



## As worlds collide: The role of marketing management in customer-to-customer interactions



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### ABSTRACT

Compatibility among customers within a consumption setting can help marketing managers ensure that Customer-to-Customer Interaction (CCI) between heterophilous customers does not detract from either customer's service experience. To date, however, much literature has focused on homophilous customers with few noted exceptions. Our research examines CCI under heterophily, which is important when managing an increasingly diverse customer base. This research presents the phenomenon of the collision of two worlds: FurTime and the Kaleidoscope Conference. FurTime is an annual conference mainly attended by furies. The Kaleidoscope Conference is an annual conference mainly attended by people from under-represented ethnoracial groups who are interested in pursuing doctorates in a business discipline. We employ netnography and introspection to theorize about how understanding CCI in the form of acculturation, competition, coopetition, cooperation, and territorialism can inform the role of the marketing manager within CCI.

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### 1. Introduction

Imagine attending an annual conference in the same hotel every year. You check in and everything looks familiar. Everything is stylishly decorated and clean, as ever. On the way to your conference's registration table, you notice that another conference is also taking place, and their registration table and meetings are proximal to yours. People are registering for both conferences and you realize you will interact with the other conference as you navigate the Hotel. What would happen if many of the other conference attendees are dressed as anthropomorphized animals? What interactions could you have with this group? How might those interactions affect your overall satisfaction with the service you received, and what is the service provider's role in managing those interactions?

This article contributes to the existing Customer-to-Customer Interaction (CCI) literature by examining the interaction between members of two socio-culturally diverse customer groups (Griffiths & Gilly, 2012; Johnson & Grier, 2013). This research examines CCI between two conferences in the same hotel setting: FurTime,<sup>1</sup> an annual furry

fandom conference, whose members are referred to as "FurSuits," and The Kaleidoscope,<sup>2</sup> an annual conference educating underrepresented minorities about becoming business school professors, whose members are called "BusinessSuits." Utilizing introspection and netnography, consumer acculturation theory is employed to understand what happens when customers with presumably divergent cultures collide within a servicescape, and how marketing managers may manage those interactions.

The next section overviews consumer acculturation and CCI and provides the context for the heterophilous groups. The following section presents a description of the dataset and analysis approach. Next, the major insights of the data analysis are discussed: first, how the interaction processes of acculturation, cooperation, coopetition, and competition shape customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Second, a discussion of five key tools marketing managers may use to help mitigate potential conflict that may arise during CCI. Finally, there is a discussion that includes implications of the results.

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## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Consumer acculturation

When customers are faced with an unfamiliar social context within the marketplace, such as the aforementioned conference attendees, they look for cues within a consumption setting that allow them to learn about the normative rules of that setting (Peñaloza, 1994). Consumer acculturation explains how customers glean knowledge about the consumption environment in order to navigate new cultural marketplaces (Berry, 1980; Peñaloza & Gilly, 1999). Essential to consumer acculturation is the opportunity for experiential customer learning. Just as Mexican and Haitian immigrants are able to translate cues that help them understand differences between their culture of origin and the host culture, so too are customers able to learn from, and participate within, a social servicescape (Oswald, 1999; Peñaloza, 1994; Peñaloza & Gilly, 1999). Acculturative learning reflects the interaction by which individuals decipher the cultural cues of, and are involved in, the social environment (Wenger, 1999). When confronted with unfamiliar consumption environments, consumers may interact with unknown and perhaps culturally distant actors, which can lead to cultural clashes. Well-planned servicescape design and supporting processes, including management interventions, may curtail failed service encounters (Griffiths & Gilly, 2012).

### 2.2. Customer-to-Customer Interaction (CCI)

Customers play numerous roles that may enhance or detract from a service experience (Davies, Baron, & Harris, 1999). This ability to influence each other's service experience stems from the interaction that typically occurs between customers known as Customer-to-Customer Interaction (CCI). Unlike Consumer-to-Employee Interaction (CEI), CCI occurs while the service happens and may occur pre- and/or post-purchase (Venkat, 2007).

CCI was once thought to be a spontaneous, uncontrollable phenomenon; thus, CCI research focuses on compatibility management, or "attracting homogenous consumers to the service environment" (Martin & Pranter, 1989, p. 7). Despite an extensive study of CCI in the services and retailing literature, the mainly mono-cultural context with which these investigations took place leaves unanswered questions concerning effective implementation of compatibility management in culturally diverse marketplaces (Nicholls, 2010).

An exception is Johnson and Grier (2013). Their work suggests that customers implicitly recognize some aspects of CCI as controllable. They demonstrate that customers have their own expectations of marketing management's role in conflict management. Expectations of managerial involvement, combined with increasing marketplace diversity are imperative for marketing managers to find ways to manage interactions between culturally dissimilar customers (Johnson & Grier, 2013).

## 3. Methods

This article adds to the field's knowledge of CCI by addressing the following questions: How do culturally dissimilar customer groups perceive sharing service space with one another? What type of treatment will these respective customers expect to receive from the Hotel marketing management? How can marketing managers best obviate or alleviate CCI conflict?

To address these questions, two means of inquiry are utilized and two distinct datasets are presented. Introspection is employed to study The Kaleidoscope event, in which all of the authors have participated. Since none of the authors were familiar with FurTime prior to attending Kaleidoscope, netnography is used to better understand the cultural perspective of FurSuits. Next, the formation of each dataset is discussed.

### 3.1. The field site: FurTime meets {collides} with Kaleidoscope

FurTime is an annual furry fandom convention. "Furries" are enthusiasts who engage other enthusiasts through the exchange of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic themed art and through the creation and promotion of a furry persona, or Fursona (Gerbasi et al., 2008). Many furries feel connected with one (or more) non-human species. This subculture of consumers commonly takes on different fursonas. For most, being a furry is a way to share common interests and to connect with like-minded others (Gerbas et al., 2008).

The FurTime convention began in 2000 with 388 attendees. 2011's convention attendance grew to 2600 attendees, becoming one of the largest furry conventions in the world. Committees of revolving and unpaid community members organize FurTime. Attendees are responsible for registration, accommodation, and travel cost.

In contrast to FurTime, the Kaleidoscope annual meeting is business-oriented. The conference began in 1994 with the goals of diversifying the faculty of U.S. business schools. Greg Buffett, the primary visionary behind Kaleidoscope, believes that increasing the number of racial minority faculty at business schools would positively impact the future of corporate America. To accomplish this mission, Kaleidoscope implements a marketing campaign that encourages candidates to seek information related to an academic career by applying to the conference.

As the first point of contact with Kaleidoscope and its network of supporters, the annual conference is vital to their overall strategy. This conference impacts candidates' perceptions of Kaleidoscope and the organization's ability to accomplish its set goals. The same hotel (hereafter Hotel) has hosted the annual conference since its inception.

### 3.2. Introspection of the Kaleidoscope

After the 2011 Kaleidoscope conference, the authors (who are all BusinessSuits) conducted an introspection to investigate the CCI phenomenon. Introspection best suits this study for allowing the leveraging of previous memories and encounters in order for the data analysis to be exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory (Gould, 1995). Many fields utilize introspective methodologies as a valid research approach, including psychology, sociology and anthropology (Wallendorf & Brucks, 1993). The approach combines introspection and retrospection (Gould, 1995). Each author was tasked with writing about their personal experiences and interactions with the FurSuits from both emic and etic perspectives. The prompt was straightforward: "Given your experience with the furries, write a couple of pages debriefing your interactions with this subculture." All introspective essays were coded by four authors and reviewed by all six. In order to increase recall, no more than forty-five days after the conference were allowed to upload compositions. The dataset was shared and coded using Atlas.ti. A total of eleven single-spaced pages (6991 words), eleven pictures, and four videos were collected.

### 3.3. Netnography

Netnographic techniques were used to gain background data on the intersections and interactions between the two conventions (and their members sharing the same space). FurTime's website represents a valuable source of netnographic data. This forum was used by FurTime members just prior to, during, and immediately following the FurTime convention. Participation online is voluntary but FurSuits are encouraged to document their experiences and to dialogue with community members. The site facilitates community building by enabling users to share pictures and by providing opportunities for general and topic-specific dialogue. Permission is not required to view or post comments on blog entries.

Protocols for establishing cultural immersion in online settings, such as naturalistic observation in the form of specialized lurking (Kozinets, 2010) and participant observation (Gatson & Zweerink, 2004), are

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