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For a Deeper Understanding of the Sociality That Emanates From Virtual Communities of Consumption

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This paper aims to improve our understanding of the sociality that emanates from virtual communities of consumption. We have collected life narratives, with a focus on agency in consumers' experiences of forums in a virtual community of video game players. Findings reveal the existence of different means of appropriation built on identified dimensions and leading to various knowledge projects. These projects are experienced throughout subject positions around which consumers build more or less salient identities. The roles that forums play in knowledge projects lead to four main interrelated consumption logics that are collectively embodied in different ways by social practices.

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At a time when the project of reflexive modernization (Beck, Bonss, and Lau 2003) radicalizes modern societies by disembedding the individual from even these "primordial social relations" (Knorr Cetina 2001) which are religious worldviews, previously stable and stratified social hierarchies, and social institutions, consumer researchers have stated that gatherings around specific objects or consumption activities become essential for social ties.

Thus, over the last 15 years, much effort has been dedicated to exploration of various forms and displays of common consumption interests (e.g., Belk and Costa 1998; Cova 1997; Kozinets 2001; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Thompson and Troester 2002). Some authors have strongly advocated that these consumption communities, (sub)cultures, and tribes represent a response to the erosion of traditional forms of sociality (Cova 1997; Firat and Dholakia 1997; Firat and Venkatesh 1995) in which sociality represents "the ways through which actors relate to each other to organise their practices and construe their identities" (Fiske 1998). Whereas more recently some researchers have analyzed deeply the practices of a given tribe (Hewer and Brownlie 2007), strangely enough it has to be acknowledged that very few papers published in consumer research have focused on the social construction of identities of selves in social interaction contexts (Reed 2002), or more specifically on sociality in virtual environments. An attempt to bridge these two gaps has been recently made by Schau and Gilly (2003), but the investigations of these researchers on the different aspects of sociality has not gone beyond revealing the existence of multiple social roles and the self presentations by consumers in cyberspace. I argue that the sociality emanating from Internet deserves to be better understood by considering social sites such as online discussion forums, wherein we get deeper insights into the structural elements that determine consumer identity constructions.

The sociality conveyed by consumption has mainly been conceptualized over the past decades on the individual level through extended self (Belk, 1988) and self presentation (cf. Schau and Gilly 2003), and on the collective level through social practices (Warde, 2005). As Reed (2002) I argue that, although social identity is a rarely used paradigm in consumer research, it is meaningful to conceptualize the role of relations with others and with artefacts in self-conception. I should add that this paradigm can be successfully applied to identity construction processes emanating from technology (Internet) that has a structural potential (DeSanctis and Poole 1994). Following some consumer researchers (Holt and Thompson 2004) and some structuration researchers in Information systems (Whitman and Woszczyński 2003), I chose to direct this paper on the structural focus on the role of agency in social effects. More specifically, this paper is based on traditional "social scientists methods" (Penaloza and Venkatesh 2006) in order to grasp the different ways consumers (as agents) appropriate the online discussion forums of a given virtual community, considered as consumption object and social site (Maignan and Lukas 1997; Presi and al 2006) in which sociality can be investigated. Following Schultz Kleine, Kleine, and Allen (1995), I adopt life narratives to enlighten the importance of others, and the results of personal progression in self-conception.

In order to strengthen the internal validity of the research, I have chosen to investigate forums of one particular virtual community of consumption, www.jeuxvideo.com. It concerns video game players. This website was created in 1997, and members of the community connect on the second most important French Internet forum in terms of volume of activity (measured by posts exchanged). The study proposes a hermeneutical approach applied to consumer experience of discussion forums. The research is inductive and is built upon existential-phenomenological interviews of different forumers at different times.

More specifically, I answer this main research question: "How do consumers appropriate forums of virtual communities of consumption in a sustainable way?" Relationships to forums are the focus of this research, because they constitute the most important part of consumer experience in virtual communities of consumption.

Preliminary results established from interviews of 8 regular members of the community show that, beyond the diversity of perceptions, most consumers agree on the ability of the forums to fulfill evolving needs. Nevertheless, a more precise constitutive analysis reveals elements around which consumer appropriations differ significantly. These are based on routines at the intersection between virtual and real environments, more precisely connexions to the forum, posting activity per se, and socializing from outside (but thanks to) the forums. Interrelationships between these dimensions sustain idiosyncratic knowledge projects (Zwick and Dholakia 2006) that are more or less actively sought by consumers. These knowledge projects are experienced throughout different subject positions related to different practices. Consumers build more or less salient social identities around these positions.

Two fundamental dimensions tend to influence a main "consumption logic" adopted by a given forumer: the degree to which the forum is associated to the knowledge project on a) consumption objects (here, video games) and b) other consumers. According to her/

his personal situation within these two dimensions, a forumer is more or less likely to be situated in “consumer”, “expert”, “communal”, or “social actor” logic. A given consumer can shift from a given logic to another during his/her foruming experience. Interrelationships between these “consumption logics” have now to be more deeply explained and validated with other data and possibly other methods like semiotic squares. Each of these coexisting logics seems to foster subject positions on more or less “locally grounded” and more or less “social” practices (e.g., trolls, polls, games, rankings, conflicts, hacks...) which create the culture of the forum. “Locally grounded” practices are generally deeply tied to the coexistence of different visions of forum “materiality”.

In conclusion, beyond extending knowledge on virtual communities of consumption, this research contributes to the Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005) stream of research, aiming to anchor consumer research in the sociological paradigm more deeply. As such it opens many perspectives to study the role that consumption plays in social ties.

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