. MK has created value by putting a new, relevant idea on the table.

The next turn is C's, in direct response to MK:

> *"That's a great way to do it for "show" but we got over the "presentation" a long time ago, unless we are carving at the table 70 years ago... I know everyone has their own traditions... BUT I do love the idea of the additions if and when I need to serve more than 16-18. (sic)"*

C explicitly acknowledges MK's contribution and challenges it: we see that she accesses MK's solution, adapts it (as indicated for instance by C switching from MK's term "*display*" to her own term "*show*"), and integrates it into her own practice by actually challenging the validity of C's concern for "*presentation*." It is the very nature and structure of the conversation that promotes the accessing, adapting and integrating process, namely value creation. By engaging in the conversation, participants pick up on each other's ideas, consider them (access), confront them with their own (adapt) and respond with their own inputs (integrate), which results in value creation.

More strikingly, at a structural level, we also find that participants actively and creatively support and coordinate the conversation, thereby encouraging greater engagement from their audience.

Conversations can be seen as joint projects in which contributors are acting in a "purposive manner" (Clark, 1996, 319) and using culturally-specific conversational techniques to jointly fulfill their purposes. In this case, we show that participants are also creating value by purposefully contributing to the joint project of a conversation-enabled creative process. Our data shows that throughout the conversation, participants creatively integrate resources by soliciting, sharing and acknowledging each other's ideas (see Appendix 1). This type of coordination activity is typical of conversations and emerges "from participants' attempts to do what they want to do" (Clark, 1996, 351).

Another way in which participants contribute to the success of the conversation and to value creation is by using specific spontaneous conversational techniques that encourage clarity and participation so as to keep the conversation going. Four of the techniques uncovered in our analysis are documented below.

1. **Capturing the audience's attention and trust:** In several of the analyzed threads, participants begin their turns by "establishing expertise" to legitimize their contribution and argue for the audience's attention and trust. E.g.:*"I have read all the studies...to know that it's not an acceptable way to do things."* By deliberately establishing what experience allows them to contribute to the conversation, participants legitimize their contribution and argue for the audience's attention and trust, in effect promoting their posts and the overall conversation as resources to be integrated, and value created as a result.

2. **Clarifying meaning:** Most contributions in the analyzed threads contain "meta-talk" (Schiffrin, 1980), specific reference to the conversation process itself. These references can be to a previous contribution: *"Sounds more like a Blender you're talking about"* or to the participant's own contribution: *"Here's my bad memory…"* and are used as "meaning labels," clarifying the author's to make the conversation more transparent and easier to get into. These instances of meta-talk are used to signal the intended meaning (here: clarification of previous post, excuse for forgetfulness). Again here, contributors are working to increase engagement and promote resource integration and, as a result, value creation.

3. **Posting clear conversation directions:** The participant acknowledges a previous contribution (e.g, by asking for clarification or reinforcing a proposed solution) and then "solicits" the next one (e.g., by asking a question, or introducing a new consideration or solution). *"Yea, you have to describe what your final product is...If you have all your items already minced as small as you want, can't you mix them with a spoon?"* These types of "stage directions" facilitate continuity, clarity, coherence and evolution in the overall conversation flow. Another observed "stage direction" is addressing other participants by their name: *"You try it, Nikki. Honest."* The function of name-addressing is to actively engage with another participant, and again to provide a "stage direction" indicating whom is being addressed in the absence of non-linguistic cues. These directions make it easier for audiences to integrate available resources and for value to be created.

4. **Validating relevant solutions:** Participants often acknowledge a proposed idea or solution (thus validating it), and specifically refer to their intention to put it to use, thereby encouraging more participation. *"My brother-in-law has jis birthday on the 26th and we usually have a*

beef tenderloin - we will have to give this a try. (sic)" A couple of posts later, another contributor posts: *"Okay...I will try again- I will be cooking one just like it today and will definitely use your way. Mine turned out okay, but it could have been better, I think."* This technique also has the effect of encouraging more participation, and value creation as a result.

DISCUSSION

In our analysis of the *Epicurious* forum, we highlighted the process of accessing, adapting and integrating resources, typical of value creation in consumption (Akaka et al., 2012). We showed, for instance, how participants access solutions, adapt them and integrate them into their own practices. We also showed how participants create value by coordinating and supporting the conversation. Non-contributing readers create value by accessing shared knowledge from the different contributors and integrating it into their own situations and needs. Finally, the platform publisher, Condé Nast, creates value from *Epicurious* in the form of advertising revenue, customer data, product development and brand equity. In this example, value creation can interestingly be tracked all the way to monetization for the firm.

A similar purposive, social and adaptive processing of ideas is discussed in the creativity literature, particularly in Lev Vygotsky's extensive writings on creativity. He describes the creative processes of 'internalization' and 'externalization' of ideas, knowledge and other representations. Commenting on these writings, Moran and John-Steiner (2003: 23 of online version) assert that 'internalization and externalization are the dialectical mechanisms that allow an individual to construct higher psychological structures'. In other words, internalization and externalization allow people to access, adapt and integrate social resources, as illustrated with our *Epicurious* data. According to Glăveanu (2010a), creators externalize their novel ideas (accessed from previously internalized experiences in other contexts and then 'repurposed' or adapted in a new context), thereby integrating them into new creative outcomes which in turn are internalized by an audience of other agents. As audiences and creators trade roles throughout a conversation or other interaction, externalized new ideas become internalized. In other words, creativity results from the cyclical internalization and externalization of novel ideas, which are then 'acknowledged, recognised, valued and used' (Glăveanu, 2010b: 54). Novelty and appropriateness, the two key characteristics of creative outcomes, are clearly seen here (Hennessey & Amabile, 2010).

Everyday consumption is a process that follows a similar creative process and includes casual internalization of meaning and practice through which transformation and externalization occur, creating dynamic value creation (Payne et al., 2008). As seen in our data analysis above, creativity can be about retrieving a memory of a past meal (internalization) and adapting it as a solution to a problem posed in an online forum (externalization). It can be about supporting an online forum by clearly indicating that a cooking tip gleaned on the forum will be put to good use. This analysis reflects our view of consumption as an instance of creativity. Boden (1994) argues that creativity should not be reduced to 'historical' achievements because it is ingrained in everyday life practices as 'mini c' forms of creativity—that is, mundane acts, such as the production and interpretation of verbal communication, the adjustment of actions to a changing context, and the creation of new personal meanings (Kaufman and Beghetto, 2009). What we see in the *Epicurious* data are not "big C" Creative acts of Master Chefs, but rather 'mini c' creative acts of everyday home cooks consuming and producing knowledge.

Consumption provides an ideal context for people to exercise their creativity. Schau et al. (2009) identify specific creative, value-creating practices around collective consumption. Yet, to date, most of the work on consumer creativity has failed to recognize its full extent and value along the different stages of the consumption journey or experience (Burroughs et al., 2008). The present research suggests that consumer research needs to better align itself with systemic views on creativity, particularly socio-cultural perspectives (Glăveanu, 2010a), and to recognize a broader role for creativity in consumption.

The collaborative and creative nature of everyday acts of consumption, as identified in our analysis, echoes ongoing developments in the literature on socio-cultural creativity. The 'mythology of the genius'—great creators working alone to produce revolutionary outcomes (Montuori and Purser, 1995)—has been challenged in recent decades within the cultural or socio-cultural tradition (John-Steiner, 1992; Sawyer, 1995). Glăveanu (2010a, 2012) suggests that traditional individualist models of creativity fail to account for the roles of audiences and contexts, both of which are especially important when studying consumption. In the *Epicurious* data, the socio-cultural consumer accesses her own resources (e.g., knowledge of available ingredients, skills, time, experience), other consumers' resources (e.g., recipes, tips, feedback) and the publisher's resources (website, forum). She internalizes them by adapting them to the specific context at hand and, through acts of externalization (e.g. posting a recipe, cooking from a recipe), integrates them into a unique value-laden experience. Creativity is embodied not only in the outcomes (e.g. the recipe or completed meal), but also in the processes (e.g. the dynamic nature of an online forum).

Our analysis suggests an account of consumption in which value is created socially as a by-product of creativity. We suggest that consumption is creative through and through. This model of consumer creativity illustrates the idea that value is not 'in' the person or the object but rather 'distributed' in the social process of everyday consumption and resource integration. The model also resonates with current thinking in marketing and service research. For example, SDL (Vargo and Lusch, 2004, 2008) emphasizes service (process) rather than product (outcome) and categorizes resources (operant and operand) according to whether they create value or serve as means to value creation.

From a methodological perspective, CA also addresses limitations of existing textual analyses (content or thematic). While other content analysis methods allow excellent in-depth analysis of contributions, they do not take into account the structure of the conversation or the role played by each contribution in building up to the overall conversation. Our results suggest that the conversation itself allows value to be created as it helps to structure the exchange and build-up of contributions, and also pulls users into the conversation. Such an analysis required CA in order to uncover the value-creating structure in addition to the content of what is said.

CONCLUSION

The contribution of the present research to the literature on consumer creativity is threefold. First, we showed, and illustrated with qualitative data, that value is created when consumers integrate and share resources. Recent work in SDL, CCT and other paradigms (Payne et al., 2008; Priem, 2007; Schau et al., 2009) has recognized that value is created in consumption, and we shed light on some of the specific psychological, social and cultural mechanisms that actually constitute or drive value creation. We then demonstrated that

resource integration is in fact an act of creativity and that every act of consumption is an opportunity for a consumer to craft a solution that is both novel and appropriate, the two widely accepted characteristics of creative acts (Hennessey & Amabile, 2010). While best illustrated, as above, through technologically enabled consumption, our claim is that creativity is at the very core of consumption, regardless of technology. Our final key finding is that creativity consists of specific types of everyday socio-cultural processes, including consumption, that lead to novel and appropriate solutions. We argued that value is continuously (re-)created through consumers' relationships with their social (other consumers, employees etc) and material (brands, products, services etc) environments and that this creative process is inherent in all acts of consumption. Our aim was to explore the core mechanisms of how consumers create value through their consumption activities and experiences. We identified these mechanisms as instances of creativity, a generic value-creating human activity. As a result, we give greater substance to the role of consumers in creating value, one that has remained difficult to explicate against the traditional "producer-side" view (Priem et al., 2013). Finally, we introduced CA as an insightful method for the analysis of online asynchronous conversations and showed that it can be a powerful analytical tool to capture the value-creating processes inherent to conversations.

The main limitation of this study is the specific consumption context we have chosen. While an online forum is a particularly rich context in which to study creativity, this work must now be extended to other consumption contexts, both offline and less interactional. Our work opens up new research opportunities for consumer creativity and provides avenues for managers to consider encouraging value creation by fostering greater creativity among consumers. Social media and other interactive channels provide unprecedented opportunities for consumers to share knowledge and to engage with each other. The richness of this socio-cultural environment yields the highest level of creativity. By enabling consumers to tap into these creative opportunities in their consumption experiences, marketers can expect to reap the rewards in the form of (1) greater consumer engagement, (2) greater value creation, (3) greater empowerment of consumers to generate creative solutions. Firms should recognize how consumers create value, how to foster greater creativity to result in greater value creation, and how to cede some control to creative consumers who are eager to solve problems with the brands who will allow them to engage creatively.

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