

Consumption communities. Critical review and theoretical implications beyond marketing

Abstract

Since the mid-'90s, marketing and consumer researchers have addressed the role of social relationships in consumption. Individual consumers were observed "as if" they were part of more complex networks, the specific characteristics of which were not only related to culture, religion, class, etc., but were also intrinsic to the dimension of consumption. This means that consumption collectives were defined as forms of social aggregations that depend on the consumerist nature of the practices and relationships they undergo: these are referred to as consumption communities (CC). The first and most cited theorizations of CCs were sub-cultures of consumption (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), consumer tribes (Cova, 1997; Cova & Cova, 2001), and brand communities (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). Since the beginning of the 2000s, a growing body of literature developed from these initial theorizations. It (a) expanded in terms of the number and variety of typologies and conditions in which CCs develop and (b) adapted its theoretical assessment of CCs as the context changed. Depending on digitalization, the advent of social networks, and consumer empowerment, the theorization of CCs also evolved. In this paper, I will review this literature, aiming to describe how CCs have been theorized over the last 20 years, which typologies have emerged from the literature, how different theoretical and epistemological approaches have developed, and how they have occasionally challenged each other. Most importantly, this paper aims to contribute to a more effective exploitation of the potential contributions of this literature, primarily grounded in marketing and consumer research, in a broader theoretical domain, specifically in organization and management. **Keywords:** consumption communities, consumer tribes, sub-cultures of consumption, brand communities **Track:** Consumer behavior and marketing research

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Introduction

Marketing and consumer researchers addressed the collective dimension of consumption many years ago. Some examples include Wallendorf & Reilly (1983), Reilly & Wallendorf (1987), Wallendorf & Arnould (1991), Arnould & Price (1993), Celsi, Rose, & Leigh (1993), McGrath, Sherry JR, Heisley (1993), Belk & Costa (1998). However, this literature did not explicitly recognize consumption communities (or any other definition) as a specific unit of analysis.

The papers that did so and are commonly considered as precursors of this stream of research are Schouten & McAlexander (1995), Cova (1997), and Muñiz & O'Guinn (2001). These papers describe sub-cultures of consumption, consumer tribes, and brand communities, respectively. There are differences in these "constructs," but they have often been considered together as examples or prototypes of consumption communities (Canniford, 2011a; 2011b; Chalmers Thomas et al., 2013). These papers are rooted in sociological studies: while Schouten & McAlexander (1995) rely on deviance research, Muñiz & O'Guinn (2001) recognize the sociology of consumption as their main reference point. Cova (1997) is strongly rooted in Maffesoli's neo-tribalism and post-modern thinking (Firat, Venkatesh, 1995). These collectives are considered specific to consumption because they provide their members with consumption-related resources (practices, goods, brands, knowledge, etc.) that deliver "linking value" (Cova, 1997). Linking value does not derive from the utility or intrinsic value of these resources but comes from the social bonds that are activated by

these resources. A brand carries linking value as it enables consumers to feel connected to other like-minded individuals.

The reason for this paper is that there are a very few lit reviews in this field and most of them are not comprehensive nor they address this phenomenon as a whole: Canniford (2011b) reviews the three original typologies as in Canniford (2011a); Stokburger-Sauer and Wiertz (2015) and Arnould, Arvidsson, & Eckhardt (2021) are introductory essays in special issues; Bhattacharjee, Pradhan, & Swani (2021) is about brand communities and Chandrasapth, Yannopoulou, Schoefer, et al. (2021) is about conflict in online consumption communities.

A brief lit review will follow as it is constrained by the size limit and then discussion and implications.

Literature

These early examples were theoretically and empirically grounded on the assumption that consumption communities were comprised of a) individuals and b) relationships between these individuals, regardless of whether they were physically close to each other. Many communities developed globally, and their members felt like they were a part of them even if they did not know each other personally.

During the 2000s, the object of this research was labeled in many ways: marketplace cultures (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), new consumption communities (Bekin, Carrigan, & Szmigin, 2005), consumer crowds (Kozinets, Hemetsberger, & Schau, 2008), consumption communities (Chalmers Thomas, Price, & Schau, 2013), brand publics (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016), consumer collectives (Arnould et al., 2021). Most of these theorizations share two important elements: consumption communities have to do with a) consumption and b) markets. In practice, they are made up of people who buy things on the market and then use them for their own satisfaction. CCT scholars published several studies in which they demonstrated that the value that consumers get from these activities is not carried by products and services but is actively produced and reproduced by consumers at the personal, collective, and cultural levels.

Data were collected on bikers (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), surfers (Canniford, Shankar, 2013), online skaters (Cova & Cova, 2001), off-road drivers (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002), collectors (Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006), cosplayers (Seregina & Weijo, 2017) to demonstrate how and why they participate in processes of value creation. We see that sometimes communities become critical and destroy value (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004) and/or they allow consumers to escape from the market (Kozinets, 2002a; Bekin, Carrigan, & Szmigin, 2005). They also become digital (Kozinets, 2002b) and, more recently, they have begun to interact with physical and digital objects, as well as with other resources such as information and platforms, etc. In certain conditions, consumption communities transform into entrepreneurial entities (Guercini & Cova, 2018; Mamali, Nuttall, & Shankar, 2018) and/or integrate with social networks and web platforms (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016; Hoffman & Novak, 2018; Perren & Kozinets, 2018; Kozinets, Ferreira, & Chimenti, 2021). Finally, some scholars represented the way in which communities emerge differently from earlier studies (Hill, Canniford, & Eckhardt, 2021), while others questioned the ontological essence of communities (Zwick & Bradshaw, 2016).

Discussion

Ordinary, physical, and actual social processes (e.g., Leigh et al., 2006) were the most common contexts in which marketing and consumer research directed their attention, providing companies and professionals with managerial insights regarding how these social groups influence their value creation processes (Schau et al., 2009). These studies still rely on the (often implicit) assumption that a CC is composed of individuals interacting with each other. As a corollary, even if only temporarily or part-time, these collectives are defined as groups of people.

Due to the work of Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) and, more generally, the recognition of substantial changes occurring in the social media context, a different approach emerged: consumption communities can also be something between collectives and individuals. Brand publics are not solely composed of individuals and can be described as flows of affect taking the form of posts, likes, etc., detached from the people who originated the social media traces that constitute them. In this sense, brand publics lie between the individual and the collective.

In parallel, other authors developed a more market-oriented conceptualization of consumption communities: consumer-constructed organizations are hybrid organizations (Mamali et al., 2018) or forms of unconventional entrepreneurship (Guercini & Cova, 2018). They exemplify the capacity of consumers (as collectives) to directly enter the competitive arena as alternatives to traditional companies. Consumer-constructed organizations are formally and substantially defined as institutional forms, comprising real people, that traverse the boundary of the market from the demand side toward the supply side, challenging the traditional role played by private companies. Furthermore, thanks to actor-network and assemblage theories (Canniford & Bajde, 2015), research on consumption communities is entering a new and thought-provoking phase. From this perspective, these communities cannot be defined unless given a specific context, period, and constellation of individuals and processes. Additionally, animated and unanimated components must be considered to effectively describe how these collectives come into existence and operate (Diaz-Ruiz et al., 2020; Morgan-Thomas et al., 2020). Consequently, consumption communities can now be framed as temporary, contingent, and flexible constellations of individuals, institutions, and objects.

The following questions appear to be particularly pressing considering recent developments in this literature and the substantial changes occurring in the society and the market:

- Context-dependence, ephemerality, and multiplicity: As researchers, how should we conceptualize the ephemeral nature of communities? Is context-dependence something that should be considered in the theoretical definition of consumption communities? Consumers participate in several communities, and their commitment varies significantly among them. How does this variation affect the way in which we define them?
- People and objects: How do consumers interact with objects that mediate between them and the communal resources they are interested in? How do these "objects" participate in consumption communities? Are there any systemic properties of consumption communities that depend on the role of modern IoT types of objects and resources? What about the role of platforms in shaping communal relationships and the relationships between consumption communities and the marketplace?
- Ontology and epistemology: Do consumers experience consumption communities "as if" they exist in ontological terms? How can we, as scholars, theoretically define consumption communities and provide the necessary analytical tools for their empirical analysis? Is "community" still an acceptable term for theoretically identifying emerging forms of consumption communities in which individuals and human relations matter less and less, while technology, physical and digital devices, software, AI, and the like assume a prominent, if not a driving, role?

To address these questions, it is necessary to consider some of the long-term issues raised by several contributors in the field of CC research. Among other issues, I identify the following key points:

1. Society and the Market: Markets are strongly affected by social structures and processes, making it impossible to summarize the literature in this context. Regarding CCs, marketing and consumer research scholars have identified conditions in which societal arrangements

can be designed or managed to "facilitate" market(ing) processes (McAlexander et al., 2002; Schau et al., 2009). Others have highlighted the contrary perspective, involving antagonism, anti-market attitudes, and market escape (Kozinets, 2002a; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). In general, this literature explores the dialectic relationship between social and market forces and the possibility of integrating them under specific circumstances (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007).

2. Interpretivism vs. Positivism: The CC literature begins with interpretive studies and soon gains attention from positivist scholars (Dholakia et al., 2004; Algesheimer et al., 2005, 2010; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Zhu et al., 2012). Depending on the context, scale of analysis, and research objectives, it is necessary to adopt one of the two epistemological stances, with little room for integration or mixed positioning. This is a topic that needs further discussion and consideration.
3. Individual, Meta/Virtual, Collective (Micro and Macro): The study of communities requires decisions about the scale of analysis and related issues. Communities can be observed in their micro dimension (Leigh et al., 2006), such as when examining direct one-to-one relationships between members. Simultaneously, communities also exhibit a macro dimension (Kozinets, 2002b; Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016), for example, when consumers worldwide identify with a brand, a rock star, or a counter-cultural movement. Furthermore, in addition to the micro-macro scale issue, CCs have been described as dynamic and ever-changing objects of analysis that deviate from the traditional consumption domain and move towards the institutional and entrepreneurial realms. Communities acquire an active role in market processes, sometimes mimicking actual companies (Guercini & Cova, 2018; Mamali et al., 2018). Moreover, they are increasingly integrated into complex digital ecosystems in which they and their members interact with platforms, social networks, and devices (Diaz Ruiz et al., 2020; Morgan-Thomas et al., 2020).

Much has been written about these issues, and yet some work is necessary to better understand current challenges in CC research as the context evolves into new and unforeseen scenarios. Moreover, further effort appears necessary to fully exploit the potential of CC research not only in marketing and consumer research but, more importantly, in other disciplinary areas such as management, strategy, and innovation.

At present, no contributions from marketing and consumer researchers appear in journals beyond those related to marketing or consumption, even though the topic seems interesting, as suggested by Porter & Donthu (2008) in *Management Science*, Fosfuri et al. (2015, 2016) in *Organization Science*, and the *Strategic Management Journal*.

Promising avenues for contributions like these could be found in the following topic areas:

- Categories: How market or sector categories develop over time and the role of consumption communities in institutional terms. See the special issue edited by Delmestri et al. (2020) in *Organization Studies*.
- Hybrids: Hybrid organizational forms have been theorized and empirically analyzed at the crossroads between entrepreneurship studies and the sociology of markets (Shepherd et al., 2019). Interesting opportunities emerge for those who study CCs in their progress toward market engagement.
- Institutional Theory: In general, the role of CCs has not been considered in institutional terms, except sporadically in non-marketing journals. In fact, based on the marketing literature, CCs matter in institutional terms, as they parallel companies, public agencies, and other institutional forms. Following Shepherd et al. (2022), it is possible to position their role in a growing theoretical field and appears open to interdisciplinary contributions.

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