The consumption, politics and transformation of community

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The consumption, politics and transformation of community

More than 20 years of research has established community as a vital conceptual touchstone for both marketing and consumer researchers (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Gainer & Fischer, 1994). From early theories of consumption subcultures, through brand communities, consumer tribes, and more recently, brand publics, research has explained how consumption resources enable people construct webs of interpersonal interdependencies, attachments to shared territories, as well as distinctive and common identities. Ideas of communal forms of living as an aspect of the market society can be traced back to sociology and cultural studies. Classical sociology sought to explain how longstanding social structures were being replaced with new forms of living in societies characterised by industrialisation (Marx, 1976).

Throughout these changing patterns of early modern life, market orders have been seen to engender new experiences of subjectivity, emotions, (inter)personal foresight and resource distribution as a feature of industrialisation, rationalisation and the accumulation of capital (Elias, 2000; Weber, 2013). With respect to the productive aims of economic life, such changes were seen to erode traditional bonds of togetherness, leading to the disenchantment of community (Tonnies, 1957 [1887]). Particularly during the post-WW2 era, growth in leisure time and disposable income provided fertile territory for the emerging discipline of cultural studies to continue examining the intersections of capitalism and community, validating the study of style, taste, resistance and identity as mediated by consumption (Hall & Jefferson, 1993; Hebdige, 2012; Irwin, 1973).

On one hand, given these origins, perhaps it is ironic that community literature has flourished as an aspect of business strategy. Indeed, concepts of community are key devices in marketing practice. Subcultures of consumption have offered sites at which firms can understand and research community forms (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Moreover, brand community has become something of a holy grail in terms of establishing customer loyalty. In short, the lifeworlds of consumers have become a vital aspect of establishing marketing strategy, brand identity and perceptions of authenticity (Holt, 2004; Beverland & Farrelly, 2009; Schau et al., 2009; Holt & Cameron, 2010). On the other hand, consumers continue to experience feelings of togetherness, conviviality and forms of resource distribution that characterise a range of valuable experiences. Such value is not measured only in commercial terms, but also in the supportive, therapeutic, emotive and ludic experiences that underpin experiential consumption (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

In short, market orders and consumption resources affect the manners in which communities manifest, how they re-enchant late modern living, how they effect new meanings and practices, how they distribute consumption resources and even how they activate new markets and meanings in society (Epp & Price, 2008; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007a, 2007b; Weijo, Martin, Arnould, & Ger, 2018). Nevertheless, community is a slippery word. It is hard to pin down. In what follows therefore we offer a (by no means exhaustive) review of some of the key community themes in our field, before we introduce the aims of our special
issue and, more importantly, the contributors who seek to enliven debate for future scholars.

**Brand community**

Marketing and consumer behaviour has given enormous credence to Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) concept of brand community. Research inspired by the original concept showed the practical value of customer participation, consumers’ emotional and quasi-religious investment in brands, and the practices of value creation that take place in communal settings such as brand fests (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Schau et al 2009). Since then, the brand-oriented behaviour of consumers (as well as brand managers) has received an increasing level of attention and analysis from marketing and consumer researchers across the globe (for recent work see Mousavi, Roper, & Keeling, 2017; Rodríguez-López & Diz-Comesaña, 2016; Scarpi, 2010; Schrembri & Latimer, 2016; Skalen, Pace, & Cova, 2015; Steinmann, Mau, & Schramm-Klein, 2015; Teichmann, Stokburger-Sauer, Plank, & Strobl, 2015). Research has examined the lifecycles of brand communities (Muniz and Schau 2005; Wang & Ding, 2017), when communities fail because value is not created (Gambetti & Graffigna, 2015), and when communities actively go out to damage or reject a brand (Parmentier & Fischer, 2015). These studies provide cautionary tales for both consumers and marketers.

More recently, the study of communities in online environments has contributed to a surge in research into new expressions and practices of communal consumption. Interest in experiential consumption has moved online in studies of gaming communities with research analysing Massive Multiplayer Role-Playing Games (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014) and social contagion within gamers social networks for instance (Park, Rishika, Janakiraman, Houston, & Yoo, 2018). Moreover, as with prior work on brand communities, such studies illustrate how consumers can create value for companies through idea generation (Chan, Li, & Zhu, 2015), and during the development and launch of new products (Divakaran, Palmer, Søndergaard, & Matkovskyy, 2017; Gruner, Homburg, & Lukas, 2014; Xie & Jia, 2016). So too have these studies illustrated how online peer-to-peer networks, provide problem solving and technical post-purchase support (Claffey & Brady, 2017; de Almeida, Dholakia, Hernandez, & Mazzon, 2014).

More recently these studies have begun to develop new vantage points for consumer and marketing researchers, particularly in respect of how digital and urban worlds fold into each other, the strange cross-overs that occur between the virtual and the physical (Mathwick, Wiertz, & De Ruyter, 2007; Stockburger-Sauer and Wiertz, 2015; Seregin and Weijo, 2016). As Breitsohl, Kunz, & Dowell (2015) note in their taxonomy, online consumption communities are often ambiguously conceptualised, and while research seeks greater understanding of them, we expect that the range and possibilities of these community forms will only continue to engender new experiences of creativity, expression and control, as well as new contextual varieties of value creation. Whilst impossible to cover all of these sites, some contexts demand sustained attention from scholars. For example, research illustrates how consumption communities extend to healthcare support and therapeutic communities (Keeling, Laing, & Newholm, 2015; Laing, Keeling, & Newholm, 2011; Lowe and Johnson, 2015; Tian et al., 2014). Equally consumer researchers are studying consumption in religious (Karataş & Sandikçi, 2013) and educational communities...
The practice, labour and knowledge economies generated in these milieux, and others such as sexuality, racial relations and politics raise important questions for future research into the relationships between consumers and branded products.

**Tribes and publics**

Brand communities have become an iconic aspect of our knowledge-making culture in business schools, and an endpoint for brand strategists. Yet, in most parts of the world, and most instances, goods and services do not attract such ritualised loyalty among admirers keen to share their experiences with each other. Although research has extended the brand community concept to the consumption of convenience brands (Cova & Pace, 2006) and business-to-business contexts (Bruhn, Schneebelen, & Schäfer, 2014), many scholars have found it difficult to generalise the brand community effect to all communal consumption experiences. Likewise, though conceptions of subcultures of consumption (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) offer a variety of studies into longstanding forms of social and cultural capital developed opposition to mainstream cultural norms (Goulding, Shankar, Elliott, & Canniford, 2009; Thornton, 1995), conceptions of subculture have also been criticised (Muggleton, 2000; Readhead, 2010).

These problems of application, as well as the opportunities offered by different traditions of social theory, led marketing and consumer research scholarship towards Mafessoli’s (1995) notion of tribus or neotribes (Cova, Kozinets, & Shankar, 2012; O’Reilly, 2012). Key to the understanding of consumer tribes is Bernard Cova’s apothegm, ‘the link is more important than the thing’ (1997). Tribal marketing has examined the emergence and development of these communities in the contexts of music (Goulding, Shankar, & Canniford, 2013; Schau & Muniz, 2007), fashion (Rinallo, 2007), sport (Bradford & Sherry, 2015; Canniford, 2011), literature and film (Goulding & Saren, 2009) and national culture (Otnes & Maclaran, 2007). In all cases, tribes come together, not so much to celebrate any one particular product, but more as a way to experience convivial, aestheticised linkages that transpire when people consume together. In comparison to brand communities, tribes tend to be more activity oriented, with multiple brands contributing platforms for consumers, less stable over time, playful in terms of their treatment of brand meanings, and affective in quality (Canniford, 2011; Cova et al., 2012).

Most recently, Arvidsson and Caliandro (2015) have coined the label of ‘brand public’, to better describe current modes of online consumer participation. Where brand communities have been characterised by structured relations, consciousness of shared meanings and practices that lead to a common identity. Likewise, many of the tribes considered by consumer research take place in online environments, the ongoing interactions between members incur transfers of resources, tastes and emotions. On the other hand, much of the interactions in social media platforms are not based on interaction, discussion or deliberation but by individual and collective affect. In short, ‘brand publics consumers do not develop a collective identity around the focal brand; rather the brand is valuable as a medium that can offer publicity to a multitude of diverse situations of identity’ (2015, p. 727). Work in this area is beginning to gain traction. Studies of social media platforms where consumers are loosely invested show how these technologies and affects that flow through social networks can destabilise brands by disrupting long-held meanings and
images (Rokka & Canniford, 2016), or expand networks of aesthetic desires, and passions for transgression or conformity (Kozinets, Patterson, & Ashman, 2017). Moreover, these platforms can act as channels for consumer desire (Kozinets, Patterson, & Ashman, 2016) and practices of micro-celebrity where social media provides platforms for attention economies.

Expanding our conceptions of collectivity in consumer society promises to renew longstanding conversations in consumer research. Not least of these are those conversations that pertain to how communities and publics create and alter markets (Dolbec & Fischer, 2015; Martin & Schouten, 2014; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Thompson & Arsel, 2004). Within this remit, the study of community as social movements (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004) has shown how collective action enables consumers to challenge firms, industries and the market as a whole (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Varman & Belk, 2009). In short, while community is a major source of value creation, so too do communities provide sources of support, therapy and coping, as well as political engagement and resistance in market societies. A number of recent projects have examined the pro-social elements of communities, exploring parental food socialisation practices in low socioeconomic communities (Judd, Newton, Newton, & Ewing, 2014), time banks and community resilience (Ozanne & Ozanne, 2016) and community disaster preparedness (Okazaki, Benavent-Climent, Navarro, & Henseler, 2015). We can include in the list research that has looked at particular communities such as consumer co-operative pubs (Wells, Ellis, Slack, & Moufahim, 2018) and sex worker communities (Umashankar & Srinivasan, 2013). As with the case of value provision in settings such as healthcare and education, however, the dimensions and paradoxes of value creation engendered by these communities have led researchers to apply critical levels of theorisation to study marketplace communities.

Critical conversations

Despite broad acceptance in the marketing literature and interest from a wide range of researchers, criticisms can be levelled against some common conceptualisations of community. In particular, the placing of clear conceptual borders around social activity by calling it ‘brand community’, or otherwise, requires ‘purifications’ (Latour, 1996), deliberate simplifications of hybrid and complex realities. On one hand, these simplifications enable categorisations that make sense of events, so as to better manage consumers and markets. It follows that clear conceptual boundaries have resulted in representations of community that have become popular not by reflecting the realities of consumers’ life worlds, but rather by virtue of their offering managers and academics handles on slippery marketplace phenomena (Canniford, 2011). Such managerial handles tend to reflect as much about the politics and purpose of management as they do about the communities they describe. Moreover, neatly bounded categories might be considered to reproduce a worldview that stops short of considering instances where communities flow into each other, or fail to gel (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2015). Forces such as ‘affect and atmospheres’ that mediate communities as ‘social flows’ via shared emotions and embodied experiences (Ingold, 2011; Kozinets et al., 2016). These are non-representational forces that are hard to measure, or write about (Hill, Canniford, & Mol, 2013). As such these effects often overflow the rationalising bounds of business school research. Nevertheless, they are increasingly central to the contemporary practices of capitalism (Thrift, 2008).
In response to some of these critiques, emerging work explores the tensions and differences that occur within communities, and the practical ways in which consumers create and negotiate difference through shared resources (Arsel & Bean, 2013; Thomas, Price, & Schau, 2013). Equally, marketing scholarship is tackling issues of boundary construction and maintenance in markets that are framed as dynamic cultural systems (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Weinberger, 2015). This emerging work offers theory that rejects a romanticised, mono-cultural or static view of community. Instead, community is placed within constantly shifting figurations of subjects and material environments, in manners that link micro-practice with broader structural changes in society (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011; Sandikci & Ger, 2010; Sinclair & Dolan, 2015). These perspectives illustrate how community can be dynamic and problematic, at times disintegrative and self-destructive, controlling and restrictive (Goulding et al., 2013; Joseph, 2002; Paulsen, 2014).

Most recently, work questioning the ethics of online and social media conceptualisations and practices of community has also begun to emerge. As much as consumption communities are celebratory arenas for ludic explorations, the fantasies feelings and fun that have preoccupied consumer research for decades (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), they also exert effects of exclusion, estrangement, discrimination, control and coercion. Revealing a darker side of online communities, Cappellini and Yen (2016) highlight how consumers can be displaced in online communities. Given the wealth of opportunities for value creation in consumption communities research into online communities has focussed on the work performed by consumers (Cova & Pace, 2006; Zwick, Bonsu, & Darmody, 2008). Most recently, scholars have questioned these relationships, conceptualising consumption communities as ideological devices capable of enslaving consumers, yet symbolically resolving contradictions that arise with participatory media (Cova, Dalli, & Zwick, 2011; Zwick et al., 2008; Zwick & Bradshaw, 2016).

**Transforming community**

Against this vibrant background, and after decades of research, there is still much to learn about community. This is not least because communities perform market relations that change their own form, content, and practices. As such our conceptions of community will continue to change as we observe these ever-shifting phenomena. This mirrors recent scholarship in the fields of politics, sociology and anthropology for instance, also feature contested concepts of community which span a broad range of historical, cultural and discursive dimensions (Ince, 2011; Mayo, 1994). For example, ‘community’ is a core concept to study political contestation, and contemporary power systems and relations of class, gender, ethnicity, gender sexuality, nationality, (Anderson, 1983; Cohen, Winton Green, & Winton Green, 1999; Tonnies, 1957; Naples, 2009; Hill Collins, 2010). As such, communities are fought over, and appropriated for different uses and interests to justify divergent politics, policies and practices (Mayo, 1994, p. 48).

With these problems and opportunities in mind, our special issue called for papers that could challenge and expand conventional views of community in marketing and consumer research. The submissions we received did not disappoint. Of the articles that made the final ‘cut’, authors have addressed a range of critical and multidisciplinary perspectives on community. Topics include discussions of community in relation to space and spatiality,
power and structure, membership and belonging, disruption and continuity. The diversity included in this special issue should be celebrated: we have an international set of contributors based in universities in the US, France, Italy, Australia, Ireland, Germany and the UK. The contexts that our contributors tackle are equally diverse, including the Baordanian online community related to the Discworld book series; the Fairphone community; neorural communities in Italy; Youtube vloggers; and an LGBT community in France. Moreover, highlighting the multitude of ways in which marketing and consumer researchers now examine community contexts, our contributors have used a range of methods including netnography, surveys, interviews, document and social media analysis.

The first paper by Eagar and L’Espoir Decosta explores spatiality in an online Boardania community. In so doing they explain the role of space and mobility in changing community structures, and in the transformation into a ‘post-consumption community’, through the marginalisation of the consumption object. In the second paper of this special issue, Gannon and Prothero’s focus is online consumption and user-generated content. They studied Irish beauty bloggers and YouTubers using community of practice theory. Next, Giordano, Luise and Arvidsson’s article is the result of three years of research and activist engagement with ‘neorural’ communitarian networks located in Southern Italy. Their paper highlights the combinations of politics, business and culture within the community they studied. The fourth paper, written by Descubes, McNamara and Bryson, focuses on the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community and in particular the nuances of differing behaviour within this broadly defined population. The final paper by Svenson focuses on collective consumption practices and online practices of communities bringing together social practice theory and anthropology. The paper examines sustainability and how social media and social changes communities (in particular a peer-to-peer problem-solving brand community) can help diffuse sustainable ICT practices.

Interestingly these papers illustrated the divisive quality of the category ‘community’ as a site of research: for several of the articles submitted in this Special Issue, reviewers were divided in their assessment of papers in multiple review cycles. The main points of contention emerged—unsurprisingly perhaps—over what constitutes a community, the extent of valuable contribution to research about communities, and in the frames of references (i.e. ‘import’ of theories to make sense of the object of study). We would like to thank all our reviewers for their contribution to the review process that allowed the publication of our special issue. Additionally, we would like to thank the authors for sticking with the process and responding comprehensively to reviewers’ comments.

Finally, we present a conversation between three key researchers working in different areas of the communal intersections of consumption and society: Adam Arvidsson, Alan Bradshaw and Alison Hulme. Our contributors begin by discussing what other disciplines might have to offer marketing and consumer researchers interested in community. These included the discussion about influence of the economy, community infrastructure, people caught up in precarious labour positions, the influence of social media and highlight once again how community, as a point of focus, has been romanticised and idealised. In the next section they go on to highlight the importance of methodological reflexivity in community research and a questioning of the artefacts from interviews (a point which should be relevant to marketing and consume researchers beyond a focus on communities). Our contributors also offer clues to the future of community research in marketing, consumer behaviour and beyond, emphasising key research gaps and key research directions that
need to be examined. These sections focus on issues as diverse as class conscientiousness and representation of ordinary people. We hope that the insights from these key researchers will provide valuable reading for both new and established researchers in the area.

In our initial call for papers we asked for contributions that extended understanding of the marketplace itself, of organisations within it and potential policy to support communities in the face of intersecting pressures from corporations and government. We see the concept of community as an increasingly important element in planning social welfare, as a means of organising service delivery, healthcare and encompassing a range of (often antagonistic) actors such as voluntary organisations, businesses and working-class populations in certain areas (Holgersen & Haarstad, 2009; Ince, 2011; MacLeavy, 2008). Further to this, we asked who and what counts in communities. Such a question raises issues of age and social isolation, loneliness (Seabrook, 1973) and animals as mediators of community (e.g. Bettany & Daly, 2008; Smith, 2015). While, these topics have not been addressed in the papers of our special issue, we still believe them to be important in the development of this area and alongside the issues highlighted in the conversation piece we call for future research to address these vital topics. As ‘the market’ becomes an overriding idiom for the organisation of resources and communal living, marketing and consumer research can—and should—contribute to the conversation on broad societal topics. We conclude, therefore, by saying that we hope that this special issue will renew interest in further research on the consumption, politics, and transformation of community and take in new and interesting directions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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