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# **BRAND COMMUNITY UNDER FIRE: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS FOR THE HUMMER BRAND COMMUNITY**

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## ABSTRACT

This research was undertaken as part of a larger consumer behavior research project investigating brands and brand communities as social systems. The paper is concerned with the particular role of social environments for brand communities previously neglected in literature. Grounded in a social-constructivist interpretive framework, a multi-perspective study was conducted to explore how the HUMMER brand community and its social environments discursively construct, situate, and legitimate one another. Findings reveal brand communities as powerful, socially embedded phenomena that continuously negotiate a set of core distinctions with and against their social environments.

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Brand communities have become powerful socio-economic phenomena and are as such of great interest for marketplace culture studies in consumer culture theory. A brand community, as introduced by Muñiz and O’Guinn, is a specialized, non-geographically bound community that is based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand. Previous studies portray brand communities as true social phenomena that share values, cultivate rituals and traditions, and care for community members.

Yet even though numerous leading brands serve as center stage for passionate disputes between admirers and opponents, literature has remained silent about the particular role of increasingly active social environments for brand communities. Apple user groups, Linux developer networks, miracle healer ministries, or fan clubs of persistently losing teams, for instance, are continuously forced to defend themselves against an antagonistic social environment.

This paper uses a blend of phenomenological interviews, netnographic data, and historical artifacts to create a multi-perspective account of the HUMMER brand community and its relevant social environments. The HUMMER brand community (HBC) provokes unprecedented amounts of both admiration and opposition among the North American public. As a true “brand community under fire” it does not only inspire public interest and sympathy, but also extensive negative reactions such as accusations, aggressions, and affronts. Consumer articulations from inside and outside of the HBC were used to explore the particular ways in which the community distinguishes itself from, reproduces itself in, and reflects upon its social environment.

Adding to existing consumer culture theory on brand communities, findings reveal that a group of shared ideological distinctions — such as off-road capability versus environmental irresponsibility, positive attention versus selfish vanity, and social superiority versus excessive overconsumption — combined with knowledge about which side to favor builds the social foundations of the brand community. These core distinctions provide members and non-members with topics for discussion, reasons to socialize, and meanings to identify with.

In its continuous discursive reproduction, a brand community considerably depends on, draws from, and interacts with its social environment. The HBC, in particular, depends on outside attention and superior functionality, draws from cultural resources like manhood, ruggedness, and war, and interacts with both fans and foes in personal and mediated forms.

A brand community uses at least six discursive strategies of responding to outside stimuli. Positive feedback from the social environment is consumed, eagerly responded to, and sometimes actively reinforced. Thus, extensive positive attention is a core motivation for many HUMMER consumers. Oppositional arguments are ignored, rationalized, or recontextualized. The HBC, for instance, entirely ignores affronts that are not of interest for the community or endanger its legitimacy, such as accusing a HUMMER-owning mother of social irresponsibility. It self-referentially rationalizes arguments to fit the accepted meaning of the community as it frames protest categorically as envy, for example. And it recontextualizes opposition, for instance, by supporting environmental organizations while not giving up the vehicle. These are some of the practices involved in the brand community. It continuously reduces social complexity and redefines itself by banning certain interpretations while encouraging others.

In summary, social environments comprise curses and blessings for a brand community under fire. Blessings, as outside sympathies and threats co-create the distinctiveness the community is built upon; and curses, as the social environments also constantly question the validity and social acceptance of the community’s foundations.

## **BRAND COMMUNITY UNDER FIRE: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS FOR THE HUMMER BRAND COMMUNITY**

Brand communities have become powerful socio-economic phenomena and are as such of great interest for the study of marketplace cultures in consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005). A brand community is a “specialized, non-geographically bound community, [that is] based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand“ (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001, p. 412). Prior studies portray these specialized communities and akin subcultures of consumption as true social phenomena that share values, cultivate communal rituals and traditions, and care for community members (Arnould and Price 1993; Caldwell and Henry 2004; Kozinets 1997, 2001; McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig 2002; Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001; Muñiz and Schau 2005; Peñaloza 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995).

Yet even though numerous leading brands have become the focal point for passionate disputes among admirers and opponents (Buechler 1995; Giesler and Pohlmann 2003; Handelman 1999; Holt 2002; Klein 1999; Kozinets 2002a; Kozinets and Handelman 2004), consumer culture theory has remained surprisingly silent about the impacts and potentials of committed social environments for brand communities. By conceptualizing, for instance, oppositional brand loyalty as the single internal process that explicitly involves an (economic) environment, Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001), among other authors, largely neglect the importance of other outside stimuli. To better understand the empirical relevance of reactive social environments for the emergence, proliferation, and dissolution of brand communities, consumer researchers need to move beyond the theoretical constraints of single-sided brand community investigations.

Drawing from a multi-perspective interpretive study of the HUMMER brand community (HBC)<sup>1</sup> - a community that evolves around the consumption of controversial, military-style sport utility vehicles - and its relevant social context, this paper explores how a brand community and its environments discursively construct, situate, and legitimate one another.

The study begins with a review of existing brand community theory. Then, a conceptual framework is introduced that allows for observing brand communities as distinctive, dependent, and ephemeral social systems. Subsequently, attention is focused on the community's particular means of distinction, reproduction, and reflection. The paper concludes with discussing the implications of the findings for brand community and consumer culture theory.

## THEORY

This study builds upon two ongoing scholarly discourses: Market Cultures Theory on brand communities and European Social-Constructivist Systems Theory, the tenets of which shall be briefly reviewed.

### **Prior Research**

A “brand community” as introduced by Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) is understood as a “specialized, non-geographically bound community, [that is] based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand“ (p. 412). Consumer researchers have investigated the idiosyncrasies of these specialized communities and akin subcultures of consumption in the contexts of vehicles (McAlexander et al. 2002), motorcycles (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), computers (Muñiz and Schau 2005), celebrities (Caldwell and Henry 2004), sports teams (Holt

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<sup>1</sup> HUMMER, HUMMER H1, and HUMMER H2 are registered trademarks of the General Motors Corporation (GM).

1995), television shows (Kozinets 1997, 2001), or temporal servicescapes (Arnould and Price 1993; Peñaloza 2001). Findings reveal that communities around products and services entail various advantages for individual identity projects (Belk 1988; Elliott 1998; Holt 2002), such as social distinctiveness (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), room for social refuge (Kozinets 2001), meaning and spiritualism (Kozinets 2001; Muñiz and Schau 2005; O'Guinn and Belk 1989; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), and opportunities for strengthening family ties (Arnould and Price 1993). Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) offer three markers for structuring the analysis of these particular social relations. Consciousness of kind (Gusfield 1975) embraces intrinsic connections felt among members (Tönnies 1957; Weber 1922) and a “collective sense of difference from others not in the community” (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001, p. 413). The notion comprises oppositional brand loyalty (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001), which elicits the value of threatening economic competition for community coherence. Rituals and traditions “perpetuate the community’s shared history, culture, and consciousness” (p. 413) through celebrations of the brand’s history, sharing of stories, and symbolic behaviors (McCracken 1986). Both consciousness of kind and sense of belonging inspire among members the third marker, introduced as “sense of duty or obligation to the community as a whole, and to its individual members” (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001, p. 413).

The importance for understanding internal brand community processes notwithstanding, the “core community communalities” (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001, p. 413) provide a single-sided and thus incomplete picture of the brand community. Considering the efforts of certain brand communities to differentiate and the empirical presence against them, it is surprising that the particularities of these structural interdependencies between brand communities and their social environments have received so little attention.

## Conceptual Framework

In line with the social-constructivist epistemological tradition in consumer research (cf. Belk 1988; Bonsu, Belk, Mick et al. 2003; Brown 1993; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Giesler and Venkatesh 2005; Hellmann 2003; Holt 2002; Kozinets 2002a; McCracken 1998; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Thompson 2004), systems theoreticians accept that there is no way of creating knowledge other than drawing distinctions (cf. Glasersfeld 2003; Thaler 1985; von Foerster 1979). Knowledge is consequently understood as a result of social construction rather than of positive discovery (Bateson 1967; Varela 1979; Wiener [1948] 1961). Within this epistemology, brands are conceived of as social systems that reproduce their underlying economic, aesthetic, political, and social distinctions through continuous communications (Giesler 2004). Framing not only brands but also brand communities as ongoing communications, or discourses in the sense of Foucault (1972), which establish and maintain the social distinctiveness of admirers of a brand, entails a departure from the core community communalities in three key aspects. First, the discovery of communalities is replaced by the identification of bivalent distinctions (Baecker 2001). The prism of distinctions encourages investigations from multiple perspectives and thus allows for comparing inside and outside constructions of meaning. Second, the existence of shared meaning (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001) and brand identification (McAlexander et al. 2002) as imperatives for community proliferation falls prey to the necessity of ongoing discourses. Thus, quantity and quality of communicative contributions rather than institutional membership or attitudes determine membership and the survival of the community (cf. Luhmann 1995). Third, the initial assumption of community stability (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Kates 2004) is replaced by presumed instability (Holt 1997). Due to human obliviousness (Glasersfeld 2003), social communities are considered to be dependent upon ongoing communicative reproduction rather than being generally persistent. This conceptual framework provides a preliminary



understanding of brand communities as distinctive, dynamic, socially embedded phenomena and thus extends the communalities framework towards the social environments.

## METHOD

This paper provides a multi-perspective account of the HUMMER brand community and its relevant social environments by using an effective combination of phenomenological interviews (Thompson 1997), netnographic data (Kozinets 1998, 2002b), and historical artifacts. The HUMMER vehicles inspire unprecedented amounts of both admiration and opposition among the North American public. As a true “brand community under fire” the HBC does not only attract public interest and sympathy, but also frequent accusations, aggressions, and affronts.

To obtain an overview over central discourses around, and key contributors to the HBC, the Internet was searched for relevant netnographic data such as HUMMER fan- and hate-pages, web-logs, owner clubs, online discussion forums, mailing lists, news reports, and corporate commercials. Salient sources were identified, archived, and continuously monitored over the course of the study. The key contributors inside and outside of the HBC were invited for interview participation — among them, AM General and General Motors marketing staff, HUMMER club celebrity Arnold Schwarzenegger, members of The HUMMER Club Inc.,<sup>2</sup> leading web forum contributors, and the initiators of the most popular HUMMER hate page.

Phenomenological interviews of 50 to 150 minutes in length were conducted with five key informants, all of which were daily HUMMER drivers. Four of them were strongly, one remotely affiliated with the HBC. The interviews provided insights into motivations to own the vehicles,

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<sup>2</sup> At least twelve larger clubs have evolved around HUMMER vehicles in North America. The HUMMER Club Inc. with about 2000 members is the largest registered community and currently the only one that is formally acknowledged and supported by GM and AM General.

into personal consumption experiences, and into the particular ways the community communicates and organizes (Thompson 1997). Outside views on the HBC were studied at the 2005 North American Auto Show in Detroit. 23 interviews of 15 to 25 minutes in length were conducted with 48 informants of Asian-American, African-American, and Caucasian origin. The sample included 31 male, 12 female, and 5 adolescent informants. Respondents were asked about their opinions, feelings, particular relationships and communicative contributions in favor of or against the HBC. About 50% of the respondents tended to generally dislike the vehicle and their drivers. Every person contacted had either seen or driven a HUMMER. Via email, additional netnographic interviews were conducted with prominent antagonists of the HBC that provided rich insights into the key motives of non-members for extensively contributing to the HUMMER discourse. Following Thompson (1997), the transcribed and archived data was continuously analyzed in multiple iterations of hermeneutic interpretation (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). In addition, the contribution of comments and stories was encouraged with postings on the leading web forums. Throughout the project, a research homepage offered a project overview, participant legal information, web links, guestbook, and contact information. This virtual home of the project proved useful for inviting stories and informing interviewees. Table 1 provides an account of the data used for this study.

**TABLE 1**

*DATA SUMMARY*

<u>Data Source</u>	<u>Quantity</u>
Long Interviews	4,5 hrs
Short Interviews	5 hrs
Email Interviews	15 pages
Webforums	40 pages
Homepages	30 pages
News Reports	112 pages
Videos/Ads	40 mins
Pictures	200 pictures
Books	2 books

## FINDINGS

*“At HUMMER our customers can’t be labeled by color, gender or creed. HUMMER is a mindset. A mindset of daring, self-assured, entrepreneurial people who see HUMMER as being a reflection of themselves – unique.” (Randall Foutch, GM)<sup>3</sup>*

*“The [HUMMER] H2 is the ultimate poseur vehicle. It has the chassis of a Chevy Tahoe and a body that looks like the original Hummer; i.e. it's a Chevy Tahoe in disguise. The H2 is a gas guzzler. Because it has a gross vehicle weight rating over 8500 lbs, the US government does not require it to meet federal fuel efficiency regulations. Hummer isn't even required to publish its fuel economy (owners indicate that they get around 10 mpg for normal use). So while our brothers and sisters are off in the Middle East risking their lives to secure America's fossil fuel future, H2 drivers are pissing away our "spoils of victory" during each trip to the grocery store.” (Jason, none, forum)<sup>4</sup>*

These key statements of GM employee Randall Foutch and HUMMER opponent Jason amply illustrate that the HUMMER brand community evolves around an extraordinarily distinct and controversial consumer product. The adapted war vehicle “HUMMER H1” (in the following: H1) and the redesigned sport utility vehicle HUMMER H2 (H2) are appreciated for their safety, capability, and physical appearance, whereas opponents criticize those same properties as dangerous, ecologically irresponsible, and intimidating. Some supporters of the brand communicate their admiration of the “King of off-road” (Tim, n/a, forum) in various personal and mediated forms, whereas some critics voice their dislike in online forums, public demonstrations, driver affronts or even vandalism. In this study, the notion “HUMMER brand community” includes all those contributors who communicate about and socialize around their consumption of

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<sup>3</sup> Except for official corporate statements and news reports, the names and identities of all informants of this study have been concealed, accepting the loss of information. The ownership status of the informant (H1, H2, H1/H2, none, n/a) and the data source (web, forum, interview, email) are indicated.

<sup>4</sup> All informant quotes in this paper are cited in original idiom, including spelling and grammar. Where necessary, clarifications have been added in rectangular brackets.

HUMMER products, whereas the notion of “social environments” embraces all other contributors, reaching from owners who do not socialize, to the uninvolved public, to passionate HUMMER opponents.

This extreme constellation of a brand community under fire holds the opportunity for analyzing how a brand community differentiates, why it attracts opposition, and if and how especially extensive protest influences the community. Using micro-level data within the conceptual framework introduced earlier, this section first delves into the functional, aesthetic, political, and social distinctions that the community uses for differentiation. Then it portrays the community’s ways of reproducing itself within its social environments. Finally, key strategies of reflection are unveiled.

## **Distinction**

HUMMERS are advertised as being “like nothing else” (GM) and thus as providing maximum distinctiveness. All informants of this study readily support this statement, yet for diametrically opposite reasons. This section examines the functional, aesthetic, political, and social distinctions the HBC uses to set itself off from its social environments.

*Functional distinctions* are concerned with the functional utility of HUMMER products. For the HBC and its environments, the distinctions between safety and threat as well as capability and subordination are predominant. HUMMER drivers are convinced they possess the safest consumer vehicle on North American roads. This belief is equally inspired by size and weight as well as by the presumed capabilities of the vehicles. Although most HUMMER owners have never got “off Highway 101 and (...) over Mount Tam” (sfgate.com, 12/29/2002), trust in these characteristics is nevertheless frequently articulated. HUMMERS are, for example, considered to be a “family insurance policy” (ibid.) or even a must for any responsible head of the family.

Consider the statement of HUMMER role model Arnold Schwarzenegger, who owns several H1 and H2 vehicles:

*“ I want a big SUV because I have four children and to protect the family” (A. Schwarzenegger, cited at CNN.com, 09/22/03)*

For non-owners, however, this feeling of safety turns into a feeling of threat, as road-safety is perceived as relative. H2-owner Ray and Stephen, who drove an H1 for the Army, provide reasons for these feelings:

*“Id rather be the one that survives the impact with the small car than the poor schmuck treehugger that i run over. Id rather pay the money for the gas than have to worry about some dumbass in a rice rocket blowing through a light and hitting me in the side.” (Ray, H2, forum).*

*“If you are driving a big truck and got this little Honda civic ahead of you, your first thought is: I am just gonna run him over.” (Stephen, none, interview)*

The other central functional distinction separates capability from subordination. At the national events of The HUMMER Club Inc., the off-road capability of both H1 and H2 vehicles is frequently contested and celebrated. Among the HBC there is little doubt about the superior capability of HUMMERS. In the urban realm, capability and dominance materialize quite differently. Owners like Brian contribute tales of heroic potency that are readily confirmed and criticized by outside contributors like Jason:

*“This weekend will be taking the H2 out to the sticks [...] to get some peace and quiet away from the city and all those tiny, wimpy vehicles that are always getting stuck in my grill and between the little groves in my tires” (Brian, H2, web).*

*“The H2 is a death machine. You'd better hope that you don't collide with an H2 in your economy car. You can kiss your ass goodbye thanks to the H2's massive weight and raised bumpers. Too bad you couldn't afford an urban assault vehicle of your own.” (Jason, none, forum)*

*Aesthetic distinctions* are concerned with positive appeals to human senses (cf. Postrel 2003). The central aesthetic differences cover the range from fascination to intimidation. Surprisingly, the data unveiled that although some informants generally reject HUMMERS, they are nonetheless intrigued by the vehicles' aesthetics. Marc, who has driven a HUMMER once, argues against the vehicle but still cannot conceal his fascination with the H2 over the course of the interview:

*"I've driven one, I don't like it. It's too big. It is very intimidating for people in front of you if you come up very high on behind, they scatter. [Feels like you are saying] get the hell out of the way."* (Marc, none, interview)

HUMMER owners agree that the public feedback they receive on the looks of their vehicles is "99% positive" (Peter, H2, interview). Jonathan reports on this as a positive experience, whereas Nathalie expresses her negative feelings of intimidation and fear:

*"We get waved to by children like we are driving a fire truck. People are constantly asking us to sit in, look in & even feel it."* (Jonathan, H2, email).

*"It's a very intimidating looking vehicle. It's just the size and shape of the vehicle."* (Nathalie, none, interview)

*Political distinctions* mark HUMMER-related communications that revolve around the prevailing distinction of freedom versus responsibility. Occasionally, the HBC also gets involved in various political discourses. When it comes to justifying purchases, the HBC frequently refers to ideals of freedom and the dictum of economic choice.

*"The good thing about marketing economy is that you can vote with your dollars and if I choose to purchase a vehicle that is less efficient ... that is my choice."* (Rick, none, interview)

Opponents vehemently attack owners like Rick for ignoring external effects of their consumption choices. In web forum discussions, participants often draw on cultural resources such as patriotism, national pride, political and local affiliations, job and literacy hierarchies, gender differences, or the Iraq Wars to support their arguments. Characteristic claims are:

“Driving a Gas Guzzler is not patriotic,” bumper stickers like “I drive a... WEAPON OF MASS CONSUMPTION,” or a demonstration billboard saying “Soldiers die in their HUMMERS, so you can play Soldier too!” (Authors unknown, n/a, web).

*Social distinctions* as they are observed and enjoyed by most HUMMER drivers, are deeply embedded in various social discourses, and continuously fueled by numerous contributors. Outside informants Rick and Nathalie summarize the two primary social effects of HUMMERS as “consumption symbols” (Belk 1988, p. 152):

*“Like it or hate it, it gets you noticed.” (Rick, none, interview)*

*“If you see a HUMMER, you automatically don’t think of a lower class individual.” (Nathalie, none, interview)*

In addition to the symbolic effects of perceived functional superiority, aesthetic extravagance, and political affiliation, HUMMER vehicles are associated with cultural stereotypes of masculinity, athleticism, fame, and economic success.<sup>5</sup> These associations are largely fueled by the military heritage, the number and presence of athletes and movie stars driving HUMMERS (ca. 60 celebrities were known in 2004 for driving HUMMERS) and the above-average prices of the products.<sup>6</sup> Arnold Schwarzenegger, the best-known member of the HBC, personifies for most informants these social distinctions of the brand. As Nathalie summarizes: “[I can] picture him being the Terminator coming out of the HUMMER. Totally see those two together” (none, interview).

The HBC uses these social distinctions extensively. Tom (H2, web), for example, impresses potential real estate customers with his H2; the tall blonde H1 driver Susan irritates men (“women will drive by and give me a thumbs up, and guys will mumble and say grrrr, it’s a

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<sup>5</sup> For an account of the underlying American ideology of manhood see Holt and Thompson (2002).

<sup>6</sup> HUMMER H1 vehicles start at \$112,000. H2s begin at \$55,000.

women driving a HUMMER!” (Susan, H1, interview)); Peter (H2, interview) enjoys the attention (“Every time we drive out on the streets we turn heads.”); and Ronny simply likes to show off (“I like taking the kids and wife places and park up front so everyone can see!! That's the best part is when other kids look and hit there moms and dads and say look!! My kids like it tooo!!” (Ronny, H2, web)).

While especially the adolescent informants of this study largely support and enjoy the feeling of social superiority, critics confront the owners with rationalized arguments.

*“According to Bradsher, internal industry market research concluded that S.U.V.s tend to be bought by people who are insecure, vain, self-centered, and self-absorbed, who are frequently nervous about their marriages, and who lack confidence in their driving skills.” (Malcom Gladwell, [www.gladwell.com](http://www.gladwell.com))*

Within the HBC, differences exist about the importance of social distinctiveness. Among the urban H2-fractions of the HBC (approx. 70,000 owners), design and social attention are more likely to be predominant motives for purchase. H1-owners (approx. 10,000) seem to be more attracted by the vehicle’s off-road capability. However, these particularities of the HBC’s social distinctiveness presuppose social environments that pay attention and feed back to the community. In this empirical context, social attention appears to be a given for both sides.

## **Reproduction**

The interpretive framework of this study conceptualizes the aesthetic, political, and social distinctions of the HBC as socially constructed through ongoing discourses. This section details the HBC’s particular communicative means for producing and reproducing these distinctions. Attention is focused on communication and interaction between members as well as communication and interaction with the social environments.

Among its members, the HBC employs personal forms of communication, such as club events, and mediated ones, such as club magazines, web pages, mailing lists, and online forums.



Members of The HUMMER Club Inc., for example, meet for the “Chile Challenge” or the “Death Valley HUMMER Happening” to pursue and share their off-road passion with other members. This is where Muñiz and O’Guinn’s (2001) core community communalities can be observed most readily. As social relationships are the core constituent of the HBC, these events play an important role for reproducing and updating shared meaning, for retaining old members, attracting new ones, and deepening social ties among owners, spouses, friends, children, club board members, representatives of the manufacturers, and guests (cf. McAlexander et al. 2002; Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). In the online realm, sharing knowledge about parts, repairs, tuning, events and off-road tips are predominant communications. Glorious roadside stories that are shared over the Internet contribute to the reproduction of the perceived capability and superiority of the HUMMER vehicles.

Communicating distinctiveness to the social environments is equally central for the HBC. Aside from corporate advertising for the vehicles, HUMMERS have attracted extensive media attention. As of early 2005, HUMMER vehicles have been featured in at least 60 movies, 13 music videos, 40 TV-shows, 12 video games, 6 books and 12 non-GM commercials. Members also personally engage in reproducing a positive image of the HBC. Two varieties of individual contribution are predominant, compensation and exploitation. Members that are concerned with signaling the HBC’s social responsibility frequently use the distinctiveness of and fascination with HUMMER vehicles to support their community. The Rocky Mountain News reports:

*“Volunteers wearing Santa hats with "H2" stitched on them smiled as they drove through Medved’s Wheat Ridge service center to load trunks with toys [that were later given out to needy children].” (Jennifer Miller, Rocky Mountain News, 12/20/2004)*

Similarly, GM and The HUMMER Club Inc. use the vehicles’ distinctive features to promote initiatives like “stars after school,” the environmental organization “Tread Lightly!” and the “Sierra Club.”

Members like Ronny, on the other hand, are instead exclusively interested in supporting their individual identity projects by means of conspicuous consumption. Like Arnold Schwarzenegger, who is quoted saying “I needed a vehicle that matched the expressiveness of my personality” (Padgett 2004, p. 91), many HUMMER owners show off their vehicles to impose style and meaning of their possessions on their own identities (Belk 1988; Holt 2002). The HBC can leverage these efforts, for example, by offering gatherings in public places. Consider this invitation of the H2 Club Chapter New York:

*“East Coast Dinner at NY TIMES SQUARE ... 43rd & 44th @ ABC Studios Bldg. Time: 6:30 pm, Trucks from all over are welcome. With the approval of the NYPD, we're going meet at NY Times Square at 6:30 sharp to meet, compare, and take pictures. About an hour later, the crew will depart to "Tao Asian Bistro" for dinner and fun ... Make sure you bring your cameras!” (H2 Club, Chapter New York, web)*

The social opposition to the HBC reproduces itself as well. Informants agree that opposition usually forms spontaneously on the road but there are also planned events by social activist organizations like “Code Pink” or networks like the “Earth Liberation Front.” In public spaces, HUMMER owners are frequently insulted, yelled at or cut off. Peter, for example, reports that his vehicle was keyed once and spat on several times.

*“I have people yell obscenities and when we come to a four way stop they ... well ... ‘you and your god-damn HUMMER, get out of my way’ ... you know. (...) We get flipped off about once every two weeks.” (Peter, H2, interview)*

Organized protests materialize in street demonstrations such as the “Code Pink” anti-HUMMER demonstrations on Earth Day 2003, where participants produced placards with slogans like “How many lives per gallon?” or “BIG HUMMER little brain” in front of HUMMER dealerships. Testing the extreme, the Earth Liberation Front burned several HUMMERS being displayed at a California dealership and spray-painted slogans such as "Fat, Lazy Americans" (Associated Press, 08/22/03) on the walls.

On the netnographic site, various web pages and online forums invite and communicate H2 protest. A popular hate-page presents more than 1.600 individually submitted and commented photographs of people making obscene gestures at H2 vehicles. The owners of the page recently started selling t-shirts and baseball caps with the web address and a popular picture on them.

In sum, inside and outside of the HBC the two opposing sides reproduce using personal and mediated, spontaneous and organized, online and offline forms of communication. In doing so, each contribution refers to and reproduces the opposite side as well.

## **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity conceptualizes the particular means that social systems employ for making sense of and reacting to inside and outside communications. So far, findings unveil that the fundamental distinctions of off-road capability versus environmental irresponsibility, positive attention versus selfish vanity and social superiority versus excessive overconsumption are used and reproduced by the HBC and its social environments. Data also supports the existence of immediate interaction between the HBC and its social environments. This section explores if and how this interaction affects the HBC.

In spite of high gas expenditures and social protest, the environmental effects of HUMMER consumption are not an issue for the HBC. On the contrary, the HBC considers itself environmentally responsible.

*“We [The HUMMER Club Inc.] have a large percentage of the population with discretionary income. They do what is environmentally correct: join the Nature Conservancy, or the Sierra Club, or Land Trust. (...) ‘I am giving money to these groups, therefore, it’s ok.’” (Susan, H1, interview)*

By displaying environmental consciousness and showing responsible behavior on off-road tracks, the community frames itself as ecologically conscious. In a similar vein, gas-guzzler

accusations against urban drivers are ignored or circumvented with reference to freedom of choice.

*“Peoples’ concerns are that it burns too much gas and it’s bad for the environment. There are a lot of reasons... It’s just a matter of opinion.” (Peter, H2, interview)*

Arnold Schwarzenegger, being harshly criticized during his campaign for backing environmental policies as Governor of California and driving HUMMERS at the same time, reacted in the same fashion. Instead of accepting the argument and parting with his HUMMERS, he chose to support a GM initiative for developing sustainable engines. Followed by the media, he occasionally drives an hydrogen-fueled H2 through California (Padgett 2004).

Partial acceptance of the stigma of selfish vanity inspired HUMMER owners and clubs to engage in charitable activities. Susan (H1, interview), for example, entertains physically challenged children by offering them rides in her H1. Jason (H1/H2, interview) holds guest lectures at a business school to inform prospective leaders about the benefits of the public private partnership of The HUMMER Club Inc., and a Colorado HUMMER dealer cooperates with the Department of Human Services and the Colorado State Foster Parents Association to deliver Christmas gifts to foster children.

Allegations of overconsumption are based on the fact that the HUMMER is a vehicle, which exceeds most customers’ needs. The HBC reacts to these charges in various ways. The program “HUMMER Owners Prepared for Emergency (HOPE),” for example, is a HBC-initiated cooperation which has emerged between The HUMMER Club Inc., GM, and the American Red Cross. HOPE membership legitimates HUMMER owners to provide transportation for Red Cross workers and their supplies to reach emergency sites that “are not accessible with normal vehicles” (Morris 2004). The program has three key impacts on the perceived meanings within the HBC. First, it responds to intimidation allegations by depicting HOPE members as (national)

security supporters rather than as a menace. Second, it signals to the social environments that the vehicles are a useful and necessary enrichment to society rather than an excessive luxury. Third, the program enhances the original distinction of functional superiority by adding altruism and moral superiority to the set of relevant distinctions. HOPE membership constitutes further pride, as owners become entitled to assist the drivers of less capable vehicles in the case of an emergency.

When it comes to reasoning against oppositional communication, the arguments of the HBC are manifold. Usually, the HBC simply frames protests categorically as envy, as there is no other acceptable way of rationalizing certain threats. Consider the following contribution by Jack to an explicitly anti-H2 forum:

*“The shame of all of the "people" who have so much negativity to say about the H2 either are just totally jealous, or can't make enough money to afford one, two or more! Maybe these "people" should not have "Partied" so much in College, if they ever went to college? ... And by the way--Fuck you ALL!! That are Jealous of a Vehicle--Period!!!!” (Jack, H2, forum)*

Another reflexive strategy that was frequently observed in interviews is accusing opponents of insufficient knowledge about the true capability, utility, and gas mileage of HUMMERS. Owners go into passionate defenses of their vehicles.

*“Hey Peter let me just be the first to say (edit) your H2. I don't need it to dog it. I drive an H1 almost everyday. Its called Army. Your hummer is a sissy truck. It is for rich girls that want to feel like they are special and older guys that can't afford the insurance on a Porsche. I flip off everyone I see on the road.” (Cliff, n/a, forum)<sup>7</sup>*

Discussions that emerge from contributions like Cliff's draw on a host of cultural resources, including the Army, slavery, Al Quaeda, or political affiliations. They provide insights into the depths of passion that both sides share about the HUMMER, yet on diametrically opposite sides.

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<sup>7</sup> This submission was edited by the forum administrator.

The existing tensions often result in informants feeling only more rather than less strongly about their HUMMERS. Jonathan summarizes this strengthening effect as follows:

*„People actually try and cut us off on the freeway. We have been cursed at, yelled at, given the thumbs down for "killing children" (not sure what that was about). Six times in the last three months people have tried to steal a parking spot from us when we were waiting first. (...) This only makes me want to drive a Hummer more. Why be like everyone else, when you can make a statement and cause much hooplah everyday!“ (Jonathan, H2, email)*

In summary, the above findings illustrate how the HBC inspires, uses, and reproduces social discourses (cf. McCracken 1986). The community generally reacts with benevolence to positive feedback and often also with demonstrative behavior such as communal show-offs or excessive car tuning. Vis-à-vis its critics, the community reacts in three ways. Arguments that threaten the validity of the HUMMER distinctions are simply ignored. If possible, they are rationalized as to fit the accepted meaning within the community. Some allegations may entail reactions of the HBC, such as participation in social and environmental missions or creation of a program for emergency support. Yet, these reactions do not result in parting with the vehicles but rather in seeking compensation elsewhere. By using a form of mental accounting (Thaler 1985) the HBC clears external costs on one side (driving a HUMMER) with payments on the other (supporting a Hydrogen initiative).

## DISCUSSION

This study explored the role of committed social environments for the HUMMER brand community (HBC). Grounded in a social-constructivist interpretive framework, a multi-perspective study was conducted to explore how the HUMMER brand community and its social environments discursively construct, situate, and legitimate one another.

Adding to existing consumer culture theory on brand communities, findings reveal that a group of shared ideological *distinctions* - such as off-road capability versus environmental

irresponsibility, positive attention versus selfish vanity, and social superiority versus excessive overconsumption - combined with knowledge about which side to favor forms the social foundation of the brand community. These core distinctions provide members and non-members with topics for discussion, reasons to socialize, and meanings to identify with. These distinctions rather than intrinsic communalities initially inspire brand community as well as protest community building. As distinctions are bivalent, critics emerge, refining and making use of the opposite side for organizing protest and taking aim at the community's foundations. By addressing, for instance, the "ultimate off-road vehicle" (GM) as an "ultimate poseur vehicle" (Jason, none, forum), the opposition of the HBC involves the community in an ongoing dispute about the predominant meaning of brand and community.

In its continuous discursive *reproduction*, a brand community considerably depends on, alludes to, draws on, and interacts with its social environments. Theoretically, a community is free to form around any brand (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001), to accept or reject any meaning individuals, marketers, and cultures have to offer (cf. Holt 2002), and to proliferate or dissolve if distinctiveness is lost. Yet by accepting the design, functions, and advertised meanings of a brand, as well as by alluding to the cultural stereotypes of masculinity, athleticism, fame, and economic success, brand communities become dependent on their social environments. Even though the core functional and aesthetic distinctions are inevitably corporate products, a brand community can develop further aesthetic (e.g. tuning), social (e.g. altruism), or political distinctions and thus emancipate itself from marketing influence.<sup>8</sup> In order to maintain these distinctions, a brand community is bound to continuous communicative reproduction within and against its relevant social environments. Internally, the HBC communicates at national events,

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<sup>8</sup> See Muñiz and Schau (2005) for a description of a community that proliferates even though the marketer has long discontinued the product.

during local road-trips, on online web forums, or in member magazines. Vis-à-vis the outside, it consciously triggers both positive feedback and inevitable protest through conspicuous consumption. The study reveals that brand community and social environments construct and strengthen each other and their fundamental distinctions through their ongoing reproductions.

A brand community that builds on strong distinctions cannot escape social attention if the brand is publicly consumed. A brand community employs at least *six discursive strategies* of responding to outside stimuli. Positive feedback is silently consumed, eagerly responded to, or actively reinforced. Oppositional arguments are ignored, rationalized, or recontextualized.

For some parts of the HBC, the extensive positive attention is a core motivation for purchasing a HUMMER and socializing around the product. Some members, who fear that the product's distinctiveness is fading due to its increasing popularity, for example, regain the public momentum by extensively tuning their vehicles or driving in large HUMMER convoys.

In reacting to outside threats, such as affronts, aggressions, and accusations, a brand community may predominantly react in three ways. Outside allegations that are either not of interest for the community or endanger its legitimacy are entirely ignored. The HUMMER-owning mother of young children, for instance, overlooks the allegation of overconsumption. If arguments can be rationalized within the interpretive framework of the core distinctions, the brand community self-referentially reframes opposing arguments to fit the accepted meaning of the community. For example, the HBC often simply frames protests categorically as envy. The most subtle interpretive strategy of a brand community is the recontextualization of accusations. The HBC-initiated cooperation HOPE, for instance, can be theorized as such a recontextualized response. By establishing a cooperation between HUMMER owners and the American Red Cross, the HBC responds to intimidation allegations by depicting HOPE members as (national) security supporters rather than as a menace. It also signals to the social environments that the



vehicles are a useful and necessary enrichment to society rather than an excessive luxury, and enhances the original distinction of functional superiority by adding altruism and moral superiority. Recontextualization strategies are favored when the brand community has no other means of reacting to a relevant outside argument than through remote compensation. Members of the HBC do not give up their vehicles and community affiliation because of opposition, but they can donate to environmental organizations to clear their mental account (Thaler 1985). With these discursive strategies of selective blindness, the brand community reduces social complexity by banning certain interpretations and encouraging others (cf. Glasersfeld 2003; von Foerster 1979).

As part of a larger research project investigating brand communities as social systems, this research has begun to explore the complex relationships between a brand community and its social environments. Yet, more research needs to be done to fully understand the particular influences of distinct product characteristics, marketing efforts, media reports, or social activist groups on brand community success and failure.

In summary, social environments comprise curses and blessings for a brand community under fire. Blessings, as outside sympathies and threats co-create the distinctiveness the community is built upon; and curses, as the social environments also constantly question the validity and social acceptance of the community's foundations.

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