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Being sub-culturally authentic and acceptable to the mainstream: Civilizing practices and self-authentication

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ABSTRACT

The practices used by members of consumer tribes to achieve mainstream acceptance remain under-researched. Consumers seek tribal membership as part of a larger life theme or identity goal, yet the divergent nature of their tribe may hinder this desire for self-authentication. The research examines how members of one consumer tribe, Furries (or anthromorphs), “come out” with outsiders, thereby taking the ultimate transformative step. The findings demonstrate that Furries desire to disclose is framed around three competing concerns: being true to oneself, true to the tribe, and compassionate to outsiders. In balancing both egosystem and ecosystem goals Furries engage in three civilizing practices: reframing, spiritualizing, and playfulness. These practices enable members of consumer tribes to remain true to themselves but also expand the boundaries of their identities thereby gaining the mass acceptance they desire as part of a larger life theme.

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1. Introduction

The literature on consumer tribes typically frames members as seeking to define their identity apart from the dominant ideology (Cova, Kozinets, & Shankar, 2007). Typically studies focus on how consumers build and maintain identity boundaries between insiders and outsiders and protect tribal resources from appropriation by marketers (Arsel & Thompson, 2011). For example, Sinclair and Dolan (in press) identify how hard rock music fans resist the label ‘heavy metal’ as it trivializes the cultural resources that enable tribal members to free themselves from societal norms. Resistance allows tribe members to self-authenticate (achieve and maintain true self) by engaging in private authenticating acts (“self-referential behaviours of uniqueness and individuality” (Arnould & Price, 2000, 160)) or intra-community authoritative performances (“shared traditions and the connection between individual and community” (ibid)). For many consumers, engaging in these two acts is enough to self-authenticate.

However, some consumers draw on tribal membership as part of a larger life theme or identity project (Healy & Beverland, 2013) whereby they desire to expand the boundaries of the tribe to achieve mainstream acceptance. Life themes are defined as sub-conscious identity issues that can surface as “profound existential concerns or tensions that

individuals address in daily life” and are “deeply rooted in personal history [and] highly central to one’s core concept of self” (Fournier, 1998, 346). Relationships are usually sought to help resolve life theme tensions, and this becomes increasingly important during major periods of identity change. For example, Fatshionistas or plus sized women desire acceptance by mainstream fashion houses (so they can have access to a diverse range of designer clothing). In so doing, they act as institutional entrepreneurs and seek to achieve legitimacy by flaunting their physicality within the mainstream to mobilize support and overcome social stigma (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2014). Star Trek fans also access marketplace resources to overcome characterizations of superficiality (Kozinets, 2001). Healy and Beverland (2013) identified how tribal members saw their collective identity as a marketplace resource to find wider meaning and success in their personal and social lives. However, they did not examine the practices such consumers used to do so.

This pursuit of a life theme can lead to consumers engaging in marketplace crossings that help balance ideals of self. Thompson and Holt (2004) identify males’ questing to restore perceptions of masculinity via symbolic ‘phallic’ consumption. Belk and Costa (1998) demonstrate consumers’ reconnections with masculinity by engaging in fantasy retreats. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) draw attention to weekend bikers’ roleplaying as aiding connections with manhood. These studies demonstrate a process of role straightening via hyper-genderized performances/transformation that aligns self-identity with normalized society. Notably, these contexts are congruent with dominant societal

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norms (e.g., notions of ‘masculinity’). However, members of divergent identity groups also need to engage in marketplace crossings in pursuit of their true self. Unlike the consumers in the aforementioned studies (white males) members of divergent tribes often face significant barriers (even amongst close relations or loved ones) in expanding their identity boundaries into wider society (Gedro, 2009; Peñaloza, 1994; Thompson & Hirschman, 1998).

Research on consumer tribes has focussed on how tribes maintain their place on the fringe of the market through acts of resistance and re-appropriation that define their boundaries (Cova & Cova, 2002; Goulding, Shankar, & Canniford, 2013). Less attention has been paid to how tribal members normalize identity with people external to the community. Research has looked at concealment of identity during marketized border crossings (Hirschler, 2011; Peñaloza, 1994), however the research wishes to understand this process under goals of identity disclosure. Although Gedro (2009) states this may lead individuals to conceal their true self—at one extreme vegans may eat meat in order to avoid strained professional and personal relationships (Hirschler, 2011)—Arnould and Price (2000) suggest that concealment is ultimately unsatisfying and leads to perceptions of fakeness, which prevents true self-authentication. With this in mind the research asks: how do consumers, fearing stigmatization, expand the boundary of tribal identity in order to achieve self-authentication in society (while simultaneously maintaining fealty to the tribe)?

The paper has the following structure. First, the literature is reviewed and locates the study within self-disclosure and consumer identity traditions. Second, the paper outlines a netnographic research design. Third, the findings demonstrate three civilizing practices (reframing, spiritualizing, and playfulness) that help authenticate disclosure of Furies transformative and divergent selves, manage tensions during boundary expansion, and draw on market resources to achieve egocentric and ecocentric goals. In closing the paper discusses the theoretical and managerial implications, with suggestions for future research.

2. Transforming the Self through Disclosure

2.1. Self-disclosure of divergent identities

The social psychology literature shows that motivation to disclose can be influenced by the nature of a concealed identity and type of associated stigma (Corrigan, Markowitz, Watson, Rowan, & Kubiak, 2003; Crocker & Major, 1989). Self-disclosure has been defined as a goal-oriented behaviour, whereby people maintain expected outcomes they wish to achieve from activities, such as gaining social support and strengthening relationships with others (Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010). Self-disclosure is part of the process of self-authentication and practices that normalize stigmatized behaviours in order to restore equilibrium within postmodern society (Arnould & Price, 2000). As a self-governed practice self-disclosure is used to aid sharing of personal information between people to enhance social interaction, express thoughts and feelings, develop a sense of self, and cultivate intimacy with close others (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). Self-disclosure can be an important component for building relationship bonds (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010).

The social psychology literature classifies self-disclosure goals as self-image (egosystem) goals and compassionate (ecosystem) goals (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). Self-image goals aim to satisfy self-governed desires, such as co-ordinating self-identity, achieving catharsis, and avoiding undesirable states such as social rejection (Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010). Compassionate goals are outward focused and consider the well-being and growth of society and/or close others, and preventing negative impact upon others. This suggests that expanding tribal identity boundaries in order to achieve self-authentication involves practices that (a) enable consumers to maintain their tribal identity, (b) help other tribal members achieve legitimacy, and (c) do

so without placing undue mental stress on non-tribal members. In negotiating these three potentially conflicting outcomes, disclosure motivation goals are likely to lead to positive behavioural outcomes including the attachments people form with others and the environment (Higgins, 1998; Omarzu, 2000; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009; Rodriguez & Kelly, 2006).

Consumer culture theory frames consumer-market collaboration as a means to explore and “mediate” heterogeneous identities without boundaries (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, 869). However, Thompson (2014, 155) states that “discriminatory constraints and institutional boundaries” that result from disadvantage and stigmatization can moderate the fluidity, intermingling and hybridization between culture and commercial offerings. Individuals waiting or unable to disclose identities that fall outside of societal norms, including alternative lifestyles (Pantazopolous & Bettany, 2010), sexual preference (Peñaloza, 1996), and fashioned ideals of beauty (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013), risk positioning themselves as targets for prejudice and social rejection (Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010), which therefore involves a level of exposure and vulnerability on the individual’s part. As a consequence Thompson (2014) draws attention to how contesting cultural stigmatization can foster market transformation.

The authors explore how members of one tribe draw on marketplace resources when self-disclosing in ways that balance self-image and compassionate goals. Considering self-disclosure can form part of a person’s value driven goals the authors suggest understanding disclosure of non-normative and divergent identities can help understand how consumers use marketplace resources to overcome stigmatization and achieve their identity goals. However, as highlighted by Pantazopolous and Bettany (2010), investigations of non-normative identity groups have neglected many consumer groups, which use consumption as a transformation device. To date, limited attention has been given to understanding and isolating the practices that assist self-disclosure (Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010). Investigating consumers’ identity disclosure practices should aid understanding consumer transformation.

2.2. Zoomorphism and identity transformation

Zoomorphism is the “attribution of animal traits to human beings, deities, or inanimate objects” (VandenBos, 2007, 1011). Zoomorphism has anthropological roots as many cultural groups and tribes have been documented as using the practice to claim spiritual and symbolic power (Brown, 2010), and have adopted animal likeness to manifest unique forms of self-expression (Brown, 2010; Fausto, 2007; Healy & Beverland, 2013). Recently zoomorphism has seen a post-modern resurgence within various sub-culture groups as a form of self-reinvention that traverses a relationship with the marketplace. Notable examples of its commercialization can be seen with the popularisation of cosplay (a modern Japanese-English mash-up of the term, costume role-play, originated in Japan during the 1980s by game designer, Takahashi Nobuyuki) taking place at various anime, manga, game, comic book, and science fiction conventions. Ekpo et al. (in press) demonstrate that annual attendance of the community driven event, *FurTime*, involves the exchange of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic artwork and production of zoomorphic identities (Furies express their animal transformations through the design, construction, and wearing of animal costumes known as fursuits). And, in more extreme cases paying for full body leopard print tattoos or even animal body modifications (a quick Google image search of sub-dermal horn implants provides an example of more permanent zoomorphic transformations).

The authors view zoomorphism as a process of transformative consumption—in this case from human-to-human plus animal or at the extreme end, animal alone. As identified by Healy and Beverland (2013) zoomorphism maintains ties to anthropomorphism (the psychological process that involves the association of human traits onto inanimate objects and animals in an effort to understand them; Ahuvia, 2008). This is

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