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HOW BRANDS ENCHANT: INSIGHTS FROM OBSERVING COMMUNITY DRIVEN BRAND CREATION

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**HOW BRANDS ENCHANT: INSIGHTS FROM OBSERVING COMMUNITY DRIVEN
BRAND CREATION**

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the emerging phenomenon of community-driven brand creation. Drawing on a longitudinal netnographic study of the “outdoorseiten.net” online community, we develop the concept of “community brands.” Community brands are consumer-created brands that enchant their owners/members by providing creative social spaces, in which consumers innovate, discuss, manufacture, and brand customize products independently from corporate agendas. Our study reveals an influential constellation of brand authenticity, consumer creativity, community, and independence that entails valuable implications for consumer culture theory and branding.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In July 2005, after a three-week process of exchanging ideas and discussing improvements, a group of outdoor enthusiasts and online community members decided on the name and symbol for their first own brand: “outdoorseiten.net”. Two years later, the community introduced its first marketable prototype, a small tent under the outdoorseiten.net brand name.

Why and how do these interest groups develop their own brands? Why do community driven brands inspire such commitment and enchantment in their members? And what differentiates these brands from corporate brands and their associated communities? With the unprecedented explosion of consumer-created content and innovation on the Internet and its rising financial, ideological, and social valuation by consumers, these questions become paramount not only for consumer culture theorists but also for marketing managers, consumer activists, and public policy makers alike.

This paper addresses this gap in knowledge by introducing the concept of “community brand.” Community brands represent particular sets of manufactures and meanings that are created and perpetuated by members of online communities. These members share specific interests, such as outdoor sports or fashion. They channel their creativity and develop their skills by designing, producing, sharing, and consuming customized products within a group of fellow enthusiasts. Unlike brand communities which evolve around existing commercial products (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001), community brands are self-created by members of an existing community. In the inversed process of brand community building, some communities begin to draw on commercial means of logo creation or offshore production for leveraging their own sense of belonging and sharing their creations with others. Community brands are particularly meaningful and enchanting to the members, but they also appeal to community outsiders with an interest in consuming the mysterious aura of unique insider fabrics.

The outdoorseiten.net community provides an ideal context for researching the above questions. The longitudinal study of community processes reveals the particular motivations, meanings, and practices of an emerging group of online communities that syndicate their members' knowledge, ideas, and skills to create own branded products (Butler et al. 2002; Shah 2006; Von Krogh and Von Hippel 2006).

Our findings contribute to consumer culture theory in at least four important ways: First, Kozinets (2002a) has argued on the basis of an ethnographic study of the “Burning Man” festival that consumers try, but succeed at “escaping the market” only temporarily. In contrast, community brand members are not interested in evading the logic of the “market,” but rather evading the dependence on corporate innovation and brands. Hence, community brands eagerly use market mechanisms such as branding or offshore production for their own projects, while liberating themselves successfully from the influences of corporations. In accordance with Thompson and Coskuner's (forthcoming) recent findings we show that consumers may create sustainable countervailing markets to evade the power of brands and corporations, but certainly for fulfilling their own desires and authentic interests independently. In addition to Thompson and Coskuner, our context reveals that countervailing markets not only emerge in retro contexts of romantic agricultural ideals, but also prosper by advancing novel meanings, experiences, and things.

Second, according to Holt (2002) and others, brands must strive for authenticity to become successful “citizen artists.” Community brands are systematically authentic, as they are driven by people that believe their own motives. As long as community brands successfully evade the impression of being commercially influenced, the sense of authenticity

leverages trust, mystique, and meaning of the community brand. However, commercial influence can quickly arise, if, for instance, salient community members are unmasked as corporate figures or the community explores options of selling some ideas to companies. Authenticity is also ensured by the mechanism of reputation by contribution. The group's most active members earn their kudos by sharing extensively, listening to creative members, and enhancing the value of the community brand in best accordance with the group.

Third, we find many members of self-branded communities to be highly loyal, passionate, and devoted to their brand. In contrast to classic branding theory, which distinguishes consumers from brands, the community brand concept suggests that the community is the brand. Hence, consumer-brand disputes that are discussed in the consumerism literature are of marginal relevance in the case of community brands. Here, consumer-brand struggles are internal differences among members.

Fourth, one salient motivating factor and source of enchantment is the independence of community brands from corporate influences. Classic brand enthusiasts are constantly threatened by corporate decisions, as they have no voice in the innovation process but only an exit option (Hirschman 1970). Apple introduced the Intel processor and abandoned the Newton handheld; Harley Davidson launched bikes for yuppies; and Hummer introduced a small mass-market sport utility vehicle. Consumers and admirers of these brands have struggled with these decisions for various reasons, but predominantly because they resented the destruction of a brand element that was important to the respective owner. Whereas firms make the decisions about their products and strongly influence the brand experiences, community brands create their own ideologies, define their own qualities, advance with their own pace, and define the prices they want to pay or charge democratically. This liberation and stability within a turbulent market environment perpetuates consumer creativity, participation, and esteem and creates a leveraged knowledge-elitist position that allows for ignoring the latest fashion (Holt 2002) .

In conclusion, our research reveals how groups of shared interests become brands creators by perpetuating a democratic, self-organized, creative community brand. The study provides valuable insights into the potential of community brands as enchanting, authentic brands that differ dramatically from traditional brands and their communities.

Given that production and design capabilities become more easily accessible for communities in the near future, the concept of community brands has the potential of drastically transforming the market (Giesler forthcoming). Yet, even though these recent developments can present a threat to existing commercial organizations, they also entail new business opportunities (c.f. Thompson et al. 2006). Companies such as "Threadless" and "Spreadshirt" that provide virtual T-Shirt design and distribution tools for community brands, for instance, already profitably provide services for creative community brands. However, on a larger economic scale, the emergence of community brands challenges the common conviction that specialized product knowledge and branding proficiency are the most sustainable, inimitable resources for the western corporate world.

HOW BRANDS ENCHANT: INSIGHTS FROM OBSERVING COMMUNITY DRIVEN BRAND CREATION



In July 2005, after a three-week process of exchanging ideas and discussing improvements, a group of outdoor enthusiasts and online community members decided on the name and symbol for their first own brand: “outdoorseiten.net”. Following this event, community members began to label their jointly innovated and manufactured backpacks, jackets, and sleeping bags with their own logo and talk about themselves as the outdoorseiten.net community. The idea of creating a brand name for marking themselves and their products inspired the members to advance the next community project: creating a superior line of functional yet affordable outdoorseiten.net outdoor products. Two years after the development of the logo, the community introduced its first marketable prototype, a small tent, with the outdoorseiten.net brand name. This is only one example of the many brand products that are created by communities of common interests. Skibuilders.com, for instance, has been developing and marketing community-created skis since 2006. PMGEAR has been successfully selling ski gear for 3 years.

Why and how do these interest groups develop their own brands? Why do community driven brands create so much enchantment and commitment among community members? And, what differentiates these brands from corporate brands and their communities? With the unprecedented explosion of consumer-created content and innovation on the Internet and its rising financial, ideological, and social valuation by consumers, these questions become critical for marketing managers, consumer activists, and public policy makers alike.

This paper addresses this gap in knowledge by introducing the concept of “community brand.” Community brands represent particular sets of manufactures and meanings that are

created and perpetuated by members of online communities. These members share specific interests, such as outdoor sports or fashion. They channel their creativity and develop their skills by designing, producing, sharing, and consuming customized products within a group of fellow enthusiasts. Unlike brand communities which evolve around existing commercial products (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001), community brands are self-created by members of an existing community. In the inversed process of brand community building, some communities begin to draw on commercial means of logo creation or offshore production for leveraging their own sense of belonging and for sharing their creations with others. Community brands are particularly meaningful, enchanting, and dear to the members that drive them most, but also appeal to community outsiders with an interest in consuming the mysterious aura of unique insider fabrics.

The outdoorseiten.net community provides an ideal context for researching the above questions. The longitudinal study of community processes reveals the particular motivations, meanings, and practices of an emerging crowd of online communities that syndicate their members' knowledge, ideas, and skills to create own branded products.

This article is structured as follows. First, we briefly introduce our context and describe the methods we used for approaching it. Then, we trace the evolution of the outdoorseiten.net community from its beginning to the launch of its first prototype to reveal the key phases of community brand development and the motivations for community members to move from one phase to the next. Subsequently, we use the insights of branding and brand community theory to illuminate the differences among community brands and "classic" brands in the enchantment of consumers. Lastly, we discuss our findings and theoretical implications and offer avenues for further research.

THEORY

How do brands develop? Existing marketing theory speaks to the question of brand development by offering the concept of brands as “open systems” (Pitt et al. 2006, p.115). Pitt and colleagues identify four key dimensions that constitute a brand: physical, textual, experience, and meanings. These elements are influenced and co-created by consumers and companies in a social context. The physical dimension involves tangible products that are modified, individualized, and even invented by consumers (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004). The text dimension comprises brand-related stories, pictures, and videos that are generated by consumers and presented on portals such as MySpace, Wikipedia, and YouTube. Consumers’ experiences also influence the brand and its meaning. Spectacles such as concerts, amusement parks, or brand fests rely on the contribution of the audience and their active involvement. Lastly, the meanings that are associated with and ascribed to certain brands can enrich the brand experience and even endow the most desired objects with cult status. Pitt et al’s key theoretical argument is that brands are more open to consumer influences than previously assumed. Yet, whereas Pitt et al’s work is useful for scrutinizing the dimensions of emerging brands, it lacks empirical insights into how and why consumers contribute to the development of brands over time.

Why do brands enchant? Consumer culture theory offers multifaceted answers to the question of why some brands are dear to people. Fournier and Belk, for instance, highlight the salient emotional values of brands used as human-like relationship partners and extended expressions of self. From an individual perspective within a social context, brands enchant through their symbolic value. As Levy (1959), McCracken (1986), and Thompson and Haytko (Murray 2002) reveal, brands become meaningful through the transfer of cultural resources, individual experiences, and social exchanges to the brand name. The better

consumers can use brands as resources for individual identity projects (Holt 2002), the more they seem to enthuse.

From a sociological perspective, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), Cova (2003), Kozinets (2002a), and McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002) argue that brands allow consumers to regain a sense of affectionate community within an exceedingly disinterested society (Tönnies 1957; Weber and Rheinstein 1966). These authors show, how a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, as well as a sense of moral responsibility weld groups of consumers together around an existing brand (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001) or a common consumption interest (Cova 2003). At the same time, however, the same brands inspire antagonists and social activist for lobbying against meanings and corporations by creating doppelganger brands (Thompson et al. 2006), anti-brand websites (Luedicke 2006), or individual practices of resistance (Holt 2002).

Next to community and distinction, two further themes leverage brand enthusiasm on a consumer cultural level, namely, authenticity and creativity. Across these theories, authenticity is rated among the most desired characters of a brand's identity (Aaker 1995). According to Holt (2002), firms try to exploit authentic subcultural innovations for creating enchanting brands in a perpetuate circle of variation and co-optation. Consumers strive for creating "emancipated spaces" (Murray and Ozanne 1991) in which they can evade the "branding mill" or even the totalizing market logic (Kozinets 2002a). Consumer creativity in buying, using, modifying, enhancing, or alienating commercial offerings plays a key role in this attempt to evade the commercial mainstream (Muñiz and Schau 2005). Thompson and Coskuner (forthcoming) recently revealed in the context of community-supported agriculture that despite corporate attempts of co-cooptation, consumers are able to create sustainable countervailing markets. These consumer-driven market responses result from the creative use of market mechanisms for alternative ideological agendas.

In summary, existing theory reveals that identity, community, authenticity, and creativity are key characteristics of the most enchanting brands. The initial thesis of this article is that a longitudinal study of online community brands can provide new answers to the above research questions by masking the corporate branding bias.

METHOD

To study the meanings and processes of community brand development, we selected online communities dedicated to outdoor sports, such as backpacking, wilderness camping, climbing or ski touring, for two reasons: First, outdoor sports are practiced by a great number of people around the world and we expected to find a high number of online communities dedicated to topic. Second, as the right choice of equipment is crucial not only for comfort but also for the safety during outdoor activities, equipment plays a key role for outdoor sportsmen. Hence, we expected to find not only reports of trips and adventures on outdoor websites, but also passionate discussions about outdoor equipment and brands.

Using community-specific and general search engines we identified more than 400 online communities dedicated to outdoor sports, ranging from day-hiking to wilderness camping to ice climbing. After evaluating each community on criteria such as the amount of equipment-related content, professionalism, posting frequency, and number of members we reduced the number of communities to thirty. We analyzed these thirty communities in-depth and finally selected „outdoorseiten.net” as the most promising context for our purpose. Outdoorseiten.net is a message board in German language with more than 4,900 members that is entirely dedicated to outdoor sports. Product-creation related discussions play an important role in the interaction among members. The forum even has a separate sub-section entirely dedicated to self-made gear and equipment.

A netnographic approach (Kozinets 2002b) was chosen for data collection. Netnography has its origin in ethnography (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994) and uses information publicly available on the Internet to study the nature and behavior of online consumer groups. It is mainly used to gain “grounded knowledge” (Glaser and Strauss 1967) concerning a certain research question. Data collection comprised community observation, participant observation, and interviews on community brand creation activities and motives.

We observed the outdoorseiten.net community over a period of 8 months, from October 2005 to May 2006. Conversation available in the archives dated back more than 2 years was included in our research. Purposive sampling was used by screening of more than 110,000 posts. Interviews were conducted with members of the outdoorseiten.net community. The most relevant statements were filed electronically, resulting in a database of 2,400 posts in 200 different discussions. We analyzed this data using qualitative content analysis. Interpretation was done in several iterative cycles including data received from other sources like press articles and other Internet sources to check the trustworthiness of information and get more sound interpretations.

The members of outdoorseiten.net are between 20 and 45 years old. They spend a significant amount of time in activities related to outdoor sports, ranging from actively doing the sport to reading magazines, preparing their equipment, or communicating with people who share the same interests, both on- and offline. Their high involvement in outdoor sports is shown, for instance, by their impressive stories of climbing the world’s highest mountains. In each community, there is a small number of members that contributes the majority of all postings. It is not uncommon for the most enthusiastic members to have hundreds of postings on their community “resume” and – except when they are outdoors – to rarely miss out a day of posting messages. At the outdoorseiten.net community, 1% of all members have posted more than 1,000 messages, 8% are frequent posters (101 – 1,000 postings), 68% contribute

messages from time to time (1 - 100 postings), and 23% of the total 3,000 members have not posted a single message yet and thus can be considered as lurkers (Nonnecke et al. 2004).

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

In this section, we trace the process of community-driven brand creation, discuss differences among community brands and brand communities, and reveal on these grounds the ways in which community brands enchant their owners.

Process of community driven brand creation

Four key phases mark the evolution of the outdoorseiten.net community from its creation in 2001 to the launch of its first product under the outdoorseiten.net brand in 2005 (see Table 1). In the following we describe these four phases, giving special attention to the fourth phase in which the outdoorseiten.net brand officially appears and starts producing its own products.

Briefly after its beginning, the outdoorseiten.net community became a preferred meeting place of dedicated outdoor sportsmen who enjoyed talking with like-minded others about their outdoor gear. Members often shared their experiences with outdoor gear and all products and brands on the market were extensively discussed in the community. In this first phase, used products were provided by established companies although some members modified existing products with the intention to better satisfy their needs.

Only two months after its beginning, a new facet of community activities emerged in the community. In order to better satisfy their specific product needs, an increasing number of members started to develop entirely new products on their own.

Well I just purchased my sewing machine so I have officially jumped into making my own quilt, parka shell, and down vest/coat.

The development of own products by members characterizes the second phase in the emergence of the outdoorseiten.net brand. The remarkable enthusiasm and dedication displayed in their innovation activities even led the community administrators to implement a new sub-forum termed “Make Your Own Gear”. From then on, creative members posted pictures of self-made products in the “Make your own Gear” section and thus inspired other members to become active themselves. The typically very positive feedback to the posted pictures of self-made gear and the high number of members who used the posted guidelines to make similar prototypes illustrate the high quality of self-made gear.

The development of individual logos and brands marks the third phase in the emergence of the outdoorseiten.net brand. In May 2005, innovative community members started to develop their own logos to make perfect their innovation activities.

To bring your self-made gear to a new level you should develop your own logo, then it's even more fun.

They arranged the production of their logos by specialized companies and in the following attached their labels to both self-made as well as to bought products. From then on, members referred to products branded in this way as belonging to their own brand.

Attracted by the idea of individual logos, briefly thereafter the idea arose to develop an own logo for the community. The development of the outdoorseiten.net logo is the introduction of the fourth and final phase, which ultimately resulted in the launch of own products under the outdoorseiten.net brand. In the following, the evolution process from individual logos of some members to the community logo, to the development of own products under the outdoorseiten.net brand is elaborated in more detail.

The idea of developing an outdoorseiten.net logo came up in the discussion of two members: one who had just developed and showcased his own, personal logo and another one who was so attracted by the idea that he proposed an own community logo.

I want something like this from our forum, for my backpack!

An astonishing number of other members immediately expressed their enthusiasm in such a project and the creation process of an outdoorseiten.net logo was started. As part of the development process, which spanned 5 weeks, more than 10 different design versions of the logo were discussed extensively (see Figure 1). After several changes and modifications of the design, the name and the end-design of the new forum badge was chosen (see Figure 2). At the same time, the community consulted with different emblem shops about the kind of production and price, and organized the way of sale. Within a short time half of all logos were sold to community members. Even the member who took the initiative in distributing the logos was surprised as he did not expect such a high demand:

Already half of all logos gone? Guys, do you make entire pants of it?

Once the logos were distributed, community members began to attach the outdoorseiten.net logo on their self-made gear and bought outdoor equipment, in this case typically choosing to paste the logo over the original producers' logo. Immediately, products modified this way were referred to as belonging to the outdoorseiten.net brand:

Now I have to think where to place the badges on my backpacks. At the moment I cannot think of anything better than replacing the big Macpac-Label. Watch out: "outdoorseiten.net" as a new backpack brand...

In 2006 the community initiated the development of its first own product: the outdoorseiten.net outdoor tent. The development process was started by one member who – driven by his perception of the vast product-related expertise prevalent in the community – introduced the idea to develop a tent by and for members. Although some members were hesitant at first, almost all agreed to give it a try:

Boah, if this would work out... I can assume that we will already fail in the definition of details. But who cares, it's worth a try.

Since then, more than 100 discussions have taken place in the community dealing with questions how the outdoor tent should ideally look like, ranging from its measurements, to materials used, to detailed construction elements. All key decisions were made in a democratic process, as suggested by one member:

I think an open discussion thread would be a good idea and once we have enough discussion, let's make a poll – like in a political election.

Overall, more than 200 members have contributed so far to the development of the outdoorseiten.net tent. At this stage, the design and construction details of the outdoorseiten.net tent are already transferred into a virtual, 3 D model. Simultaneously, members are discussing last changes and consider which manufacturer they should contact to produce their community's tent.

TABLE 1

The evolution of the outdoorseiten.net community and brand

Phase	Interest group activities	Development of own products	Individual label creation	Community brand
Timeline¹	<i>Oct 2001</i>	<i>Mar 2002</i>	<i>May 2005</i>	<i>July 2005</i>
Community activities	<p>The outdoorseiten.net community is created in Oct. 2001</p> <p>From the beginning, members share stories of using their products during trips</p> <p>In-depth evaluation and discussion of all existing outdoor products and brands</p> <p>Members arrange trips and meetings to jointly experience products and brands</p> <p>Modification of products so that they better fit demands by some members</p>	<p>Members develop their own products which better satisfy their needs</p> <p>Self-made products are tested during trips</p> <p>Evaluations and suggestions for improvements are jointly discussed</p> <p>Other members further advance proposed prototypes</p> <p>Posted guidelines are used by other members to create the same prototypes</p>	<p>Members draw designs of own labels and arrange production</p> <p>Own labels are attached both to self-made gear as well as to products of existing companies</p> <p>Members start speaking of their own brands and their brands' products</p>	<p>Joint development of a logo for the outdoorseiten.net community</p> <p>Labeling of self-made products with the outdoorseiten.net logo</p> <p>Development of an entire brand around the outdoorseiten.net logo</p> <p>The community jointly develops products under the outdoorseiten.net brand</p> <p>In 2006, a registered association is created around the outdoorseiten.net brand</p>

¹ Date shows when phase started



FIGURE 1: Drafts Outdoorseiten.net Label



FIGURE 2: End-Design Outdoorseiten.net Label

Community Brand versus Brand Community

Brand communities are theorized as groups of people that cultivate close social relationships with and around their most admired brands (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001). As such, brand community theory provides a suitable contrast for exploring the properties of community brands.

The research conducted at outdoorseiten.net, an online community for dedicated outdoor enthusiasts, has shown that community members replace the original logos of their expensive, high quality outdoor gear with their self-created community logo. Besides of that,

the outdoorseiten.net community just started to market a self-developed tent under their own brand. Further a registered association was founded around outdoorseiten.net.

Those examples show that online consumer groups become active themselves, modify existing products, and create completely new ones. Further, in the near future firms may compete with consumer community brands who market their own products.

Community brands differ from other brands in various dimensions (see Table 2). First of all, community brands are created by interest groups, not firms. As we showed in the previous section, the outdoorseiten.net brand emerged from the interaction of numerous community members who all shared the enthusiasm for outdoor sports, after some time created their own branded products, and finally became a community brand. Another difference lies in the meanings associated with brands and how these meanings evolve. In the case of corporate brands, meanings are coined by a company and interpreted and appropriated by different interest groups including e.g. consumers. In contrast, community brands' meanings are created and shaped in the discourse between community members. Numerous statements indicate that for the members of the outdoorseiten.net community, the brand stands for individuality, high quality, and authenticity. Also, the brand's products are regarded as capable to compete with existing products on the market, as shown by the following member statement referring to a backpack branded with the outdoorseiten.net logo:

Yeah! I have a new backpack. A great piece. The best which currently exists on the market. Brand: outdoorseiten.net

Traditional brands and community brands further differ in regard to who manages the key-tasks in the development of new products. Typically, design, production, marketing and distribution of products are carried out by companies. In contrary, products of the outdoorseiten.net brand are developed predominately by the community itself. The members

conceptualize and market all new products and companies are only called upon in managing production and logistics.

A further aspect in which brands and community brands differ from each other is which groups ultimately consume the brand's product. While the customers of corporately advertised brands may be part of a variety of communities and interest groups, the products of the outdoorseiten.net brand are predominately used by the members of the community itself. Hence, in community brands producers and "customers" are one and the same group of people. But brands and community brands not only differ in regard to who uses their products and who manages the key-tasks in product development, but also *why* products are developed at all. While companies in most cases develop products with the aim to satisfy the needs of their customers and to earn enough money to ensure the company's survival and growth, the outdoorseiten.net brand first and foremost aims to provide the best products possible to its own members.

In their creative activities, strong emotional bonds emerge between the most active members of the creation process – marking another aspect, which differentiates community brands from other brands.

Finally, another dimension, which distinguishes conventional brands from community brands is the pattern of communication. In the case of commercial brands, brand related communication is conducted through mass media. In contrast, within community brands communication is managed through word-of-mouth and some respected members who take the role of community ambassadors.

TABLE 2

Comparison of Brands with Community Brands

Dimension	Brand (Community)	Community Brand
Initiation	Created by commercial companies	Created by community members, often members of interest groups
Community Type	Brand Community: Center around existing commercial brands	Interest Groups who create their own branded products and become a Community Brand
Meaning	Suggested by a company, interpreted and appropriated by different interest groups	Results from and is constantly shaped by community discourse
Products	Products are designed, produced and marketed by companies	Products are designed and marketed by the community. Production and logistics are outsourced and managed by companies
Narrative/ Archetype	Centered around the offering Provided by company and centered on attractive stories – artificial.	Centered around the community The community is the brand. All interactions and discourses of the community are part of the story and manifested through all members (texts, discussions, products, artefacts)
Customers	Members of various communities and interest groups; including commercial consumers only, symbolic free-rider	Predominantly members of the online community Self-supporters: producer = customer
Relationship	Typically professional rather than social bonds between “creators” of brands	Strong emotional bonds of the community members especially of those who actively engage in the creation process who form the core.
Control	By company and community	Community
Communication	Through mass media and community discourse	Word-of mouth through community ambassadors
Aim	To maximize earnings and make customers happy Ensure surviving of the company	To satisfy own needs! To ensure surviving of the community and provide best products

How Do Community Brands Enchant Consumers?

What is it that drives community members to dedicate their entire spare time to the community and to the building of the community brand? Many members, especially those of the “Make your Own Gear” sub forum just love to create their own equipment, their meanings and their stories. Everything is centered around ability to do it themselves. Everything which does not fit 100 % is modified, tailored and created by them till they get a solution which meets their needs. Initially, the desire for unique solutions, need for better, more specific equipment, or to save money may trigger to engage in the community creation activities. Besides of the utility gained from their self-created solutions and the fun derived from the creative act, community aspects like sharing experiences and know-how with others, and striving for pride and recognition present further important aspects.

..but who besides us can claim to wear a jacket of one's own brand???

It is the enthusiasm and love for the activity which keeps them to spend loads of time. Further, outdoor community members like to identify each other as outdoorseiten.net community members even when they do not know each other and have never met before. Therefore they needed and created symbols and artefacts like such labels and special color codes to be able to recognize other members.

Wouldn't it be cool if we meet and get to know each other at any place and at any time with a outdoorseiten.net logo?

The pride of belonging to the community and to their own created label is that strong that some of the less skill community members buy e.g. pants or jackets from established manufacturers remove the original labels and replace it with their outdoorseiten.net logo.

I had the same idea. Place them right on the Haglöfs Logo. I'm wondering if the size fits.

Yes. Directly on the firm logo. There, the logo is spotted best.

For other community members, commercial brands are not really attractive, because they are associated with status and behaviors not desired

I find brand labels as status symbols apish anyway.

In addition to that the community members think that their self-created stuff is much cooler than offers from known brands at less cost.

I get a lot of satisfaction (creative and otherwise) from knowing that I saved forty bucks by making my own silnylon tarp. I get satisfaction from knowing I can construct better than the gear companies. They don't make nice wide, genuine french-fell seams, with five rows of stitching. My four ounce home made cooking set that cost me under a dollar gives me satisfaction too.

For some community members, outdoorseiten.net is not just a hobby but a philosophy. It is one main reason for their existence.

DISCUSSION

Using the concept of community brands, the paper presents empirical evidence for the emergence and evolution of community-driven brands and explores how these brands differ from other emotionally laden brands in their enchantment of their interest groups. Community brands are created by people who share common interests, not by firms. Community brands create motives, ideologies, and modes of self-organization that suit the majority needs of the active members rather than the needs of economically interested shareholders. Community brands are inspired by the independence, creativity, knowledge, and distinction of their members. The ability to commonly design products that exactly suit particular functional and symbolic needs at lower expenses and without the threat of being exploited or overtaken by the next fashion wave enchants the owners of community brands. The research shows that community brands are not limited to open source software, but also exist in the material world.

This study contributes to consumer culture theory in at least four important ways: First, Kozinets (2002a) has argued on the basis of an ethnographic study of the “Burning Man” festival that consumers can try, but succeed only temporarily at “escaping the market.” In contrast, community brand members are not interested in evading the logic of the “market,” but evading the dependence on corporate innovation and brands. Hence, community brands eagerly use market mechanisms such as branding or offshore production for their own projects, while liberating themselves successfully from the influences of corporations. In accordance with Thompson and Coskuner’s (forthcoming) recent findings we show that consumers may create sustainable countervailing markets to evade the power of brands and corporations, but certainly for fulfilling their own desires and authentic interests independently. In addition to Thompson and Coskuner, our context reveals that countervailing markets not only emerge in retro contexts of romantic agricultural ideals, but also prosper by advancing novel meanings, experiences, and things.

Second, according to Holt (2002) and others, brands must strive for authenticity to become successful “citizen artists.” Community brands are systematically authentic, as they are driven by people that believe their own motives. As long as community brands successfully evade the impression of being commercially influenced, the sense of authenticity leverages trust, mystique, and meaning of the community brand. However, this impression can quickly arise, for instance, if salient community members are unmasked as corporate figures or the community explores options of selling some ideas to companies. Authenticity is also ensured by the mechanism of reputation by contribution. The group’s most active members earn their kudos by sharing extensively, listening to creative members, and enhancing the value of the community brand in best accordance with the group.

Third, we find many members of self-branded communities to be highly loyal, passionate, and devoted to their brand. In contrast to classic branding theory, which

distinguishes consumers from brands, the community brand concept suggests that the community is the brand. Hence, consumer-brand disputes that are discussed in the consumerism literature are of marginal relevance in the case of community brands. Here, consumer-brand struggles are internal differences among members.

Fourth, one salient motivating factor and source of enchantment is the independence of community brands from corporate influences. Classic brand enthusiasts are constantly threatened by corporate decisions, as they have no voice in the innovation process but only an exit option (Hirschman 1970). Apple introduced the Intel processor and abandoned the Newton handheld; Harley Davidson launched bikes for yuppies; and Hummer introduced a small mass-market sport utility vehicle. Consumers and admirers of these brands have struggled with these decisions for various reasons, but predominantly because they resented the destruction of a brand element that was important to the respective owner. Whereas firms can dictate the objects and strongly influence the meanings and experiences of brands, community brands create their own ideologies, define their own qualities, advance with their own pace, and define the prices they want to pay or charge democratically. This liberation and stability within a turbulent market environment perpetuates consumer creativity, participation, and esteem and creates a leveraged knowledge-elitist position that allows for ignoring the latest fashion (Holt 2002).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our research reveals how groups of people with shared interests become brand creators by perpetuating a democratic, self-organized, creative community brand. The study provides valuable insights into the potential of community brands as enchanting, authentic brands that differ dramatically from traditional brands and their communities.

Given that production and design capabilities become more easily accessible for communities in the near future, the concept of community brands has the potential of drastically transforming the market (cf. Giesler forthcoming). Yet, even though these recent developments can present a threat to existing commercial organizations, they also entail new business opportunities (Thompson et al. 2006). Companies such as “Threadless” and “Spreadshirt,” for instance, already profitably provide services for creative community brands. However, on a larger economic scale, the emergence of community brands challenges the common conviction that specialized product knowledge and branding proficiency are the most sustainable, inimitable resources for the western corporate world.

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