



Seriously Engaged Consumers: Navigating Between Work and Play in Online Brand Communities

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Abstract

Seriously engaged consumers create and manage online communities dedicated to brands or consumption activities, but this type of engagement remains under-examined. This study explores the contextual triggers and individual drivers of serious engagement in online communities and explains how seriously engaged consumers navigate the intersection between work and play that characterizes serious engagement. We draw from qualitative data spanning over a decade on the trajectory of four seriously engaged consumers who created and/or managed an online brand community for players of Microsoft's Xbox. Three contextual triggers (market-specific practices, marketplace shifts, sociotechnical advancements), when aligned with individual drivers (relevant skills and expertise, entrepreneurial vision, personal commitment), motivate consumers who have been engaged with a brand or consumption activity to deepen their engagement, becoming managers of or launching an online brand community. Consumers can navigate the in-between space of serious leisure through knowledge development or searching for personal fulfillment and/or external recognition. These findings support several contributions to the literature on consumer engagement: demonstrating the vital role seriously engaged consumers play in online community development; drawing attention to contextual triggers and individual drivers of consumer engagement that have not been addressed in prior research; and exploring how consumers navigate the in-between space arising from serious engagement in online communities, finding routes that can lead to deeper engagement in the community itself or redirect it to alternative targets.

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Introduction

Engagement in online brand communities involves interactions among community members and between members and the brand (Brodie et al. 2013). Highly engaged consumers are more likely to consider their engagement not only as mere play or an end in itself, but also as a serious commitment to achieving a desired identity or positions within a group (Grayson 1999; Taylor 2006) — that is, they take it seriously. Hence, we propose the concept of *serious engagement* to refer to the incorporation

of skills, knowledge, and responsibilities into the activities of creating and managing online brand communities. Serious engagement involves specific interactions, such as moderating discussions among community members and solving managerial and technical problems. Because serious engagement combines aspects of work and play (two domains frequently experienced as opposed to each other), it is fertile ground for tension.

Prior research has shown that consumer engagement in online communities may range from relatively low to extremely high levels (Brodie et al. 2013). Kozinets (1999), for instance, explains that consumer identification with an online community varies depending on two interrelated interests consumers may have: (1) in consumption activities and (2) in developing relations with other participants. This understanding supports

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the identification of four distinct types of online community members, each with a different level of engagement in the online community: devotees, insiders, tourists, and minglers. Recently, Martineau and Arsel (2017) revisited these types of engagement, linking each to different value-creating practices that require specific skills. The authors propose a new engagement-based typology of online community members that includes tourists, aspirers, utilizers, and communals.

Such typologies have pointed to relevant factors driving engagement, and they are useful for understanding that some consumers are more engaged than others. Nevertheless, they do not explain why consumers assume a position of serious engagement and how consumers maintain that level of engagement. Prior discussions on the intensity of consumers' engagement in brand communities have accounted for the role of relationships among community members (e.g., Kozinets 2002) and/or between consumers and the focal brand or activity (e.g., Cova and White 2010; De Valck, van Bruggen, and Wierenga 2009) as drivers of engagement. But we know little about contextual triggers other than relationships (e.g., industry and market-related aspects) that might inspire consumers to develop and maintain high levels of engagement with online consumption communities. As noted by Vibert and Shields (2003) and underscored by Brodie et al. (2011, p. 260), considering the contextual nature of engagement is of extreme importance, as “engagement, separated from its social, cultural, and political context, is a contradiction that ignores deeply embedded understandings about the purpose and nature of engagement itself.”

Despite growing scholarly attention to the individual drivers of engagement in the context of interactive marketing (Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie 2014; Pagani and Malacarne 2017), the personal motivations of consumers who pursue continued and high levels of engagement in online environments also remain unclear. Aiming to address these gaps, we propose the first of our two research questions:

RQ1: What contextual triggers and individual drivers prompt consumers to become seriously engaged in online brand communities?

Even though serious engagement in online brand communities has gone virtually unexplored by marketing researchers, studies of serious leisure (e.g., Stebbins 2007) and consumer dedication to activities (e.g., Luo, Ratchford, and Yang 2013; Seregina and Weijs 2017) provide relevant insights into understanding the benefits and challenges of sustaining high levels of engagement. In analyzing cosplayers, Seregina and Weijs (2017) note that time demands, precarious play-mood, competence plateaus, and material costs threaten the maintenance of these consumers' engagement with the consumption activity. The authors found that cosplayers individually adjust their consumption practices to minimize tensions and to preserve the ludic and playful character of the activity. While these solutions at the individual level were sufficient for highly engaged cosplayers to maintain their participation in the activity, consumers who are seriously engaged in online brand communities may not be able to individually adjust their practices without threatening the development and even the continued existence of the brand community. Therefore,

they may need to find different ways to navigate the in-between space between work and play to sustain both their position in the community and the community itself. Hence, we propose a second research question:

RQ2: How can consumers navigate the in-between space of serious engagement in online communities?

To address these research questions, we undertook an extended qualitative study of a Brazilian online customer-managed brand community for players of Xbox, a brand owned by Microsoft. In interpreting our data, we draw from research on the drivers of consumer engagement in online communities (Brodie et al. 2011, 2013; Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie 2014; Hsieh and Chang 2016), as well as consumer culture theory (CCT) research addressing the overlapping of work and play that is characteristic of high levels of engagement in leisurely consumption activities (Seregina and Weijs 2017; Tumbat and Belk 2011; Woermann and Rokka 2015).

This study investigates individual and contextual incentives for consumers to deepen their engagement, and examines the trajectories of four seriously engaged consumers to discuss their efforts to sustain – at least for a time – serious engagement. In doing so, it contributes to the interactive marketing literature by extending the understanding of extreme levels of engagement in online brand communities (Brodie et al. 2013; Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie 2014; Pagani and Malacarne 2017). This study also contributes to advancing managerial practices by calling attention to seriously engaged consumers and their vital role in the creation, growth, and continued existence of consumer-managed online brand communities.

The following sections introduce our theoretical framework, research methods, and context; describe our findings; and discuss their implications for interactive marketing research and practice.

Conceptual Background

Consumer engagement in online communities has been considered a psychological state or set of behaviors that is voluntary, pleasurable, and positively experienced by consumers (e.g., Baldus, Voorhees, and Calantone 2015; Brodie et al. 2013; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001). In this sense, engagement can be likened to play, which has been defined as “voluntary, a source of joy and enjoyment, [...] carefully isolated from the rest of life, [and] unproductive [as] it creates no wealth or goods, thus differing from work or art” (Caillois 1961, p. 9). Marketing and consumer researchers have explored play in relation to the environmental and social conditions that interfere with and result from consumers' playful activities. Hence, these studies may support our examination of engagement as derived from individual and contextual elements. Table 1 summarizes the key individual and contextual drivers of consumer engagement accounted for in the online communities literature.

The literature on individual drivers of consumer engagement is extensive, and some studies have attended to the context of online consumption communities in particular (e.g., Baldus,

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