

The Significance of Meaning in Online Consumer Communities

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Introduction

The concept of community possesses a strong attraction for individuals. It connotes a connectedness that appeals to our social nature. When we think of community, we think of individuals living amidst each other, communicating, relating, learning, and helping. Community also possesses a nostalgic quality that harks back to what we - in our twenty-first century society - might consider "simpler times" (Barthel 1990; Francaviglia and Franklin 1996). There can be little wonder why the idea of community transferred so easily from the physical village of our forebears to the online space of our current time.

To understand how the concept of community has evolved and been reinterpreted in the online world, we need a specific theoretical and methodological toolset. As a social science, anthropology is uniquely situated to study and understand community and how it has evolved in the last twenty-five years as both a physical and virtual construct. Anthropological methodologies provide an appropriate way to investigate the "cross-cultural, multileveled, and multi-sited phenomena; emerging constructions of individual and collective identity; and the culturally embedded nature of emerging communicative and social practices" (Wilson and Peterson 2002).

Over the past decade, businesses have started to embrace the marketing and customer service opportunities available through online communities. For-profit companies now understand that online communities are an effective method for building relationships with their customers. The consumer community is focused on specific topics around a company's products or services and is designed to lead to increased purchases (Bickart and Schindler 2001). The reality is that individuals have long consulted their personal networks for recommendations on particular products and services. However, these recommendations were maintained offline and shared among a small group. With online consumer communities, companies have access to immediate and insightful consumer-to-consumer interactions (Curien et al. 2004).

The findings in the paper highlight some of the reasons why individuals may choose to participate in these online consumer communities. It goes further to suggest that a central reason for this participation is intertwined in the individual's continual search for meaning. To explore the various rationales behind these actions, we turn to interpretive theory, an approach that is tuned to uncovering the multiple layers of meaning through exhibited behavior.

The strength of an interpretative approach is its ability to unravel complex conceptual structures. It begins with observing that actions of participating individuals (Keyes 2002), which may appear to be challenging in an online medium. However, marketing researchers such as Kozinets argues that the online space offers an argument that online ethnography (he calls it "Netnography") is more naturalistic and unobtrusive than offline focus groups or interviews (Kozinets 2002). By delving into the behaviors of online community members, we gain "information on the symbolism, meanings, and consumption patterns of online consumer groups" (Kozinets 2002).

This remains compatible with the interpretive approach advocated by Geertz who believed any formulation of a symbol system must be actor-oriented. What lies behind Geertz's "thick description" is an action can take on multiple interpretations, each with deeper levels of meaning depending on the context. The role of the ethnographer is to unravel these actions and construct an analysis that sorts out the structures of significance and determines their social importance (Geertz 1973).

Layout of Paper

There is a rich history of research into traditional communities from the small village to the sprawl of the modern metropolis. With the advent of the internet, social research has not quite caught up to the new usages of community that have arisen in the past thirty years. This paper will not be so ambitious as to fill the gap, but modestly aims to add a valuable introductory perspective to both anthropology and the business world. This exploration will consist of two parts. The first section explores the nature of communities and the relationships between the online and offline versions. We'll investigate the multiple definitions of community and why this concept has been difficult to isolate. The second section will explore the constructs that form symbols of community behavior. It will focus on these four particular constructs: boundaries, identity, participation, and knowledge.

The Character of Communities

What exactly is a community? Why have businesses gravitated toward constructing these online versions? A popular connection made with the online community is to compare it to the offline world as the neighborhood. Neighborhoods can be characterized as tightly bounded, densely knit groups of broadly based ties. We think of the rural conceptualization of a village or the local neighborhood situated within the urban city where individuals share a sufficient level of public trust to provide social services and support and facilitate commerce transactions. Yet, does this accurately define the contemporary reality of community as a construct? Wellman presents a different view based on work in social network analysis. Since the 1970s, community has evolved in both offline and online areas and can be characterized as loosely bounded, sparsely knit, and highly specialized (Wellman 1999). This presents a different representation that matches some of the interpretations commonly used today (consider the use of such concepts as professional community and religious community). Individuals now freely participate in communities not necessarily contained within one geographic area and yet highly contained by shared specialized interests. It is a radical and important shift in how individuals interpret their participation in community.

Anthropology has been tasked in dealing with many amorphous concepts that lack a ready, and often universally accepted, definition. Like culture, community is such a term. Does This is all the reason to adopt an interpretive approach since its primary objective is to understand individual conceptualization. Preece and Maloney-Krichmar suggest that rather than try to provide one universal definition of community, it is more productive to accept community's inherent fuzzy boundaries and allow for each community's

membership to define itself. “This can be done by noting the similarities and differences of each new member and comparing them with the characteristics of members who are regarded as being within the community” (Preece and Maloney-Krichmar 2005).

[Division between online and offline] Another issue is the degree of “reality” that online communities possess compared to offline or traditional communities. This overstates the physicality of human relationships and largely ignores the basic principles underlying relationships. There is nothing “virtual” about online communities as Kozinet asserts that the term virtual “might misleadingly imply that these communities are less 'real' than physical communities. These social groups have a 'real' existence for their participants, and thus have consequential effects on many aspects of behavior, including consumer behavior” (Kozinets 2002).

Further, many online communities rarely exist only online. Increasingly, there are examples of these online communities branching into offline groups. Individuals participating in online social networks regularly schedule informal meetings at local establishments as a way to transfer the online community to a face-to-face component. This allows for individuals to further increase the communal bonds in a way that blurs the line of what constitutes a community. Some online communities also function as tools to maintain offline relationships or solidify these offline connections (Boyd and Ellison 2008). As Wellman argues, it would be a mistake to confuse the concept of community which is essentially a social phenomenon with place which is a spatial phenomenon (Wellman 1999).

Symbols of Community

The idea of community is essentially symbolic in nature. To understand the reason for a member’s community participation, we need to delve deeper into some of the prominent symbols that define the user experience. In particular, with this focus on consumer communities, we must also ask what a corporate brand symbolizes as a macro-level construct. If we accept that online communities form around commonality and a shared sense of purpose, we can take steps toward understanding why members join, participate, and even leave if their purposes are not being met.

Boundaries

The internet facilitated the transformation of previously understood boundaries of what constituted a community. Communication and relationship-building in the neighborhood was noted for being set in a specific time, contained in space, and limited by distance. In an online environment, these boundaries take on different properties which are representative of how each community member interprets them. For instance, individuals can send messages at different times of the day through blog comments or forums. This ability to hold asynchronous communications across several continents is beneficial but not without complications. In constructing their own meaning from the experience, each

individual applies their own symbolism to these reconsidered boundaries.

Understanding the constantly shifting role of boundaries is an important factor in articulating online communities. Cohen notes:

“As a symbol, [community] is held in common by its members; but its meaning varies with its members’ unique orientations to it. In the face of this variability of meaning, the consciousness of community has to be kept alive through manipulation of its symbols. The reality of efficacy of the community’s boundary - and, therefore, of the community itself - depends upon its symbolic construction and embellishment” (Cohen 1985).

Cohen goes on to argue that saying community boundaries are symbolic does not just mean they are open to individual interpretation, but that these boundaries may not even be perceived by other individuals or groups. In the context of businesses using consumer communities, this serves as a reason for business managers to approach their community members not as a fully known homogenous group, but with a curious attitude for how each member makes sense of their participation.

Time

It is easy to argue that online communities are not bound to the constraints of time. A characteristic of online community is the ability to hold conversations asynchronously through various forms of bulletin boards, forums, and weblogs (or more commonly referred to as *blogs*). This allows an individual to engage in dialogue when it is most convenient for them.

Where the boundary of time becomes more individually peculiar is when we look closely at the symbolic relationship of time and communications. When speaking with someone in a synchronous method such as a phone call, the communication typically follows a familiar pattern of back-and-forth dialogue. However, when posting one side of a message to a forum, the response may be immediate or there may be a gap lasting days (it is not uncommon for there to be *no* response). Each individual interprets this communication cycle differently. Do people expect immediate replies? How are these intentions interpreted across a community? An individual may expect a different response speed from a business than a fellow community member.

Space

Prior to the internet, holding dialogue and sharing knowledge also was bound by the constraints of physical space. This limited the congregation site as well as the number of participants who could engage in the dialogue. Consider the town hall as an example of such boundaries in the traditional offline neighborhood.

Space takes on different interpretations in the online community. Ownership of the space and acceptable behavior in the space are issues that test the community’s overall purpose and legitimacy. The concept of space also includes how the internet and online

communities connect and overlap an individual's everyday social relations as well as their cultural and ethnic memberships. Online communities don't replace these structures as much as they add yet another dimension to the individual's social reality.

Distance

One of the most obvious distinctions between traditional and online communities is the ability for the latter to negate distance as a factor in member participation. Online, individuals can communicate and build relationships regardless of their geographic location.

The lowering of geographic boundaries via the internet and online communities alters the power dynamic in very real ways for business. Whereas a consumer once may have been marginalized by distance from the business, the internet has provided a proxy for in-person service. And as companies are increasingly finding, if a consumer continues to feel marginalized and unheard, the "long-tail" and wide broadcasting of internet communication means complaints and criticism can be exchanged far beyond the customer's locality.

The minimization of distance also presents the consumer with far greater choices of businesses to choose from for their needs. Such choice gives rise to a fickleness that challenges the companies who see such online communities as a way to build relationships with consumers. "The ability for groups and individuals to interact at great distances raises interesting questions for those investigating the construction of identity, social interactions, and collective action" (Wilson and Peterson 2002).

Identity

Identity takes on different meanings as an individual participates in an online consumer community. When an individual chooses to participate in an online consumer community, they often do so with a particular identity in mind. If they choose to join and engage in a community for electronics, they may find affinity for their identity as a "geek" on a personal level or as a "technologist" in a professional sense. These identities are rarely fixed, but instead, constantly shifting depending on multiple factors.

Anthropology holds a unique position in uncovering this construct of identity. The field's nature is to examine how individual and collective identities are constructed. Anthropology also offers the ability to explore what Wilson and Peterson term the "culturally embedded nature of emerging communicative and social practices" (Wilson and Peterson 2002).

Individual and Group

At a very basic level, individuals choose their new experiences based on similitude (John et al. 2008). A typical consumer community tends to be comprised of like-minded individuals who want to connect with a brand.

There is sometimes a tendency to confuse online identity with a fantasy identity disconnected from the real-world. This is likely a holdover from the early days of the internet when MUDs (Multi-User Dungeon) allowed individuals to create fictional presences in an online gaming world. These environments are still present in the form of worlds such as the popular game World of Warcraft and the world of Second Life. But it would be unwise to equate online identities as persistently consistent with those fictionalized identities. Wilson and Peterson argue that “identities are negotiated, reproduced, and indexed in a variety of ways in online interactions, and these often cannot be understood without considering the offline context” (Wilson and Peterson 2002). Indeed, any attempt to place such a fixed offline/online dichotomy on identities ignores that individuals frequently negotiate multiple roles within different social and cultural contexts.

An added layer of complexity is in the relationship between community and individual. While community members may share a common affinity toward a particular brand, there is also a great likelihood of a lack of community consensus on such constructs as values and even more pertinent to the company, overall brand direction.

Relationship to Brand

The relationship between brand and consumer can be defined as fickle and tenuous which begs the question of why consumers are loyal to brands. Kozinets posits that a major factor that influences positive brand equity is consumer advocacy. In his research, he notes that online communities provide a legitimate context in which consumers can inform and influence their fellow consumers about the pros and cons of particular products and services (Kozinets 2002).

For the company, such a consumer community provides ready-access to vital marketing research. Community can help brand managers identify and understand the constantly shifting tastes, desires, influences, and relevant symbol systems of target consumer and consumer groups (Kozinets 2002).

Participation

The internet has significantly altered how individuals and groups interact not only with each other but with companies. This interaction is no longer static and one-way from company to consumer. Advancements in technology have changed how people engage in and interpret their experiences. These different types of interconnections and collaborations have given rise to creative methods for individuals to make their desires known and for companies to build different relationships. Traditional advertising has ceased being an effective method for communicating the benefits of the latest product.

If we accept John’s finding that emotional and cultural memory shapes our sensory experiences, this provides an important direction for the branding company. This calls for the company, in order to cultivate online social interaction, to root their technological developments in the every day reality for their community members.

Embedded in the very act of participation is a deeply-felt reason to contribute to the community which suggests that participation is never a fixed activity but a constantly shifting activity of negotiating identity and purpose. Even in a commonly accepted lifecycle of participation, there should be an acknowledgment that roles are nonlinear. Once a member joins a community, there may be a need to “rejoin” in a symbolic sense if there is a gap in the member’s involvement.

Knowledge

The relationship between information and the online community demonstrates how the internet has changed how individuals share knowledge and collaborate to create new knowledge. John writes, “How we consume media (photos and videos) will become conversation centric. Conversational semantics, found in the conversations that ensue around media, is as important as traditional content-based semantics” (John et al. 2008).

There is also a central question of why individuals choose to share knowledge in an online consumer community. Lampel and Bhalla point to research that suggests the powerful motivation for giving away knowledge is tied to an individual’s status seeking. They argue that status seeking is a social passion with a wide range of individual interpretations. For businesses hosting consumer communities, this social passion is a reliable source of continued participation (Lampel and Bhalla 2007).

Conclusion

Because an individual’s participation in community is so tightly bound by their interpretation, companies who choose to build relationships with consumers through an online medium must step with care. The same personal connections made with a positive experience can easily be outstripped by negative interpretations and therefore harm any brand communication.

How an individual interprets their membership experience and how a company develops strategies around these various interpretations will be a key health indicator for the community. As this paper reveals, there are several constructs that must be accounted for when thinking about the interconnected relationships that exist between consumers, the business, and the online community itself.

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