Online Consumption Communities: An Introduction

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Abstract

Online consumption communities play a significant role in the life of most consumers. These communities remove temporal and spacial boundaries, allowing consumers to convene online to connect over a shared consumption interest anytime and from anywhere. The objective of this special issue is to advance our understanding of online consumption communities and to stimulate future research in this exciting research domain. Eight papers are included that present cutting-edge research exploring three issues: (1) governance and conflict management in online consumption communities, (2) implications of community membership for individual and societal well-being, and (3) drivers of community success under different ownership structures. In this introductory editorial, each of the papers and their contribution are briefly overviewed.

Online Consumption Communities: An Introduction

Marketing, consumer research, and related disciplines have a rich tradition of studying diverse forms of online consumption communities, such as brand communities (e.g. Muniz & Schau, 2005; Stokburger-Sauer, 2010), open source communities (Hemetsberger & Reinhardt, 2009; Shah, 2006), peer-to-peer support communities (Mathick, Wiertz, & De Ruyter, 2008), and innovation communities (e.g. Gebauer, Füller, & Pezzei, 2013; Moon & Sproull, 2008). A consumption community refers to a group of consumers who share an interest in a particular consumption activity and/or ideology (Kozinets, 1999). The community can either be organized by consumers themselves, by a company or brand, or by an interested third party. Online consumption communities remove temporal and spacial boundaries, allowing consumers to convene online to connect, share information, collaborate, and support each other anytime and from anywhere (Kozinets, Hemetsberger, & Schau, 2008). As a result of the explosion of social network sites, there is a tendency nowadays in both academia and practice to call any online group or Facebook page a community, which is conceptually careless and possibly misleading. Following Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) notion of community, an online group can only be understood as a community if members develop shared rituals and traditions and feel a sense of belonging and moral responsibility to the group.

A significant body of research about online consumption communities has furthered the understanding of such communities. Specifically, research has explored what consumption communities actually are and how they operate (e.g., Kozinets, 1999; Muniz & O'Guinn 2001; Muniz & Schau, 2005) and for which reasons members commit and contribute, including social capital (Mathwick et al., 2008; Wasko & Faraj, 2005), we-intentions (Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Klein Pearo, 2004), and the relationship to the brand (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). Online

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consumption communities have also been studied as sites of co-creation of innovation (Dahlander & Frederiksen, 2010; Gebauer et al., 2013) and value creation in general, with a specific view as to which consumer practices create value (Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009). Understanding how online consumption communities organize themselves to achieve collective outcomes is another important, yet so far less researched, question (O'Mahony & Ferraro, 2007; Thomas, Price, & Schau, 2013).

Despite these advances, there are still gaps in our understanding of online consumption communities. Based on a comprehensive analysis of over 100 articles in marketing and consumer research, Thomas et al. (2013) have identified nine dimensions on which consumption communities vary: focus, marketplace orientation, duration, dispersion, access, appeal, resource dependency, collective belonging, and heterogeneity. They rightly point out that some of these dimensions are less understood than others, specifically marketplace orientation (i.e., the degree to which the marketplace plays a collaborative role), resource dependency (i.e., the degree to which resources flow into and within the community), and heterogeneity (i.e., the degree to which members differ from each other) (Thomas et al., 2013). These are all potential sources of tensions between members within the community as well as between the community and the market, and while a number of studies uncover and acknowledge these tensions (e.g., De Valck, 2007; Fournier & Lee, 2009; Martin, Schouten, & McAlexander, 2006), there is little understanding of how conflict and tensions can be best managed and how consumption communities should best be governed, especially depending on whether the community is firm-sponsored or consumer-organized. Moreover, there is also a need to further explore the consequences of online consumption community membership for individuals, brands, the community, and even broader society. For example, many consumption communities are initiated and sustained by consumers to fill a need that the market is currently not serving, thus altering the consumption landscape.

These neglected areas were highlighted in the call for papers, which stimulated a very high number of submissions (49, to be exact). This strong interest in the special issue indicates that indeed, many research questions remain to be answered in relation to online consumption communities. It is worth pointing out that of the total number of submission we received, roughly half were based on quantitative data, and the other half on qualitative data. After three review rounds, eight papers were selected to be included into this special issue because they had the biggest promise to advance our knowledge of online consumption communities and were of highest quality regarding rigor and relevance. Of these eight papers, only two are quantitative, four are qualitative, one uses mixed methods, and one is conceptual – which seems to indicate that the positivist paradigm reaches its limits when it comes to garnering new insights and a deeper understanding of the underlying processes, practices, and mechanisms of online consumption communities. The next section briefly outlines the structure of this special issue and shortly describes the included papers.

STRUCTURE OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE AND SELECTED PAPERS

Overview

The potential of exciting research in the area of online consumption communities is reflected in the eight articles selected for this special issue. We divided the special issue into three sub-sections and categorize the eight articles accordingly. The three papers in Part I of this special issue deal with *intra-community communication, governance, and conflict management*. These papers take an in-depth look into how online consumption communities deal with internal and external tensions. Part II comprises two papers that investigate online consumption communities and community membership as drivers of *individual and societal well-being*. Set in a health context, these papers follow the notion that communities assist in the empowerment of consumers to provide and share information that is not accessible to them in the marketplace, but is crucial to their well-being. Finally Part III deals with *drivers*

of community success from a community perspective. The three papers in this section look into the antecedents of community vitality, community members' content contribution, and their satisfaction with the community.

Overall, the special issue spans a wide range of online consumption communities, including communities focused on gardening, leisure/mountain sports, illegal drugs, serious and chronic diseases, food, and soft drink consumption. Most of the researched online consumption communities are peer-to-peer problem-solving (P3) communities; one is a brand community, one is an activist consumption community.

Part I: Intra-community communication, governance, and conflict management

Independent of the particular topical focus of a community, participation in an online community always consists of a range of interpersonal practices (Schau et al., 2009) by members with varying levels of expertise, commitment, and experience, and possibly varying ideologies and individual- and community-level goals. This heterogeneity can be both a source of tension and of creative advancement in an online consumption community and needs to be proactively managed to ensure the continuity of the community (e.g., Thomas et al., 2013), for example through various approaches to governance. The three papers in Part I all deal with some aspects of this challenge.

In the first paper in this section, Dinhopl, Gretzel, and Whelan examine intra-community communication, specifically label use, in online consumption communities as social practice. By analyzing conversations in an online consumption community of vegetarians, they develop a theoretical framework for when, how, and why members use labels to categorize themselves and other members of the consumption community, as well as different aspects of their consumption activity. They uncover four specific strategies of label use; construction, reconstruction, conversion, and invalidation, and discuss how these strategies are used for governance purposes, such as to achieve boundary

maintenance or group cohesion. Importantly, such identity labels often translate into product labels and thus are of great relevance for marketing communication with consumers.

Community governance is the main theme of the conceptual paper by Sibai, De Valck, Farrell, and Rudd. They examine governance from the perspective of social control, which is exerted in online consumption communities through a system of moderation practices. Moderation practices are executed during interactions that operate under different governance structures (market, hierarchy, and clan governance) and serve different purposes (interaction initiation, maintenance, and termination). The focus of the paper is on reviewing and integrating the disparate literature on social control in online consumption communities, and to develop a clear agenda for future research in this important area. Their framework of moderation practices provides a useful tool for managers to diagnose social control problems and appropriate actions in online consumption communities.

The paper by Husemann, Ladstaetter, and Luedicke takes an in-depth look into the conflict culture and conflict management in online consumption communities, studying the interesting case of the Premium Cola consumption community. The authors develop a framework of conflict patterns and conflict outcomes; the conflict culture toolkit. They propose to differentiate between routinized and transgressive conflicts which produce or inhibit the practical, identity, and relationship value in online consumption communities. The paper thus furthers our understanding of how community members perform and manage conflicts, and how these conflict practices leads to value outcomes.

Part II: Community membership as driver of individual and societal well-being

The two papers in Part II of this special issue share the notion that online consumption communities empower consumers by enabling consumer-to-consumer sharing of information that they cannot access via the market. This empowerment of consumers in turn increases individual und societal well-being. The first paper is quite unconventional. O'Sullivan looks

into what he calls the "ecstasy market maven crowd" to study how these online consumption community members help decrease market information asymmetry by diffusing important and otherwise unavailable information about the side effects of illegal drugs. Being able to access this information increases both individual well-being (by reducing negative individual health consequences) and societal well-being (by reducing deaths). While the context of his research – illegal drug consumption – could be viewed as controversial, it is a context suitable to show how consumers collectively adapt to unwarranted risks. It further demonstrates the power of online consumption communities to enhance collective risk-aversion. In addition to individual and societal implications, O'Sullivan points out that by facilitating the emergence of market maven crowds in legal contexts, managers can benefit from their marketplace knowledge and power (e.g., involve them into the creation of brand meaning or coproduction).

Keeling, Laing, and Newholm also look into how access to information empowers consumers in online consumption communities, but in the context of chronic and serious diseases. They focus on how online consumption communities can help redress information asymmetries between consumers and healthcare professionals by offering what they call "permissible space" in which important patient-professional negotiations can take place. These negotiation processes, consisting of occupation, validation, advocacy, and recording, support patients and professionals in understanding how they experience health and what constitutes successful treatment. Importantly, these negotiations in online consumption communities are shown to lead to tangible offline outcomes, such as changes in treatment plans, thus greatly contributing to the individual well-being of patients, and to a greater understanding of patient viewpoints by healthcare professionals.

Part III: Drivers of community success

Prior research on online consumption communities has already provided some insight into the divers of community success, as discussed in the introduction. Nevertheless, the three

papers in Part III have each identified important drivers of community success that so far have been under-researched.

While the motivations of members to actively participate in online consumption communities have received much research attention, there is a need to better understand passive participation (e.g., lurking) and its consequences for community success. Hartmann, Wiertz, and Arnould look at such passive participation in an online gardening community and distinguish between direct versus vicarious consumptive moments of community practice. Community practices are by definition interpersonal, and thus need a recipient or an audience for their performance. To illustrate, when a community member receives an answer to a question, s/he experience a direct consumptive moment of the empathizing practice. When s/he observes the archived question-answer exchange between fellow members, s/he experiences a vicarious consumptive moment of the same practice. Using a mixed-method approach to data collection, the authors study the relationship between the two consumptive moments of practice and value outcomes, which then translate into individual-level engagement with the community as well as overall community vitality. Importantly, this study shows that passive participation (i.e., lurking) cannot be understood as a unidimensional construct, but represents both direct and vicarious consumptive moments of online community practices, with different effects on community success.

The paper by Teichmann, Stokburger-Sauer, Plank, and Strobl presents a framework that helps to classify previous research on motivational drivers and values for community participation into self- versus other-oriented and extrinsic versus intrinsic motivational drivers of online consumption community participation. They specifically take into account the ownership structure of online consumption communities and distinguish between consumer-hosted and firm-hosted communities. They find that in company-hosted versus consumer-hosted online consumption communities; opinion leadership, self-presentation, and enjoyment are stronger drivers of content contribution, which does not hold true for altruism. Community

managers are thus well advised to present and foster the possibilities for these motivational drivers to increase their members' contribution behavior.

Finally, the paper by Steinmann, Schramm-Klein, and Mau goes more into depth regarding company-controlled drivers (i.e., marketing communication variables) of community success in a company-sponsored online consumption community. The paper examines the effect of communication style (non-personalized vs. personalized) and pictorial presentation (brand logo vs. avatar) on community success in an online brand community on a social networking site. Specifically, by using a longitudinal experimental study, the paper investigates the impact of these management communication actions on community success on the brand level (e.g., brand recommendation, brand purchase) and the individual level (i.e., satisfaction with community). In a number of conditions, communicating with community members using an avatar is more successful than solely using the brand logo. However, counter-intuitively, non-personalized versus personalized messages seem to be more successful in this brand community context.

FINDINGS AND AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While the specific contribution of each of the eight papers has been discussed above (and is, of course, elaborated on in each individual paper), this section shortly summarizes the key findings of this special issue and outlines avenues for future research on online consumption communities.

The call for papers for this special issue pointed out the need to learn more about the forms of community affiliation and community participation, the impact of heterogeneity of members and their interests, governance structures to manage member conflict, community success factors from both a manager's and member's perspective, individual-level consequences of participation in online consumption communities, and the evolution of online consumption communities. The papers included in this special issue advance our

understanding of many of the above noted issues. Importantly, they contribute frameworks on how consumption community members use labels to achieve boundary maintenance and group cohesion; and on how to govern and moderate consumption communities to achieve social control. Furthermore, a conflict culture toolkit gives guidance on how different types of conflicts in consumption communities should be managed to lead to value outcomes. The special issue has also identified new drivers of community success and shows that such drivers operate differently in different types of communities (e.g., company-hosted vs. consumer-hosted communities). For example, one important insight is that passive participation (i.e., lurking) is important for community success, and that passive participation is not unidimensional, but comprises direct and a vicarious consumptive moments of community practices, which each lead to different value outcomes. Moreover, this special issue reminds us that online communities are an essential force in the empowerment of consumers, for example by addressing information asymmetries between consumers and professionals or by enabling the exchange of information that the market does not provide.

Whilst this special issue significantly contributes to a better understanding of online consumption communities from both an academic and a managerial perspective, it also points out avenues for future research. Each paper suggests a number of research opportunities and highlights aspects that have not yet received adequate attention. An important contribution of this special issue is that it spurred theory development in the field of consumption communities. Future research could thus undertake the endeavor to empirically test the suggested conceptual frameworks to better understand the importance of different elements of the frameworks in achieving desired community outcomes, such as group cohesion and community continuity. Additionally, while the special issue helped to better understand governance and conflict management in online communities, it would be interesting to investigate if and how the suggested governance and conflict management strategies vary in different types of communities (e.g., community ownership, topic, national background, and

so on). It seems like there is already much knowledge with regard to motivational drivers of online consumption community participation. This special issue further advanced our understanding of these drivers by identifying new drivers and by presenting a typology for member motivations' to participate in online consumption communities. Once enough empirical research exists in this area, a meta-analysis would be helpful to shed more light on the relative importance of the single motivational drivers. Finally, none of the papers submitted to the special issue explicitly dealt with the evolution of online consumption communities, and our knowledge on this topic remains limited. Looking into the dynamic processes of establishing and nurturing an online consumption community over time could be of major importance.

ACKNOWEDGEMENTS

-Insert Table 1 here-

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Table 1 – List of Reviewers

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