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User-generated content about brands: Understanding its creators and consumers

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ABSTRACT

This consumer research study investigates the motivations and meanings behind young adults creating and consuming user-generated content (UGC) about brands. Service-dominant logic suggests that resources are operant rather than operand and so used/re-used by consumers, eventually breaking down the provider/consumer dichotomy to see the entire logic as working in an actor-to-actor network. This study establishes these two theoretical advances empirically. For the participants, the key issue within the UGC interactions is that of who to trust i.e. source credibility as the resources were used as part of the ongoing identity project of the young adults participating. The findings support this search being within the frame of persons re-using operant resources as part of their wider lives as persons, rather than merely consumers. In this process, actions creating and consuming UGC also underpin potential for personal transformation as the movie *Leaving Pleasantville* proposes. Therefore, the study here contributes a person-centric metaphor of the journey that individuals can be understood as participating in as they interact with brands on the Internet for personal formation and even transformation. The study provides insight and a metaphor to explain a key driver of UGC creation in 21st century postmodern life.

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1. Introduction

Marketers use Web 2.0 to observe and to create virtual space for content creation and yet have still been slow to ask what UGC creation and consumption might mean to their customers. This is the case despite a decade of research indicating the need for marketing managers to focus on consumer meaning (Stern, Thompson, & Arnould, 1998; Strizhakova, Coulter, & Price, 2008). The problem addressed in this study is to understand what motivates young adults (from a sample of students aged 20–25) to generate and consume content? It has already been established that the technology in Web 2.0 changes power relations between consumers and firms. For Web 2.0 is much more open, user-centric, and responsive than the first-generation web and although this was quickly seen as likely to empower firms, it has in fact also empowered consumers (Cheong & Morrison, 2008). We focus on the shift in power from the producer to those making various uses of what is produced in the world of Web 2.0, leading to a culture of peer-to-peer interaction and new possibilities for personal transformation. Within this power shift, there is the issue of source credibility. So our second problem is to consider where users of the product or service within this peer-to-peer network find source credibility.

To address these problems, we designed a study that required young adult participants to record interactions on the Internet connected to brands for four weeks. Then they were invited to reflect on why they had made those interactions. Service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch,

2004) indicates a more active consumer than previously theorized. The application of this theory to the problem provides a basis for understanding the activity motivated by the availability of Web 2.0. As Vargo and Lusch refined their logic, they moved from thinking of producers and consumers to re-conceptualizing parties as “actors” (Lusch & Vargo, 2009). So this study is underpinned by the service-dominant logic (SDL) that reframes marketing from being concerned with firms and consumers exchanging information and knowledge—value in exchange—to focusing on persons networking in exchange activities, actor to actor—value in use (Lusch & Vargo, 2009). Already one of the unintended consequences of Web 2.0 interactivity is that it is not simply a tool for firms to use as part of their communication with customers. Web 2.0 can empower these very same consumers. Web 2.0 can lead them to question the firm’s authority and trustworthiness and to place their trust elsewhere when evaluating source credibility. This re-balancing of power in the relationship between a firm and its customers is what is at the heart of the Vargo and Lusch insight to rename these players “actors.” We also draw from the consumer culture theory (CCT) approach to investigate the use made by these young people as they make use of business brands in their wider lives. Together, these two theories inform our study of what motivates them to consume and generate content on branded websites.

SDL suggests that resources are operant rather than operand and so used/re-used by consumers, eventually breaking down the provider/consumer dichotomy to see the entire logic as working in an actor-to-actor network. This study establishes these two theoretical advances empirically. Smith, Fischer, and Chen (2012) identified three streams of brand-related UGC research. This study contributes to the strand

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“search by the consumer for trustworthy sources of advice.” Our work contributes to the topic of source credibility. We emphasize that it needs to be placed in a wider setting of meaning creation by young persons. We contribute to theory that this is what persons are doing: reworking these resources now available to them, not merely passive consumers of brands and advice on whom to trust in a branded world. These activities offer potential for personal transformation by connecting the content of websites to networks of virtually connected persons. To capture that we also contribute a metaphor—the journey through a labyrinth—a journey both within and beyond the self to supplement current typologies of users to better encapsulate the transformative potential of creating and consuming UGC connected to brands transformation, we understand as taking place in the context of ongoing exponential social transformation (Drucker, 1994), since ongoing identification processes lead to transformation over time.

The world of Web 2.0 enables the focal point for individuals to be the self and self-fulfillment in a virtual world. This enables a move towards a “narcissistic” society, to use a term coined by Lasch (1979), for a self-oriented form of formation and transformation to become the daily life of the person. It also affirms and provides an updated illustration of the focus of Belk’s seminal paper where he drew attention to possessions as creators of personal identity rather than merely purchased goods (1988). Sources of credibility are addressed as a gateway to possessing. This develops Belk’s work into the virtual world of Web 2.0.

The study finds that young people indeed draw operant resources from interaction with branded websites to use in their wider life goals. For we provide understanding of how young people create meaning (for themselves, as persons, rather than themselves narrowly in the role of consumers) through interactions with brands that embrace this change of power and ownership of brands. In this study of meaning, we define meaning as that sense of making use of resources to transform the self. This draws on McCracken (2008) where the material world is a world of meanings in use. We interpret practices in terms of creating UGC as potentially meaning-laden and therefore to do with ongoing identity construction as personal transformation. We contribute to this area of anthropological meaning making to interpret those that have been seen as consumers as actually taking part in a wider process of self-creation and re-creation. This allows us to consider how personal transformation might fit as an explanation of behavior in creating and consuming UGC. We designed an interpretive consumer study to explore motivations behind the recent, yet quickly very popular practice of UGC. We focused on a small section of the “web-savvy global youth culture” (Strizhakova et al., 2008, p.82) to generate this insight.

2. Context

Web 2.0 enabled social networking site technology (SNS) that Wikipedia (2014) defines as “a platform to build social networks or social relations among people who share interests, activities, backgrounds or real-life connections.” Facebook is a typical site in that every time the user goes online, a web advertisement takes up a prominent section of the page. Power was thought to lie in the increased ability to advertise to consumers and to extract sales income from these consumers—this is a picture of a world where producers retain power. But what has happened is that the power has been distributed across all users of social media. It has been found that social media networking upsets firm-controlled power relations, particularly in digital marketing communications (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009). Jenkins and Deuze (2008, pp.8–9) summarize the relevant change in power relations now that social media are open to all via Web 2.0 when they write, “We also need to factor changes in consumer behavior and relations... Users are increasingly understood as another group which helps to generate and circulate content rather than as simply a market for corporately produced materials.”

Twenty years after Drucker’s prediction, our context is a knowledge economy and the young people in this study are all university students

preparing for careers as knowledge workers. Drucker (1994) said that this was a coming change in the human condition. Certainly, the focus has become very inward (also prophesied by Lasch, 1979). The focus is personal, is internal—and personal transformation is on the agenda, understood at the very least as change—in an environment where social change is a given and personally transformative technological advance an expectation—the very latest being the Apple Watch. Our findings demonstrate in practice the conclusion of Choi, Ko, and Megehee (2014, p. 2918) who note that today “identity is created by information.” Thus, the purpose of finding the information is to create ourselves.

3. Concepts relevant to the creation of UGC

We focus on how the meaning of the brand is made by consumers in the light of recent acceptance of the concept of the customer as co-creator of value in the service-dominant view of marketing. We connect SDL to consumer culture theory (CCT); this enables us to re-frame the consumer as a person with life projects requiring various resources, including brands. To develop this understanding of the person “leaving Pleasantville” and journeying through life, we draw upon social identity theory for insight from brand identification research.

3.1. Service-dominant logic and CCT

In their seminal paper, Vargo and Lusch (2004) trace the development of contemporary marketing thought back to its roots in classical economics, in which markets are founded on the exchange of tangible goods for money. They argue that early marketing thought tended to focus on operand resources, that is, resources on which an act is performed to produce an effect. From this starting point, marketing became the act of embedding value in operand resources to increase product value to enhance exchange value. This line of theoretical development culminated in the marketing mix approach (McCarthy, 1960), in which product characteristics, promotion techniques, and distribution strategies combine to lock value into the product offer. The focus of marketing theory rested firmly on this ultimate product offer that marketers strove to make as attractive as possible in a given transaction. Vargo and Lusch note that with the advent in the 1990s of interactive services and relationship marketing, the focus moved to operand resources as the prime source of competitive advantage. These are active, indeed self-organizing and controlled by their owners. This was not perceived by firms at the advent of widespread Internet access, when the manager’s imagination led to notions of ever more intrusive one-way communications through advanced digital marketing (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009). Yet with hindsight, Deighton and Kornfeld note that what empowered firms also empowered consumers. They advocate using the word “person” rather than “consumer,” as the literal meaning of that word is too narrow for today’s empowered buyer. The person is the subject not the object in the service for service exchange (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

The study here conceptualizes SNS UGC as essentially an operand resource (see Fig. 1 below) generated outside the organization and therefore out with its direct control. This is not the most common view among marketers of brands. We find that this nexus of the SDL literature and the CCT literature provides the space for this work on how consumers search for information and build trust in their search for personal transformation. We consciously develop a further response to Arnould, Price, & Malshe’s 2006 paper “Toward a cultural resource-based theory of the customer,” in following in their footsteps by depicting “how operand resources of customers and firms come together to create value through patterns of experiences and meanings embedded in the cultural life-worlds of consumers” (p.91). For, as Fig. 1 below demonstrates, consumers are in fact engaged on a life project with goals and resources that embrace the economic and the branded, but are not dominated by them. Hence our focus on a person or actor or peer rather than the narrower conception: consumer.

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