13 Communal consumption and the brand

Thomas C. O'Guinn and Albert M. Muniz, Jr.

The vast majority of the marketing and consumer behavior literature emanating from American business schools is about one quasi-dyadic relationship: marketer and individual consumer. In this literature, the why of consumption is typically explained in terms of attitudes, attribute bundles, affect, judgment biases and decision heuristics—all at the individual level. While these factors are no doubt important, the truly social aspects of consumption have been relatively overlooked and undervalued. To be sure, social psychologists attempt (more or less) to account for the influence of others on individual consumer’s thoughts and judgments. But this is hardly the same as studying social behavior as social behavior in its social context: consumer behavior formed and enacted within and by aggregations, themselves shaped, sanctioned, and grounded in relationships, institutions and other collectives.

In “the field” of consumer research (the field as defined by researchers in U.S. business schools), the social is most often constructed as a moderating variable to the cognitive processes of individuals, a weak modifier of all things psychological. It is the relatively rare occurrence when the social is studied beyond this narrow and limited construction. In the wider academic world the social is better represented. In this chapter, we will bridge this gap and make a case for why, and how, the social should be better represented in the field of consumer research. We cast the why of consumption

---

differently: not a single heuristic is mentioned. Instead, we observe active and meaningful negotiation of the brand between consumer collectives and market institutions. Holt (this volume), argues for the need to understand brands in their societal context. We feel that it is equally important to understand brands at the group/community level as such an understanding reveals much that is important about the why of consumption.

We start by reviewing the two constructs that are central to this endeavor, community and brands. We will examine the historical legacy of community in modern social thought, arguing for its centrality to the study of consumption by illustrating its relationship to brands in contemporary market economies. We then explore the quintessential example of this relationship, the brand community. After connecting the particulars of brand communities to the why of consumption, we will explore another, closely-related, group brand phenomenon, the polit-brand. These two closely-related phenomena reveal important aspects of the socially situated and constructed nature of brands. Many of the aspects, enactments, and other behaviors surrounding brands are significant for consumers, and thus should be to consumer researchers and practitioners as well.

**Community**

The idea of community has been used in the pursuit of understanding human beings for over two hundred years. Community was important to Immanuel Kant in 1781, and to Fredrich Nietzsche a century later (1886). It was given its modern sociological nomenclature in 1887 by Ferdinand Tonnies: Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft (roughly
Community and Society). From that point forward community was canonical to sociology. Simmel in the early twentieth century (1904), then Max Weber (1922) and Royce (1969), viewed it as essential social theory, vital to understanding modern social existence. Today, community remains a staple of political, religious and scholarly discourse (Bauman 2001; Boorstin 1973; Fischer 1975; Maffesoli 1996; Wellman 1979; Putnam 2001). Not inconsequential is that community is present in everyday utterance, and matters to publics well beyond the academy.

Yet it has taken the nascent field of consumer research well into its third decade to more than mention community, even in passing. The reasons for this are, as always, essentially political in nature, and are rooted in the vagaries of academic history, including the wholesale adoption of psychology as the sanctioned science of U.S. business schools (the field). It is Pollyannaish to think that this absence of social thought was unrelated to the hegemony of the field’s psychological atomism, which holds that while there is a social, it is relatively inconsequential compared to cognitive process. The field as defined above has produced scant literature involving social and institutional production, politics, and history. Yet, to discuss consumption outside these social forces is a mistake.

Several years ago, we became interested in applying the notion of community to consumption (Muniz and O’Guinn 1995). Like a handful of others (Fischer et al. 1996; Fournier 1998; Maffesoli 1996; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), we believed we were observing a form of community playing out in the marketplace. After thinking about this for a bit, we came to believe that as broadly as the notion of community applies, marketplace behavior has a particularly important place in community research. After all,
the very idea of community is historically and fundamentally connected to the marketplace. Community scholarship begins with a concern for community’s condition in the wake of modernity, market capitalism, and then ubiquitous consumer culture. The branded-society in which we now live has been traditionally implicated in the purported demise of community, or at least its cooptation. So at a theoretical and fundamental level, community and consumption are no strangers. Community is (or should be) a fundamental consumer behavior term. We believe the interplay of community and contemporary consumption is important to a fuller understanding of how we live and why we consume as we do.

**Brands**

To most scholars, it is absolutely axiomatic that there is no such thing as just a thing. To sociologists, anthropologists, and many more, all material objects carry with them meaning—even the ones mislabeled as “utilitarian.” This point has been made too many times by too many celebrated scholars (e.g., Goody 1993; Sahlins 1972; Schudson 1984) to belabor it here. The entire human record consists of no place where materiality, social construction, and meaning are strangers. Goods have always had social meaning. The same holds true for *branded* goods.

Brands are particularly marked things, their power being derived from being marked. Brands have a special relationship to modern market economies, those economies marked by marketing, advertising, and consumption. In the late nineteenth century, brands replaced many “unmarked” commodities. While it is true that there were some branded products prior to this period, it is during the last two decades of the
nineteenth century that the ubiquitous branding we know today began. Between 1875 and 1900, thousands of branded products replaced unbranded commodities. The phenomenal growth first took place in package goods. Soap, previously sold by weight from a generally unbranded cake, becomes Ivory (1882) and Sapolio (circa 1875). Beer, previously drawn from an unnamed keg, becomes Budweiser (1891) and Pabst (1873). All across the spectrum of goods and services, existing commodities became brands, as did the flood of new things designed for the modern marketplace of 1900.

In was a necessity of modern market capitalism to discover and promulgate brands. Consider the economics. Commodities (beer, soap) have elastic demand functions. If there is no distinction between soaps, all soaps are completely interchangeable. The set of acceptable substitutes is large and the demand is price elastic; price increases are met with decreases in demand. But when soap became Ivory in 1882, all that changed. Procter and Gamble began to impart different, additional and particular meanings to the previously unmarked commodity. Due to the new marketplace meanings of Ivory brand soap, there were far fewer acceptable substitutes at any given price. Value (and profit) was added. Ivory’s demand function became inelastic. Brands made good economic sense, and modern market capitalism became reliant on branding. It is no coincidence that this period is also known as the birth of the modern advertising industry (Fox 1984). Major advertising agencies such as J. Walter Thompson and N.W. Ayer were founded during this period. The growth is obvious in a ten fold increase (Fox 1984) in advertising spending between 1864 ($50 million) and 1900 ($500 million.) Brands were created and projected into national consciousness by ad men.
Ivory would claim purity during a period when purity was of vital concern to Americans. The average life expectancy in the US in 1900 was 49.2 years (Sullivan 1926). Infant mortality was twice what it would be just twenty-five years later (Sullivan 1926). A concerned public pushed Congress to pass the Pure Food and Drug Act in 1904. Purity was more than a word; it was, at that time, one of the few things the public believed might prevent them, or their children, from dying young. So, Ivory floats. Its purity was demonstrated by a market logic. No one really had to understand the physical mechanism that related purity to floating; it became a marketplace myth. Social context gave meaning to Ivory’s branding, its advertising claim, its marketplace logic, and the meaning of a bar of soap that floated. Ivory meant something. It was pure, 99 44/100 pure. Ivory was no longer a commodity; its set of acceptable substitutes shriveled. The same was true of countless other branded goods and services.

During the last years of the nineteenth and the first two decades of the twentieth century, the practice of branding exploded. Advertising and branding pushed marketplace modernity along; they were its engines, its mode. Over the next eight or so decades, the branding tide rose to cover just about everything. By the end of the twentieth century, religions rushed to brand, as did universities, cities, and national parks. Even dirt and water were branded. Few things were left behind. Brands came to be important in the lives of citizens. Citizens became consumers, consumers of brands. We became a branded society, and brands had meaning, social meaning, meaning that cannot be isolated from its historical, political, cultural, and social grounding.

The modern concern with community’s demise
The parallel storyline of this play is about what was supposedly happening to community. Remember, it was mass-marketed, branded society that was the prime suspect in the slaying of “true” community. This meta-narrative is the leitmotif of modern social thought: commercial urban life destroyed true community. How ironic is it to now be writing of their admixture: brand community? Yet, since the postmodern is marked by irony, then perhaps brand community is perfectly of its time (Maffesoli 1996). Or, maybe, the two constructs (brand and community) have always shared more, and were less antithetical, than modernist doctrine allowed. The latter is our belief.

Now, after two centuries or so, we arrive at this moment where three things are true: (1) brands are a ubiquitous aspect of daily life; (2) brands are at some level meaningful to ordinary contemporary citizens; and (3) community was not so easily done away with—the communal urge of humans and the benefits that accrue to collectives and institutions ensured community’s adaptive longevity. Community endures in all sorts of forms, in all sorts of places, including the marketplace. Community, of a particular sort, is alive and well in the form of brand community. Brand communities possess the hallmarks of traditional communities, but have their own unique market logics and expression. In the following, we explore brand communities and the why of consumption, drawing on ten years of research conducted by both authors into a variety of brands (Muniz and Hamer 2001; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Muniz and O’Guinn 1995; Muniz et al. 2005; Muniz and Schau 2005; O’Guinn and Muniz 2004; O’Guinn and Muniz 2000; Schau and Muniz 2002). These data include observation, participant observation, and interview data from a variety of settings including face-to-face and online environments.
The characteristics of brand communities

Brand communities, just like other forms of community, possess three defining characteristics: consciousness of kind, evidence of rituals and traditions, and a sense of obligation to the community and its members. The ways in which these characteristics manifest, and the fact that they manifest in communities centered on brands, reveal much about the why of consumption.

Consciousness of kind

The most important attribute of community is consciousness of kind. To be a community, a group of people have to feel a collective similarity to one-another and the group, and a collective difference both individually and collectively from other groups. Our research has shown considerable evidence of consciousness of kind in a variety of brand communities in several different product categories. Consider the following exemplar from an on-line Mazda Miata community post:

Truth be told, I just “found” this group and I’m a happy little person now that I’ve found there are other people out there like me that love their Miatas!

This verbatim reveals language of someone being happy because they realized that there are others just like them…out there…who get it…who see what they see as enthusiastically as they do. The promise of community is here: not to be alone, to share appreciation, no matter how odd, inappropriate, misplaced, trivial, or wrong others might feel it to be. The informant’s language looks much like that of someone saying that they discovered others with the same sexual orientation, the same health problems, or the same religion. No matter how others might judge this shared affection, it is clearly
consciousness of kind. It is often the case that communities form precisely because others find the focal object unusual and/or objectionable. Communities have historically served (among others) the otherwise isolated and outside. Consciousness of kind transcends geographic boundaries. Because so much occurs on-line, and is, after all, about far flung brands and mass mediated creations, face to face interaction is unnecessary.

Many brand communities have a stated populism. In brand communities, stratification characteristics that might determine an individual's standing in another community, such as income, age or gender, are said to be unimportant. Rather, status in brand communities is more often influenced by such factors as how long consumers have been using the brand, the historical value of the model they own, the number of models that they own, and their knowledge and experiences with the brand. In this way, brand communities are officially egalitarian, at least in a traditional socioeconomic sense. As a result, and as a testimony to its strength, consciousness of kind is often experienced and expressed by members with diverse backgrounds.

One informant tells of holding up traffic at a McDonald’s one morning because the employee working the drive-through window was a fellow Saab owner. The two members “ignored” their stratification inequities to carry out an expected ritual of Saab community members, even if it meant holding up everyone else in the busy service line. The informant was a successful professional. The employee was assumed to be of a lower SES category, but owned a much older Saab, one with historical value and enhanced community social cachet. Many of our informants tell similar tales of lengthy encounters with others with whom they share little beyond a shared appreciation of the
brand. In this manner, benefits accrue to the individuals in several ways, not least of which is a sense of their own egalitarianism, fairness and goodness. The belief in a “democracy of goods,” (Marchand 1985), also serves to ameliorate and justify the realities of even severe social stratification inequities in market economies. It protects and reifies marketplace ideology. If a community of things can make us equal, then other inequalities may be more easily accepted or ignored.

Communal feelings of consciousness of kind underscore the significance of brands and brand meaning to contemporary consumer culture. Brands are easy to see and carry a host of strong and pervasively cultivated meanings. They facilitate the community-forming process by making the identification of like-minded others visible and vivid. It is easy to gather around brands. The why of consumption here lies in recognizing that brands say much about the groups that use them. Brands demonstrate shared beliefs, beliefs consumers like to recognize.

**Rituals and traditions**

Communities typically develop rituals and traditions that serve to reify the community and its culture. This is one way in which communities stay vital. Brand community examples of this are plentiful. Methods and modes include celebrating the history of brand; sharing brand stories and myths; ritualistic communication and utterances; special lexicon; and communal appropriation of advertising, market icons, and commercial text. One obvious example is the way Saab, VW Beetle, Miata, and Jeep drivers wave, beep their horn, or flash their lights to other drivers of the same brand. One informant told us: “If you own a Saab, you just do this, it’s expected.” When asked
who expected it, he said, “the Saab folks”—in other words, the brand community, the
others in the know. The collective has behavioral expectations.

Communities educate their members (particularly the young) in community
history. Communities, whether traditional or brand, rely on a known-in-common history
to keep the community alive, vital and centered. Thus, user-created webpages devoted
to these brands are replete with historical narratives. The textual nature of the Web
provides an excellent forum in which members share their knowledge of the brand’s
origins, often replete with illustrations and photographs. Consider the following, from an
ambitious user-created Volkswagen website:

The idea for the Beetle came from a German engineer, Ferdinand Porsche, in
the early 1930's. The final design for the Beetle was completed in 1938 and the
first bug prototype saw the light of day in 1939. Unfortunately, WW2 ceased
production shortly thereafter. Fortunately, in the summer of 1945, production
restarted and Beetles couldn't be produced fast enough. In 1958, Volkswagen of
America was established and Beetles soon made their way onto American soil.
By the mid 1960's the VW Beetle was out selling all American made vehicles in
the US. The Beetle was mass-produced for a record 30 years, undergoing over
50,000 design modifications along the way. Loved for its unique road handling
and its adorable style, the Beetle stands proudly today as the top selling imported
car in US automotive history.

Similar texts and retellings are common within most brand communities. The VW Bug
has special significance for the VW brand community because it was the car that started
it all. In much the same way, the date of January 24, 1984 (when the Macintosh was
launched) has significance for most Apple brand community members. Hence, it is
frequently chronicled. Communities need marked dates or celebrated events. Through
this the community bestows significance upon the event and gives it meaning, meaning
which is transmitted and affirmed though the socially enacted celebration.
One of the most frequently encountered forms of communal affirmation is ritualized story telling. Communities (re)create their history, their values, and other aspects through communal stories. Religious narratives, stories of national heroes and battles, and even school anthems are examples of this. The same is true in brand communities. In the Saab brand community a common critical communal myth is the “saved my life story.” Saab positions itself as a safe car, and its brand community embraces this positioning as well, building on it and incorporating it into their experience with the brand. Here is one example of its telling:

I love my Saab. It is my second one, the first one got totaled when a stupid [driver] pulled right out in front of me. I was going about 50mph and slammed on my brakes as hard as I could (there was a truck coming in the other lane). Everything went into slow motion and I braced myself for the crash. My car held straight, didn't waver or slip on the wet pavement and it also saved my life. I walked away...she wasn't so lucky. The cop told me Saabs... are the safest in crashes that he has seen.

Think about this story: The Saab is totaled (it gives its life for its driver). The Saab driver “walked away” while the other driver didn’t. A policeman is present (miracles often need an objective authority figure as confirmation) and proclaims Saabs to be safe. This story is full of critical distillations of the brand’s constellation of meaning. It is economical in its conveyance. Most members have such a story in their repertoire, referring to firsthand experience or someone they know. These stories are not generated by Saab, but are organic, created by consumers for consumers.

These stories are ritualistically told, re-told, and re-told again. Reactions are always the same, amazement and affirmation. When one thinks about communication from a psychological point of view, communication is typically explained as the transmission of information bundle x between parties a and b. Here, in a communal
setting, we see something completely different, a different sort of communication. Here, the purpose is not to get consumer b to learn something new; both consumers already possess this knowledge. They know “that Saab also builds jets,” that “Apple created the first windows-based desktop operating system” or that “Newton created the PDA market.” Why do they do this, if all the parties already possess information bundle X? The why here is communal affirmation. Here the speech act is to publicly affirm and reify a key community belief: Saab’s are like jets, Apple is a computer pioneer. It is affirmative and ritualistic communication, an authoritative performance (Arnould and Price 2000). It is communication that serves a larger social purpose, to maintain the collective and its boundaries, and keep its rules. It is communal communication serving the individual and the collective.

(Moral) obligation

The third, and probably most controversial aspect of brand community is the degree to which moral obligation is/is not present. To nineteenth century social theorists, publicly enacted morality was a vital aspect of face-to-face community. In contemporary times, what constitutes group morality is a much more open question. Here, it is more narrowly construed, limited, and fungible. We hold that a certain type of soft moral obligation does exist in brand communities. Here, the sense of responsibility sometimes involves brand advice, repair, and service help. Such sentiments are regarded as commonsense by members, as the following quote from a Volkswagen community forum makes clear:

So if you are driving through Cincinnati and see a white 67 Beetle at the side of the highway, hopefully it will not be me this time. If you do see a bug stranded by the side of the road, remember that it is good VW etiquette to stop and see what is wrong.
Similar etiquette shows up in Saab drivers who help other Saab drivers when their cars break down on the side of the road, among Macintosh users who will help an acquaintance rescue a defective Mac hard drive, and Pocket PC users who will donate their troubleshooting efforts to the collective. A particularly powerful sense of responsibility exists in the brand community centered on the Apple Newton, a product that Apple discontinued in 1998. The Apple Newton brand community innovates the product and software, provides parts sources, technical support, and advertises the brand to others. Here, the sense of responsibility is quite strong as the community is the only source for support.

Responsibility also manifests via an apostolic function. Members of brand communities, generally think that new members (but only appropriate new members) should be recruited to keep the community alive. This is seen as a group moral duty. Most brand community members have engaged in this behavior at some level or another, ranging from showing off what the brand can do to more openly explicit persuasive attempts. Most love to share stories of successful conversion efforts. Brand communities, like traditional communities, are often most morally offended when defections occur. In brand communities, this means buying or using the competing brand. Defectors are labeled “turncoats,” or are accused of “betrayal.” Reasons for staying in the community are publicly rehearsed and restated, as in Mac pages that list “the reasons Macs are superior to Windows pcs.” While serving to elevate the brand, such statements also serve as a publicly performed reminder to stay loyal to the brand, and to rehearse counter-arguments against “leaving the fold.”
Brand communities are similar to communities of limited liability (Janowitz 1952). These communities are intentional, voluntary and partial in the level of involvement they engender (Janowitz 1952; Hunter and Suttles 1972), but still vital to contemporary life, meaningful, and maybe modal. We argue that the morality that manifests in brand communities is a small case ‘m’, morality, even a marketplace morality. Still it exists, and the marketplace is the central stage of contemporary society. Brand community members do feel a type of obligation to other members, and the collective, that has at its core a morality: a loosely codified sense of right and wrong, duty and obligation. The why here is to perpetuate the brand and what it stands for, and to help others who share this appreciation.

Of particular marketplace relevance

There are some aspects of brand communities that have the particular flavor of the marketplace, and yet are very similar to the same basic dynamic observed in traditional communities.

Oppositional brand loyalty

Just as in any other form of community, members of brand communities also note a critical demarcation between users of their brand and users of other brands: “We are different from them.” This phenomenon is observed in brand communities in which the very defining nature of the community is its opposition to another brand and its community. One example of this can be found in the Apple Macintosh brand community,
and its nemesis, Windows-Intel (or Wintel). Consider the following from a typical user-created Apple website:

These are some pictures, sounds and links that express my hate for Microsoft and Windows PC’s, I do not hate pc’s, just pc’s running Windows. Please wait half a minute while it loads (kinda like opening the “Windows” directory in Winblows 95), but unlike Windows – its worth the wait…

The purpose of the Apple community is as much anti-Wintel as it is pro-Apple. In fact, a good part of what the Apple brand means is that it is not Wintel. In a similar fashion, Saab is not Volvo and Volkswagen is not Honda.

Another great illustration of oppositional brand loyalty and the resulting tensions comes from the PDA market. It is a market with two fiercely competing operating systems: PocketPC and Palm. Users of these two operating systems seek market dominance, recognizing the benefits afforded via network effects. In the following, one can even see the oppositional community as intertwined with geographical metaphor, the wrong part of town:

I gave a sales rep a demo of my iPaq a few weeks ago at Franklin Covey. That place is scary, it’s like wall to wall Palm. I felt like I had wandered into the wrong part of town.

Much like in traditional communities, members of brand communities use familiar spatial metaphors to highlight the shared consumption topography.

This phenomenon shows up in other brands as well (Muniz and Hamer 2001). Users of a variety of brands appear to define their preference by the brand that it is not. These rivalries occasionally surface in the context of online conversations, leading to brand preference debates that can range from simple name-calling to sophisticated and passionate discussions of why each brand is better. Such conversations underscore the social and communal nature of brands, even among those who feel little to no affiliation
with their fellow brand users. When a user of the competing brand insults their brand of choice, even those who feel no connection to their fellow brand users will pull together in a temporary communal affiliation of sorts. The why here is the desire of the group to define themselves, particularly by who and what they are not. Obviously, history is replete with examples of communities and other social collectives that have done the same. Still, it’s the completely unremarkable everydayness about the marketplace language of opposition that marks it as so completely consumer culture.

**Marketplace legitimacy**

Another brand community facet is revealed in issues of legitimacy. These occur on two fronts: is the brand “real,” and is the brand community member legitimate? Again, issues of pretenders and true believers have long been part of community discourse. Communal status hierarchies are often premised on degrees of passion and shades of authenticity. Yet, marketplace legitimacy has a particular dimension to it in that it reveals the shifting power relations between those traditionally in control of the brand (the marketer) and consumer collectives. Members make distinctions between those who are appropriate for the brand and those who aren’t, the impostors being those attracted to the brand for the wrong reasons.

Consider the following exchange, from a Saab brand community forum. The Saab brand community has long struggled with issues of legitimacy. These issues started when yuppies began to embrace the brand in the 1980s and continued as General Motors took complete control of the Saab brand, redesigning the models and repositioning the brand to make them more mainstream and marketable to a more
affluent market segment. Members were discussing who proper Saab drivers were versus who they were perceived to be, when one member voiced a common belief among long-time devotees:

I tend to avert my gaze in disgust when passing a NG900 (New Gen, No Good—take yer pick) So-called-Saabs, so I never noticed what drives them (always assumed yuppie scum)

Here, the assumption was made that those driving newer Saabs, those produced since GM had taken over (hence, new generation), were Yuppies, while those who favored the classic, pre-GM models were the true aficionados. Demonstrating the tensions surrounding these issues, another member takes issue with this characterization and replies with the following:

Wow, I've been reading this newsgroup for over a year and never knew how much some of you were disgusted with NG900/9-3's. I'm sorry to have bought a product that sullies YOUR image. Here's yuppie scum for you...I'm a 25 y/o married guy that works as a warehouse manager and is enlisted in the Navy Reserve (after 4 years of Active service). I drive a 2K 9-3. My 28 y/o wife is an administrative assistant for the CEO of an e-bank. She's a veteran as well. She drives a 1998 900S. Working people (that probably make less than some of you yuppie scum) own the cars that you snub your noses at. We drive our Saabs, not for status, but because they are extremely fun to drive. Neither car is an automatic, and both are run hard on a daily basis. Besides a sunroof motor on my 9-3, neither car has ever had a problem. My Mother and Father in law both own early 900 turbo's. My Mother in law because of safety issues, my Father in law because he's an absolute speed demon and loves to perform most of the work on the car himself. They are professional people, probably like you. There's only one difference, they would never "pigeon-hole" someone (especially us) as yuppie scum for wanting a nice, fun car.

Of course, from the marketer's point of view, having its core or “lead” users actively policing community membership (and purchase), is a problem. Many drivers of newer Saabs, like the driver above, are likely to be offended by such characterizations. Some may even be dissuaded from repurchasing the brand.
In a very similar way, members of the Volkswagen brand community differentiate between the original Beetle, produced between 1945 and 1981, and the new VW Beetle introduced in 1997. The original Beetle is a large part of the meaning of the VW brand community. Its unusual appearance and underdog origins are a source of pride among VW enthusiasts. To most long-term VW aficionados, the New Beetle is nothing but a pale, marketing-inspired imitation of the original Bug designed to move VW upstream, and further away from its economy-minded roots. The VW brand community is a factious collective, having segments favoring air-cooled over water-cooled models, each with differing claims to legitimacy. Through actions to define and enforce these standards of legitimacy, the active brand community can represent a very cogent marketplace power inversion.

*Desired marginality*

A closely related phenomenon is desired marginality. Here, brand community members actively try to keep the community small and marginal. A brand like Apple, with an approximate three percent share of the U.S. computer market, has marginality as part of its brand meaning. The original VW Bug had it too, its underdog status cleverly and famously used by Doyle Dane Bernbach to market the brand. Sometimes brand community members actively work against share growth. They must walk a tricky path between rejecting willing new members and sustaining a large enough market share to keep the brand viable. Here, the why is in maintaining cultural cachet. If the brand gains too much market share or if it becomes too mainstream, cultural cachet is lost and the brand is no longer deemed “hip.” This dynamic maps on to the alternative ethos in
which a band or a filmmaker or some other artist is deemed to be “cool” until they are signed by a major label or too widely discovered. (For a similar example of how this happened to the Mexican beer brand Corona, see Holt, this volume). Here, the boundaries of community and brand are upheld by the collective. By enforcing community standards of legitimacy, they ensure marginality.

**Rumor**

Much content in brand communities takes the form of rumor. The history of the brand and personal stories centered on the brand are often transmitted via communal rumor. Rumors play an important role in the consumer construction of the brand as rumors allows the community to express properties of the brand that might not be true, but reflect what the community *wants* to be true.

Cultural capital and issues of credibility loom large in brand communities. These communities are structured, with complex hierarchies. The contribution of a new and valuable piece of communal brand talk carries status. The search for new information, such as modifications the manufacturer intends to make to the product or new line entries, can be intensely competitive. As a result, consumers sometimes share brand-related information from non-reputable sources. Such utterances are particularly relevant in the internet age as they may be afforded the same credibility as official information and become part of the brand’s communally accepted legacy. The multimedia nature of the Web provides an excellent forum in which members can share their knowledge of the brand’s origins, often replete with illustrations, photographs, and video.
Rumors surrounded the reintroduction of the New Beetle in 1997 as community members looked for reasons to be optimistic that the new Beetle would honor its roots. As a result, rumors about the new model, including the use of the original plans and the re-hiring of retired designers were rife in the months leading up to the launch of the new Beetle. Long-time community members wanted to believe that the New Beetle would be true to the ethos of the original, despite fearing otherwise. In a similar way, members of the Saab brand community spend considerable time discussing the future of Saab, including rumors on future Saab models. These rumors have arisen largely in response to Saab’s acquisition by GM and the fears that GM would change the essence of the brand.

Rumors of the creator's return constitute a recurring narrative phenomenon in the abandoned Apple Newton brand community: Is Apple coming back to the market that it created? Such beliefs, despite the low-likelihood of their occurrence, are common. Co-mingled with these beliefs are rumors and tales of secret labs and hidden signs that a new Newton is being developed and tested. Consider the following example from an online Newton forum:

I dunno. I saw *something* at Disneyland out here in California. It wasn't a newton, and they usually used newtons for taking surveys and things. It was a color device with an apple logo. This was months ago. I know I should have kicked his ass and ran out of the park with the device, but going to jail is not one of my "cool" things to do on my weekends :). All I know is that there is something going on. What with all the spare newtons on ebay, (could be a sign that apple is about to drop some cool sh**) it will make sense.

The possibility of reintroduction is an important source of optimism in the Newton brand community. Here, like in most brand community rumors, the why is often the communal
desire to ensure the survival of the brand and what the community wants it to represent. Via rumors and community narratives, the community attempts to exercise control.

**Communities of a fashion**

Given that we see these and other traditional markers of community, we hold that brand communities are communities of a sort. This does not, by any means, assert that they are the same as pre-industrial villages, or any such thing. Obviously, they are not situated in the same late nineteenth century dynamic of nascent urban modernity, labor and capital politics, or dominant academic critique. Instead, brand communities, as well as other consumption communities, are their contemporary milieu: existing in late modernity, with a fully embedded and normalized (hyper)-consumer ethic, the product of a mass-mediated connectivity that is quickly becoming the mode of community connection and communication. Why these previously antagonistic forces (if they really ever were so unambiguously antagonistic) are now less antagonistic is an important why question for researchers working in the domain of Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Is there something so appealing about the communal form, that consumers now living in a branded world, appropriate it and build on it, apparently quite comfortably? It appears so.

An important and related question centers on where brand communities can be found: what leads to the formation of a brand community? After ten years of research in this area, we can offer some conditions under which brand communities are likely to flourish. While we cannot assert that a combination of any or all of these properties will definitely exist in or produce a brand community, we can state with some confidence
that these properties have been common in the brand communities that we have witnessed. Brand communities fare best when the brand in question has a unique and
distinctive set of meanings. Such meanings allow the brand, and the resulting community, to stand out from others. Grassroots communities appear to fare better than inorganic or created communities. The attempts to build a community around the Saturn brand of automobile have created a far weaker form of brand community than those that exist around Saab, Volkswagen, or Jeep. This is not to say that a marketer cannot create a successful brand community or cannot encourage an existing brand community. Rather, we believe that the strongest brand communities form out of a necessity. A challenge gives the community a reason to exist and persevere. This challenge can take many forms: low market share (Saab, Macintosh), difficulty of use (Jaguar), derision and ridicule (Volkswagen Beetle), marketplace abandonment (Apple Newton), or a strong rivalry (Coke versus Pepsi, Apple versus Wintel, Pocket PC versus Palm). Tension is crucial to maintaining cohesiveness. Finally, many brand communities appear to have the capacity for powerful and transformative consumption experiences. We have encountered clear examples of brand communities in a variety of brands: Bronco, Jeep, Macintosh, Miata, Newton, Palm, Pocket PC, Saab and Volkswagen. Many of these communities have been demonstrated to be capable of consumption experiences that have a profound impact on their users, moving their users beyond the mundane, remaking them. Many of these transformative experiences have been dependent on the communal setting for reification and reaffirmation.

Further, we are not just talking about fanatical consumers. More and more consumers of every stripe are getting their information about brands through non-
marketer controlled channels in a way that is unprecedented. True, some of the data reported here and elsewhere come from active brand community members. But for many consumers, brands provide an admittedly small, but not altogether trivial communal bond. For every person who actually posts on a brand community web site, there are certainly more who feel some communal connection, but do not act, and others who act only rarely. It would clearly be an unusual social network or community that did not have such a distribution of activism/passivism. Further, it would be entirely odd for a mass market material object existing in the consumer (brand) society milieu not to possess some aspect of we-ness in its global brand meaning. Even for the relatively passive, the communal ethos of a brand becomes part of what the brand means, an important part.

So the point that typically gets only the passing and dismissive nod in “the field,” becomes vital: humans are social creatures, and this holds true if the human is a sixteenth century villager or a twenty-first century consumer. Humans desire to congregate, affiliate and associate with like-minded/spirited others. It is a powerful, basic human expression. Community endures and finds at its center the things most cherished by its members—organizations, political causes, religious affiliations, even brands. Community emerges where it will, despite the rationalizing effects of markets (see Ritzer et al., this volume). Do benefits accrue to other interested institutions, political actors, ideologies, and systemic engines around which communities form? Yes, clearly there are. There are philosophical, economic, and political benefits to those collectives, just as there are for brand communities, making branded consumption not only a social marker, but a social goal as well.
The polit-brand

Brands are sometimes explicitly political. At their center is the particularly politicized brand, which we have dubbed the polit-brand (O’Guinn and Muniz 2004). The post-1972 (U.S./Western Europe) political left fights market capitalism’s hegemony through purchases, as opposed to boycotts of brands from major corporations; the new revolutionary leftist strikes blows against the capitalist empire by buying things. But, these things have to have been granted community approval. Here, the brand community is at once centered on a brand and a political goal. While the use of brands in revolution has been discussed elsewhere, most notably in Frank’s (1997) *Conquest of Cool*, we offer a significantly different take on the dynamics and meaning of the phenomenon.

Circa 1972 the old “new left,” for all intents and purposes, perished (Schulman 2001). It was replaced by a more consumption ambivalent “revolution.” In this new socio-political order, revolutionary politics are enacted not through choices of consuming or not consuming, but in identification, group sanctioning, and community championing of brands that are deemed by the collective to be the best vessels of the group’s “alternative” politics. Such social processes can be seen in such brands as Apple, Ben and Jerry’s, Blackspot, Carhart, Diesel, MAC, REI, Sweat-X, and Tom’s of Maine. We believe that notions of branding and their place in social thought have something to gain from the broadening border-crossing of brand and politics. These are communal brands, inherently tied to communal politics, and it is impossible to deny the
inherent social nature of this consumption. Here, the why of consumption is about advancing a social movement’s politics.

One of the earliest politicized brands was Coca-Cola, a brand whose political legacy is still the topic of communal discourse. Consider the following comment:

My mother’s family swears by Coca-Cola. It used to be, in fact, that in order to receive permission to marry into her family, three basic qualifications had to be met. The prospective in-law had to: (1) Be a Democrat, (2) Drive a Ford, and (3) Drink Coca-Cola.

Such sentiments, divulged as long-standing and “understood,” reveal the depth of the co-mingling of politics and brands by different groups of consumers. In a similar fashion, during 2004, members of less affluent Chicago neighborhoods made their “right” to have Starbuck’s a matter of front-page city politics (Mihalopoulos and Olivo 2004). To have one’s neighborhood served and marked by this brand became a matter of rights, disenfranchisement, and social equity. Aldermen/women were asked to get the neighborhoods Starbuck’s. This is very interesting in contrast to the traditional critique: here there is a reported lack of concern of displacing local “mom and pop” coffee outlets. These are brand politics, and obviously, have a powerful and literal communal component.

Intentionally or not, Apple Computer has become a politicized brand. This is the result of several factors, most the subject of story, speculation and rumor, oftentimes reflecting what various factions desire to be true. The Apple brand community has strong feelings about this. This is from a discussion entitled “Apple=Democrats?”

1.) It’s well-known that Jobs is a liberal and has contributed liberally (pun intended) to liberal causes and liberal political campaigns. I’ve heard this discussed for years.
2.) A Democratic administration has brought Microsoft to the brink of destruction as the entity we all know. This is of benefit to Jobs and to Apple Computer…
Such characterizations are consistent with those encountered previously, such as the Apple community member who characterized “IBM people” as wearing suits and voting for Reagan and “Apple people” as wearing jeans and not voting for Reagan. Such descriptions may reflect Apple’s position as a David fighting the Goliath of then IBM, now Microsoft. Still, this is not the entire story. Others note figures from the right side of the political spectrum who use Macs and challenge the liberal characterization. In this way, the community accepted political ideology for the brand is continually negotiated, regardless of marketer intent, much like the quasi-political characterization of the typical Saab driver (yuppie or not) is continually negotiated in the Saab brand community.

Recently, more actively marketer-politicized brands have emerged on the scene. Two examples of this are SweatX clothes and BlackSpot sneakers. SweatX is an anti-sweat shop brand. It is strongly supported by an on-line brand community. In fact, without the associated collective, it would have far less market meaning and potency. However, the most controversial polit-brand is the so-called “anti-brand brand,” BlackSpot, by AdBusters, an ostensibly anti-advertising and anti-consumer culture magazine. AdBusters is marketing the BlackSpot to its members (themselves a form of brand community) to challenge a particularly chaotically politicized brand, Nike.

We’re selling real, authentic empowerment. If you wear the BlackSpot sneaker, you’re helping to demolish a big, bad corporation [Nike] that has done dirty deeds in the Third World.

Adbuster Publisher, Kalle Lasn

By targeting Nike, BlackSpot further complicates the politics of Nike, polarizing both supporter and detractor communities. Very clearly, brands, politics, and national ideology intersect. Holt (this volume) offers compelling evidence on this marketplace
reality. To deny the inherently social form of human politics would fly in the face of reason, not to mention the evidence of everyday experience.

**Who owns the brand?**

This is an obvious question posed by the issues explored in this chapter. Brand communities assert considerable claims on ownership, claims that are only complicated by the politicization of brands. These impassioned and empowered consumer collectives assert more channel power and make claims on core competencies formerly reserved for the marketer. Brand community members increasingly regard marketers not as owners of the brands, but as temporary stewards, stewards who can be held immediately and directly accountable for transgressions, such as undesired modifications or violations of privacy (see Deighton, this volume). Community members recognize that their interests in the brand may surpass those of the marketer and that they may be better aware of the realities in which the product is used.

In the following, a Body Shop customer and brand community member goes online to tell the community about her dissatisfaction with a recent change in Body Shop management policy.

> I hate this sort of waste. I went to the Body Shop recently to get a refill for my foundation and they didn’t have my color. The sales being informed me that they “were phasing out the refills because they ‘recycle’”. Like that’s an environmental step forward. Sheesh. I refused to buy an entire new case, that’s absurd and wasteful. I switched brands because of it. I think Body Shop is selling out to profits over the environment.

Marketers must be more accountable because consumers are acting as social collectives, not individual marketplace atoms. The PocketPC (a Microsoft product) user group organized on-line enough to be a lobbying force to Microsoft…not as individual
customers, but as an organized, politicized, and powerful social collective. Representing the extreme case is the brand community centered on the Apple Newton. There, the brand is no longer produced by the manufacturer, but by the community. Moving beyond the co-creation of the brand, the collective becomes the marketer and keeps the brand and its meaning alive. While certainly not typical, the actions of the Newton brand community demonstrate what brand communities are capable of.

In brand communities marketplace power relations are destabilized. It is via the continued creative and interpretive actions of the community that the brand is continually co-created with the marketer. If the meanings suggested by the marketer resonate with the members of the community, these meanings will be amplified in the stories they tell and the images they create. If the marketer-suggested meanings do not map onto the brand as created by the community, then the community will attempt to drown out those marketer-suggested meanings. The community will reject those marketer-created images and endeavor to create their own. Potential buyers of a new car may “Google Saab” and be put into immediate contact with Saab community members who present an image of the appropriate buyer that is not what Saab management would like for them to see.

These effects extend to all brands. While not all brands have thriving brand communities, all brands have communal aspects. All brands are situated socially. User-created brand talk is everywhere. Regardless of whether they are consumed publicly or not, all brands convey complex meanings to others, meanings that are continually negotiated between the marketer and consumers.
Discussion

It is time to see brands as more than summed attitudes floating in preference factor space. We need to see them as complex bundles of meaning, where negotiation between marketer and groups of consumers is instrumental and meaningful to both parties, the marketplace, and society at large. Brands are co-mingling with, or substantially emulating, the form and function of traditional social institutions. This obviously impacts the why of consumption. In this chapter we argue that we must significantly re-think our views of brands, brand communication, and the obsession with the individual consumer and his or her thoughts. Contemporary society floats on a true sea-change in mediated human communication that makes it easier for consumers to exchange information and organize. Brands are social creations, and this reality has never been more important.

This research provides an important perspective via its boundary-spanning nature, occupying the intersection of blind spots for two different fields. Consumer behavior research, for the first three decades of its existence, has had a blind spot concerning things truly social. The field has developed little knowledge on consumption in its social context, as it is affected by the various groups, institutions, and collectives centered on it. Sociology, on the other hand, has extensively explicated the social, but has a significant blind spot with regards to the marketplace beyond its essentialist critique. Sociology has failed to recognize consumption as providing important and emically legitimate social bonds for contemporary society. We are advocating a position where the substantive area of consumer inquiry can contribute to both fields and beyond, thus enriching at least two genres via truly interdisciplinary thought.
Community should be added to the study of consumption, and consumption to the study of community.

The thing so long called “brand loyalty” is more and more thought to be informed by social relationships and communal sensibilities and forces—and not just by consumer sociologist but by brand managers as well. Brands were always socially constructed, but recently the power ratio of their builders has changed significantly. Brand managers have recently begun to publicly fret over the “newly empowered consumer.” Hardly brands with small shares, Pepsi and Coca-Cola have brand communities. P&G and HP, just to mention a couple, actively acknowledge, court, and seek to “manage” brand community. It is not industry that has been slow to see brand community’s power.

**Conclusion**

Brands are not trivial to human existence, no matter how hard one tries to wish this reality away. As branded things grew more important in people’s lives and consumption became more central to everyday life, community did not subside, but began to coalesce around icons of society’s new center—consumption. Ultimately, brand communities matter because they look and behave like other forms of community, and community is an essential human phenomenon. These are socially embedded and entrenched entities, and thus extremely durable. The increasing legitimacy of consumer society has changed the world. In short, consumption and brands matter. Brand communities and other social aggregations of empowered consumers are not going away. In fact, society’s need for trust (Cook 2001) and security (Bauman 2001) have
rarely been more profound. This provides us with heretofore unknown research opportunities. But, this requires new thinking and conceptualizations.

Brands and the talk of brands are everywhere. Yet, this ubiquity does not counter their importance, just the opposite. Brands are constellations of meaning, meaning that cannot be cleanly detached from culture and history. Brands are not just names of marketed things, but increasingly part of the social fabric and centers of social organization. Our models, our thinking, and our practice need to catch up with this reality.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Gary Fine, David Mick, Hope Schau, and Jim Twitchell for their comments on an earlier draft of this manuscript.

References


