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When totems beget clans: The brand symbol as the defining marker of brand communities

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Abstract

The veneration of brands as part of “brand communities” reflects the expansion of consumerism in advanced capitalism. But what is it about brand communities that set them apart from other community types? It is argued that brand communities differ from other types of communities in one important respect – the community is a secondary, rather than primary, effect of brand community association. In other words, the brand as symbol precedes the emergence of the brand community, rather than the symbol being employed (in a totemic fashion) to represent a pre-existing community as in other types of community. This realization opens the way for understanding the specific dynamics that characterize brand communities, particularly in their relationship with the corporate entities that legally own brands and market the branded products, and also with wider social trends where the brand comes to possess an iconic, mythic significance. It will be argued that, contrary to the recent trend in the brand community literature to view all manner of brand-oriented group activities as examples of brand communities, there are specific features that set brand communities apart from other types of community configurations. As a consequence, some of the examples put forward by analysts as brand communities might have brand community aspects, but are in fact primarily other types of community formations, such as subcultures and hobby groups. It is suggested that brand communities be viewed as a part of a continuum, with some groups according with the ideal type of brand community more than others. This is not merely important for classification purposes, but is important analytically, as it is contended that brand communities have a unique set of dynamics that sets them aside from other types of community formations.

Keywords Brand community, brand identity, symbols, consumer tribes, neotribes

Introduction

The advent of the consumer society was a defining characteristic of the 20th century (Lee, 2000). Advances in mass production enabled consumer goods to stream out of the factories and into the homes of Western consumers. Whether intended by the producers or an unintended consequence, the value of many consumer items came to extend well beyond their perceived functionality, as people became dependent on consumer goods for the realization of their own identities and sense of purpose. While debate continues among postmodern and cultural theorists over the extent that consumerism involves collective meanings and scope for agency (Baudrillard, 1981 [1972]; Fiske, 1989), there has been an emergent phenomenon surrounding consumptive identity that has largely gone unnoticed by social and cultural analysts but less so by marketing analysts – the emergence of new forms of

sociality centered on “brand communities” – where thriving communities of consumers have developed a devotion to certain brands and made those brands the basis of social interactions.

Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001: 4) contend that brand communities offer their members powerful and transformative experiences and a culture with complex rituals, traditions, and behavioral expectations. Similar studies have revealed communities surrounding brand-based consumption of Harley Davidson motorcycles (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001), jeeps (Rosenbaum, 2013), the MG car company (Leigh et al., 2006), magazines (Davidson et al., 2007), Nutella (Cova and Pace, 2006), Warhammer (Cova and White, 2010), CouchSurfing (Cova and White, 2010), Liverpool Football Club (FC) (Pongsakornrunsilp and Schroeder, 2011), and theme parks (Carlson et al., 2008), among others. While some of these groups accord with brand communities in a definitive sense, others may possess aspects of brand community but are not primarily brand communities in themselves. In cases where communities are only partially brand-defined, the brand community perspective may lead to a misleading characterization of its social dynamics.

A central point is that brand communities operate very much as “symbolic” constructions (Cohen, 1985), which is participation characterized by allegiance to brands as symbols. To the extent that participation is based on other factors, such as the enjoyment of fantasy literature (e.g. Harry Potter enthusiasts) or support for a sporting team (e.g. Manchester United and Liverpool FC supporters), the brand community aspect becomes secondary and less important in the social dynamics surrounding the community. While the relevance of symbolic constructions to understanding brand communities has been highlighted previously (Hatch and Schultz, 2008), the manner in which brand communities are a distinct form of symbolic manifestation has not been adequately understood, and as a result, brand communities have not always been properly classified.

Brand communities are symbolically constructed in ways similar to those described by anthropologists like Anthony Cohen (1985) – that is, as collectives that draw on shared symbols as a basis of community-belonging and serve to mark the boundaries of their communities, in much the same way that Emile Durkheim (1965) viewed clans as using collective representations in the form of totems as a basis for unity. However, brand communities are different in important ways. Brand communities are first and foremost symbols around which communities form as a secondary development, in contrast to the way that symbols are typically identified by communities that already exist in some form. This reversal of Cohen’s concept is pivotal to understanding the way brand communities herald unique forms of collectivities that have emerged in contemporary society. With communities forming around symbols, rather than symbols forming around communities, a special kind of consumerist, postmodern identity has emerged where the cultural form (i.e. the symbol), not the collective meanings or sentiments that bind collectivities to those forms, is pre-eminent, allowing a much more fluid, individualistic, and multivocal form of participation in communities than previously seen. This article will attempt to map out the key features of brand communities that make them distinct types of social formations in contrast to other types of community, and what implications such an understanding has in terms of conceptualizing the relationship between brand owners and consumers.

Defining brand communities

Analysts have looked to a range of formulations on community figurations sociological and anthropological literature in their attempts to define what brand communities are. Most of these concepts derive from more recent postmodern concepts of community that emphasize fluid associations and forms of identity. O’Reilly (2012), for example, has attempted to differentiate brand communities from “consumer tribes.” For O’Reilly (2011, 2012), consumer tribes (Cova et al., 2007) relate to Maffesoli’s (1996) concept of the “neotribe,” which are fluid, occasional groups that are

effervescent, ascetic, oriented toward the past or the future; they have as their common characteristic on the one hand, a breaking with the commonly held wisdom and, on the other, an enhancing of the organic aspect of the social aggregation. (Maffesoli, 1996: 96)

These “tribes” have varied life spans that are dependent on the emotional investment of those within it (Maffesoli, 1996: 140). A good example of a neotribe is a nightclub, which is a labile social formation whose membership changes from event to event (Goulding et al., 2002). The concept of “consumer tribes,” such as groups of surfers, gaming communities, and movie fans (e.g. Star Wars or Star Trek), draws from the neotribe concept.

O’Reilly (2012: 342) contends that brand communities have different origins and purposes than consumer tribes. O’Reilly takes Muñiz and O’Guinn’s (2001) lead in contrasting the fluidity of consumer tribes with the relative stability of brand communities. Consumer tribes are not united by the brand but by the passion or emotional tie that concerns the act of consumption (Cova and Cova, 2001, 2002; Cova et al., 2007). However, O’Reilly views the brand as an equivalent of a totem in some consumer tribes, warning that neglecting brands in studying community overlooks a central component of tribal culture (O’Reilly, 2012: 345).

The distinction between the concepts of neotribe and brand community is best understood as the distinction between a social grouping (akin to a tribe) and a cultural grouping (akin to a subculture). In a brand community, members identify with a collectivity even though they may be geographically separated (Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001). The brand community therefore possesses a stability that is not dependent on the continuity of the social groups that form around it. Some of the earlier anthropological formulations on urban identity have relevance to explaining the difference between consumer tribes and brand communities. Harries-Jones (1969: 301–302) distinguishes action sets (a social grouping that forms for a particular purpose) from categories (a network of people who hold some identifying characteristic in common, be it a language, a style of dress, or some other identity marker, but who may or may not directly interact with one another). The brand community can be seen as a social category consisting of consumers who feel united by a common affiliation to brands, while consumer tribes can be seen as the action sets where specific group-based interactions take place, including those that take place within brand communities (e.g. forums and club meets).

Given, then, that brand communities are loose social figurations distinguished by a symbolic marker – namely, the distinctive brand that is venerated by the collectivity – then on what basis can brand community members be distinguished from general brand consumers? For instance, just because someone may enjoy a bottle of Coke, would this person then be considered a member of the Coca-Cola brand community? (O’Reilly, 2011: 244). Hence, a distinction needs to be drawn between brand followers (or enthusiasts) and a brand community. The distinction is between affiliation with a brand (i.e. the brand enthusiast) and affiliation with a community of fellow brand enthusiasts (i.e. the brand community), which constitutes an awareness and belonging to a collectivity. One can be a brand enthusiast without necessarily belonging to a brand community. But one does not normally belong to a brand community unless he or she is a brand enthusiast (that said, there may be participants in brand communities who are not brand enthusiasts, such as motor enthusiasts who show up at a BMW club event).

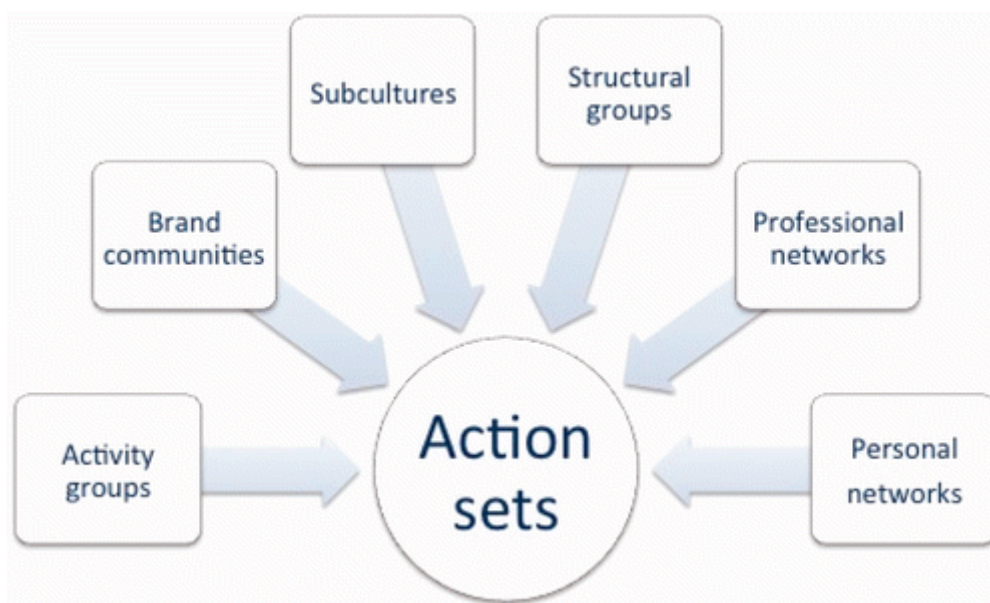
It is the sense of communal identification or belonging that sets brand community “membership” apart from the brand enthusiast. Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) define a brand community as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand” (p. 4). Carlson et al. (2008: 284) note that actual social relations are not as important to defining brand communities as a sense of community, thereby extending the definition to

also include a representation of them as being a physical unbound group, who in the absence of social interaction are informed by a sense of community with likeminded brand admirers. This definition draws attention to what Anderson (1991) refers to as “imagined community,” which relies more on perceptions of togetherness, and not necessarily on actual interactions.

Another definition is offered by Cova and Pace (2006: 1089), who contend that a brand community can refer to groups that possess common interests in specific brands and form a social universe constructed upon their own myths, values, rituals, language, and hierarchy. In this sense, brand communities are not necessarily about social relations or even feelings of community, but a sense of collective affiliation and ownership over shared cultural elements, regardless of whether communal interactions are enacted or collectivity imagined. Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan (2007) emphasize, however, that brand communities are distinct from subcultures, in that the former exists only for the brands that define them. As an example, surfing subcultures could continue to exist as a shared practice without Quiksilver and Rip Curl. In brand communities, however, the brand is central to the interaction, such that if the brand disappeared, so too would the collectivity.

It is best – analytically speaking – to treat brand communities as a distinctive ideal type alongside other forms of categorical identity such as structural groups (e.g. class, gender, age and ethnicity), subcultures, activity enthusiasts, and personal and professional networks. To be sure, there are often overlaps between these social figurations. Surfers, for example, are primarily an activity group, but they also overlap with music subcultures (e.g. alternative, indie) and structural groups (e.g. youth), and are characterized by various personal networks and professional (sporting) networks. Interactions between surfers (i.e. as specific activity-based action sets) may well be based on any one of these affiliations (see Figure 1). The consumer tribes that manifest within brand communities may similarly overlap with other categorical identities. For example, participants at car shows may comprise members of several different car clubs (brand communities), as well as street racers (both a subculture and activity group) and professional networks (e.g. car dealers).

Figure 1. The relationship between categorical identities and action sets.



Attempts to adequately define brand community reflect the challenges that sociologists have faced over many years to define community in general (Bauman, 2001; Delanty, 2003; Gusfield, 1975; Nancy, 1991; Toennies, 1957). In some senses, it can be misleading to refer to brand communities as “communities” at all, if community is associated with notions of “togetherness” and mutual affection that are often implied by the term. But as a synonym of a “collectivity” or “group” defined by a common purpose or a shared categorical identity, the concept of the brand community can be usefully applied if certain unique properties that set these social figurations apart from others (such as neotribes and subcultures) are more precisely understood.

Defining the unique characteristics

Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan’s (2007) emphasis on the primacy of the brand as the basis for brand community association might seem to be a rather obvious point. But it is perhaps because it has been largely taken for granted by analysts that its significance has largely gone unrecognized when it comes to defining the unique characteristics of brand communities and their peculiar dynamics. Indeed, attempts by analysts to ascertain the defining characteristics of brand communities have so far struggled to identify the genuinely unique properties that separate brand communities from other types of social figurations.

In their seminal paper on the brand community concept, Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) note the following characteristics of brand communities. The first characteristic is acceptance of mainstream ideology. They claim that this is what distinguishes a brand community from subcultures of consumption like Harley Davidson motorcycle enthusiasts (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). There is a distinction between Harley Davidson enthusiasts united primarily by brand with motorcycle enthusiasts or even motorcycle “gangs” like the Hell’s Angels that are primarily subcultures in which the Harley Davidson motorcycle is metonymic rather than definitive. A complication exists here, with some brand communities displaying the characteristics of resistance to the mainstream, as Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) appear to recognize with respect to early Apple enthusiasts (i.e. before some Apple products became mainstream).

This notion of resistance has been deeply embedded in the Apple brand – both through the appropriation of consumers and the strategic marketing of Apple. During the early 1980s, Apple founders Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs promoted their products by “creating” media stories that emphasized an alternative, even hippie, style with an anticorporate or antihierarchical stance (Stein, 2002). In contrast, IBM (their main rival at the time) had propagated itself in a standard corporate culture of company rankings and insistence on a uniform corporate look and attitude (Stein, 2002). What followed for over 30 years was the resonance of this idea, or myth of Apple, among consumers, even as the Apple brand has in market terms gone mainstream. In active brand community gatherings found in real life (conferences or product launches) or throughout the Internet, such as Web forums (like those found at <http://www.macnn.com> or <http://macrumors.com>) and social media platforms (including <https://www.facebook.com/fansofapple> and <http://www.reddit.com/r/apple>), a personal, symbolic form of resistance can still be found that is resistant to mainstream products and ideas.

Another distinguishing characteristic noted by Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001), but one that again appears doubtful as a unique property to brand communities, is the way in which members exhibit self-awareness but also an awareness of their community’s relationship to commercial activity (p. 421), to the point where members may acknowledge their membership could be interpreted as a sign of shallowness, fanaticism, or materialism. To the extent that this exists, such a consciousness is not very different to fans of literature, music, and movies, whose interests may be similarly viewed (mostly by outsiders) as trivial.

While some levels of fandom reach pop-culture phenomena status and emerge as brand communities (such as Harry Potter, Twilight, and Hunger Games), the same level of self-awareness and acceptance of commercial practices can be found in subculture communities. Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) suggest the early punk community would not represent a brand community, meaning that 1977 consumers of Vivienne Westwood's punk collection or customers of her SEX store should not have been considered a brand community despite the creators' links with fashion and commercialism. Similarly, similar subcultures such as the straight-edge community consume a number of social and cultural artifacts – music, tattoos (with a particular marker for group membership), and vegetarian food (Haenfler, 2004) – all which are consumed with an acknowledgment of the commercial practice in the pursuit for meaning through subcultural participation. This is distinct from the search for meaning through consumptive practices that emerge within brand communities but displays a similar awareness of the process. The issue then remains that although consumers might be aware of their relationship to commercial activity, fan-determined groups surrounding pop-cultural institutions are in a state of community flux. For example, communities formed on the basis of shared devotion to The Lord of the Rings could be described as consumption communities (maybe), brand communities (not necessarily), literary subcultures (possibly), or fan communities (certainly) depending on any number perspectives or practices that are identified. Attempting to distinguish brand communities through the awareness of members does not help as much as has been suggested, given the overlap of elements of social awareness in other types of communities.

Finally, Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) claim that brand communities are characterized by rituals and traditions (including a consciousness of the history of the brand and the sharing of brand stories), and moral responsibility (to maintain the community and to help others in brand utilization). These aspects, however, are not unique to brand communities. As a result, we are left to wonder what it is that defines brand communities as distinctive in Muñiz and O'Guinn's (2001) typology at all?

More recently, Schau et al. (2009) have outlined 12 common practices associated with brand communities, which are categorized into social networking (welcoming, emphasizing, and governing), impression management (evangelizing and justifying), community engagement (documenting, badging, milestone, and staking), and brand use (customizing, grooming, and commoditizing). Without going into detail on how Schau et al. define these characteristics, suffice to say that they are too broad to serve as a basis for distinguishing brand communities from other types of communities, being common to other communities such as fan communities and activity-based communities (such as shooting clubs).

As a result, Schau et al. end up classifying certain communities as “brand communities” that are clearly not. For example, Schau et al. include fan communities that have developed around rock groups (they use the example of Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers) and television shows (their example being *Xena: Warrior Princess*) as brand communities. While well-known musical acts and television shows certainly have brand power, they are primarily fan communities rather than brand communities – the brand community aspect being minor at best. This is particularly evident in youth cultures where experiences of music are often an essential component in developing individual and collective identity – often considered subcultural (Frith, 1996). Fans are primarily drawn to a rock band, pop singer, movie, or television series because of the creative content. *Xena: Warrior Princess*, for example, primarily appealed to fans because of the fantasy content of the show (a bricolage of classical/medieval revivalism), the sex-appeal and gender interchangeability of its leading characters (Bryan, 2005 [1998]), and the perceived quality of the series production and story, all of which relate to the content of *Xena* as an artistic creation not to *Xena* as a brand symbol. The fact that *Xena* has acquired market brandability is a secondary effect.

There is only one characteristic that essentially distinguishes a brand community from other types of community – the commitment to a brand as the pre-eminent basis for association. First and foremost,

brand communities center around a “brand,” which is fundamentally a symbolic artifact, being either a linguistic marker (i.e. the brand name), a visual marker (i.e. a logo), or a style (i.e. the product design). As multivocal symbols (Turner, 1967), brands become a collective resource and “repository of meaning” and a “referent of their identity” (Cohen, 1985: 118).

The similarities between brand communities and Anthony Cohen’s concept of symbolically constructed communities are worth highlighting in this respect, even though brand communities subvert the function of symbols as totemic representations of social figurations as posited by Durkheim. Cohen understands community as a collection of people possessing a shared sentiment toward their unity (which Cohen refers to as “belonging”) by means of common practices, language, and experiences (understood as symbols) that separate them from other “communities.” Symbols of community might include rituals, iconic activities, language, or values. A war memorial, for example, is not merely a symbol *used* by the community to signify the sacrifice made by the fallen, but is a representation of the community itself (marking a community that remembers, that grieves together, and honors its members). These symbols are shared in form, but not necessarily in meaning, and are multivocal in that community members may interpret them differently, attaching their own affective meanings to the symbols. The symbols serve as boundary markers, thereby distinguishing one community from another by way of difference, even opposition.

Brand communities operate in a similar way in that they employ shared cultural markers (in the form of the brand) that define a common affiliation for the collectivity that forms around the brand. Brand communities are also defined in contrast, or opposition, to other brands (Apple vs Microsoft, Ferrari vs Porsche, and so on). They are multivocal in the sense that members of the brand community attach different meanings to those brands, such as myths (e.g. techno-utopianism), values (entrepreneurial success), and sentiments (e.g. supporting the underdog, or desire for a status symbol) that are drawn from wider cultural trends (Holt, 2004, 2006). However, as already highlighted, brand communities operate differently from the way envisaged by Cohen, in that brands as symbols precede the experience of community, with community being very much a secondary, rather than primary, effect. To put it simply, if the brand ceased to be, so would the community. The community will not seek to find another brand should the brand disappear (although individual members might) – it will simply fade into oblivion or else possibly become a heritage community (such as vintage car enthusiasts) that lives on as a celebration of the brands of bygone eras.

As an example, if Harley Davidson Inc. closed down and all existing models were destroyed (perhaps not an entirely preposterous scenario in light of Queensland’s new anti-“bikie” laws in Australia, which permit the confiscation and crushing of motorcycles if members attend unauthorized gatherings of more than three bikies), then would outlaw motorcycle clubs disband? This is unlikely, given that members can build or purchase other cruiser motorcycle brands (such as Indian and Triumph), which already have an established history of use (albeit marginal) by members. If, on the other hand, Apple folded (as unlikely as that might be right now for the world’s largest company), then the Mac forums would likely disappear too. Participants might become consumers of other information technology (IT) brands, but it is unlikely that they would interact as part of a brand community centered on those brands, as the symbolic power of other IT brands is not powerful enough to garner a devoted following.

This hypothetical test, what we dub the “absence test,” need not be entirely speculative, as it can be gauged through an empirical understanding of what unites members of communities. Outlaw motorcycle clubs like the Hell’s Angels and Banditos do not specify ownership of a Harley Davidson as a basis for membership (the Hell’s Angels, for example, stipulate only a 750cc+ motorcycle), in the same way that Doc Marten’s are not definitive for being a skinhead, which indicates the noncentrality of the brand to their collective identity. If one were to ask members if they would accept another

member if they did not possess the branded object in question, then it would be possible to get an empirical verification of the strength of the brand community component.

Another case to illustrate this is the Lomography community, which is an experimental artistic movement that emerged around the unusual visual style associated with photographic images produced by the Lomo camera. The lens of this Russian-made analog camera produces images that have somewhat saturated colors and distorted, blurred effects. In 1991, a group of Viennese students formed a society centered on experimentation with Lomo cameras, and in 1995 Lomographische AG, a commercial company set up to cater to the Lomographic community, signed an exclusive distribution agreement with the Russian-based manufacturer to supply Lomo cameras outside of the former Soviet Union.

However, Lomographische AG also manufactures its own analog cameras, such as the La Sardina, Konstruktor, Belair, and Diana+ range. The Diana+ camera is a re-release of the Diana cameras that were manufactured in Hong Kong in the early 1960s. Use of any of these cameras is sufficient for identifying oneself with the Lomography community, and so Lomography fails the basis test for being considered a brand community, given the certainty that if the Lomo camera ceased to exist, Lomography would carry on as a community regardless, centered around its unique style of experimental photographic techniques rather than the brand per se. While Lomo cameras became *iconic* of experimental analog cameras and inspired the name for the artistic movement, the Lomo brand is not fundamental to the identity of its members, whose primary interest is the style of the photographic images produced by this type of camera, not the brand itself.

A complication in applying the absence test is that with some communities, it is difficult to separate the brand component from the other elements that unite members, such as narrative elements that immerse fans in a fictional universe (like *Xena* fans or Trekkies), or the appeal of the product itself (such as Nutella). It is not possible in these cases to apply the absence test. A second test is therefore required, which we dub the diversification test, which all brand communities must also pass in order to qualify as a definitive brand community. The diversification test is as follows: if a company or franchise manufactures a product that is different in essential qualities, would admirers of the new product be accepted into the “parent” community? If yes, then the group might qualify as a brand community (we can only say “might,” because the diversification test measures brand loyalty not brand community, although brand loyalty is a prerequisite for brand community).

So with the Mac forums, users of any of Apple’s diverse range of products (such as iPhones and iPads) are welcome to participate, and hence it fits the criteria of a brand community (although to the extent that the Apple brand is still anchored to IT products, it is not completely a brand community). If Manchester United ventured into sports other than football, would the current fans accommodate fans of the other sporting codes as well? If the producers of *Xena* developed a new series where *Xena* teleported into 21st-century New York and adopted a modern-day lifestyle, would there be a crossover between fans of the new show with fans of the old show? In other words, does the brand following transcend the specific product associated with it? If it does not, then the product itself is more central than the brand, in which case the community does not function primarily as a brand community at all, but rather an activity-based group centered on a particular product.

Like the absence test, the diversification test will often be hypothetical rather than empirical. Companies generally avoid diversifying their brands if they feel that there is a high chance of failure, and hence the cases must often be surmised hypothetically where a group would fail the diversification test. For example, Manchester United understands the limit of its brand power, and apart from souvenirs and clothing ranges that are part and parcel of football fandom, the club has not ventured into areas that extend beyond its football base. To be certain, we could survey Manchester United supporters to ascertain whether they would perceive themselves to have more in common with, say, Leeds United supporters than supporters of a hypothetical Manchester United Formula One team.

As it is unlikely that they would, it casts a measure of doubt over its primary status as a brand community.

This is not to understate the importance of the brand community aspects of Manchester United supporters. Although Manchester United historically emerged as a fan-based sporting team, it has certainly evolved into an international brand that is now indistinguishable as a sporting club/brand community. The Manchester United brand now extends beyond the football team to encompass a television station (Manchester United Television (MUTV)), club merchandise, soccer schools, a Theatre of Dreams leisure complex in Hong Kong, and the incorporation of other brands (or vice-versa) within the Manchester United brand, including at various times Nike, Carlsberg, and Vodafone (Hill and Vincent, 2006). The club has certainly endeavored to diversify its brand power to the fullest extent possible. But this diversification does not stray from its football base. Consequently, to understand Manchester United as a brand community would be too limiting, because Manchester United continues to operate primarily as a sports club that is subject to the dynamics that affect other sport clubs as well.

In this respect, it is important to realize that brand communities are a subset of consumption-based groups of enthusiasts that coalesce around particular activities or product uses, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Relationship between activity enthusiasts and brand communities.



To the extent that a community can transcend its activity base and rely on its brand power alone, then we are dealing with a brand community proper, rather than an activity-based community with merely a brand component. The brand community devoted to Apple's Mac computer and software range is a subset of Apple brand enthusiasts, who in turn are a subset of computing enthusiasts. However, the Apple brand community that was once solely focused on computers has transcended its computer base to incorporate enthusiasts across a whole range of Apple product streams. Apple could theoretically venture into new markets (say, televisions or game consoles), and its members would probably feel more in common with these consumers than, say, Microsoft users. Whether Apple could venture into non-IT products and successfully carry brand community members along with it, however, is questionable, and therein lies its limits in its status as a brand community (for the historical present at least). One day, we might witness the emergence of a true brand community, where branding alone – rather than the activity or product base – defines membership.

The primacy of the brand over the community in brand communities has certain implications in terms of how brand communities operate, which distinguish them from other community figurations. First, it elevates the role of the companies and their marketing teams as agents in the genesis and, sometimes, maintenance of brand communities in ways not normally found in other types of communities (which is why marketing and business researchers, not just anthropologists and sociologists, have a special contribution to make to understanding how brand communities operate). In groups where the brand community aspect is not all that pronounced (say, outlaw motorcycle gangs or Skinheads), the relationship between consumers and the brand company is not generally strong.

In such cases, the companies are often more at the mercy of the wider cultural or subcultural processes that their brand is positioned within. Holt (2004, 2006) highlights that brands are enduring cultural symbols through which consumers express collective identities and meanings within particular local, national, or global discourses. Thus, brands hold a strong relationship with the products they represent, but they perform this role while also being symbols of dominant ideologies, ideas, and core values of the society in which they thrive (Holt, 2004). This relationship between product, society, and consumers generates what Holt (2004) refers to as brand identity myths controlled by those who do not produce the products. These myths can change at any time, and corporations may find that the brand image they have been heavily promoting quickly becomes discordant with the brand identity that consumers desire. This is particularly true with brands positioned within popular culture, although less so with those positioned with marginal subcultures, which tend to be more enduring.

In more pronounced brand communities, however, the relationship between the brand companies and the consumers is more symbiotic and tends more toward mutual dependence. While the notion of brand communities being a partnership or “co-creation” is not new (Schau et al., 2009), when understood in terms of the dynamics by which brand communities are symbolically constructed, it has certain implications that are important to consider. The key issue is the locus of power in controlling the form and boundaries of the brand community, which, in a co-creative situation, is being forged from two different directions. The growth in Apple to market dominance in several of its product lines (namely, iPods, smart phones, and tablets) shall suffice as a relevant case study to illustrate this bi-directional contouring dynamic.

When Apple decided to push into the broader IT market (first, through their iPod music player, then iPhones and iPads), they adjusted their marketing campaign to appeal to a broader cultural mainstream. The “Think Different” slogan of the early 2000s, which emphasized resistance through the association with images of Cesar Chavez, Malcolm X, and the Dalai Lama, shifted to the Get a Mac slogan (2006–2009) with “I'm a Mac” advertisements in the United States, whereby Hollywood actor Justin Long personified Mac as a young, hip, and cool alternative to John Hodgman's “nerdy” personal computer (PC)/Windows. The success of the Apple corporation in marketing Apple products

to mainstream consumers forced the brand community, which had long been constructed by its members as something of a resistance movement, to accept its dominant, mainstream status. In the shift toward the mainstream and popularism, the Apple brand community has remained intact by continuing to connect with the products the company releases despite the increasing diversity of products offered by the brand. For example, the Apple iPhone has been embraced by devoted members of the Apple brand community while also being popular among a range of other consumers, including those seeking technological innovation, social positioning, and hedonic experiences of new products (Arruda-Filho and Lennon, 2011).

Such a renegotiation would not be entertained by, say, outlaw bikers or skinheads, who have maintained their oppositional values regardless of shifts in the market status of Harley Davidsons and Doc Martens. Hence, even as Harley Davidson devotees formed their own motorcycle clubs, and even as Doc Martens became a feminine fashion item and a symbol of Gothic punk culture, outlaw bikers and skinheads simply carried on employing the brands as symbols of rebelliousness and toughness in the context of their subcultural orientations.

When we look at other types of community formations, we see other dynamics at play in addition to the brand community aspects. For example, the strength of the Manchester United fan base is tied to the on-field success of the Manchester United FC, much like it is with other sporting clubs. While the marketing of the Manchester United brand by club promoters and strategic partnerships with other major brand companies like Nike have done much to raise the profile of the Manchester United sporting brand (and its share price as well), one wonders how much its branding power would be retained if its on-field success declined for any sustained period of time, or if emerging football competitions in other countries presented alternative successful clubs for overseas fans to embrace (Kharpal and Bishop, 2013). While the on-field success of FCs and the commercial success of corporations are analogous in many respects, sports fan communities are characterized by a distinctive dynamics that center around the players, managers, ranking systems, rival teams, trades, and, above all, the match events themselves, that go well beyond the brand component. Any brand community analysis of these groups that fails to take into account the additional dynamics will mischaracterize the way these communities operate. To refer to them as “brand communities” can therefore be misleading.

Conclusion

The emergence of brand communities marks a shift toward symbols as central definers of community, rather than as mere representations of community. This characteristic defines brand communities as distinct from fan communities, religious groups, subcultures, and other types of communities in terms of the centrality of the brand symbol to communal affiliation over and above particular sets of norms, values, beliefs, practices, and other interactional patterns. It also differentiates brand communities from neotribes and consumption tribes, as social interaction is a secondary manifestation in brand communities rather than the primary basis for affiliation.

The brand as symbol sets up a special dynamic in brand communities, which detaches itself from the logic of production to the logic of consumption. Hence, while fans of *Xena: The Warrior Princess* were primarily interested in the content of the show and the mythic reality it portrayed, BMW owners are primarily interested in the distinctiveness of the brand and the status associated with this, which in turn become the basis for participation in the BMW brand community and the various car clubs and discussion forums that have emerged within it.

It is important to keep in mind that a brand community is fundamentally an ideal type (in the Weberian sense) and, in actuality, tends to overlap with other types of social figurations. However, analysts need to have a solid grasp of which figurations predominate within groups, as groups that

primarily operate as brand communities have a different orientation to the brand as symbol that sets it apart from other types of social figurations.

In some cases, then, so-called brand communities are in fact predominantly other types of community, such as subcultures or sporting clubs, where the brand is merely an accessory or an incidental element rather than the core defining element. In these cases, to describe these groups as “brand communities” is to misunderstand the elements that define and sustain these groups.

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