

Working title: How do everyday relations of mutual aid sustain online consumption communities?
Excavating the commons in the cracks of platform culture.

Area: Marketing/ Operations & Supply Chain

Key words

consumer community, platform, consumer culture, digital common, social relations

This paper illuminates how consumption communities provide a context for members to sustain relations of mutual aid between their members. We followed two directives for this research. The first was to critically consider how digital consumption communities are currently understood within the consumer theory by engaging with conceptualisations of subcultural consumption, brand communities and consumer tribes (Canniford, 2011a; Moufahim et al, 2018; Wickstrom et al., 2021). The second directive was to critically explore the everyday social relations which arise within digital consumption communities (Darmody and Zwick, 2020; Wickstrom et al., 2021; Zwick and Bradshaw, 2016) through the use of netnographic methodology (Kozinets, 2020). Our findings provide practical insight into how the consumption community provides a context for enacting social relations *between* and the production *of* their members. Through these practical insights, we go on to theorise how digital consumption communities can provide a context through which members might self-organise a digital common (Arvidsson, 2020; De Angelis, 2017) within online platforms through their everyday relations of mutual aid. In closing, we reflect on how this everyday use of consumption communities reflects a larger tactic of subverting the logic dominant marketized structures (such as those of the platform) in the cracks of contemporary consumer culture.

This research illuminates how consumption communities provide a social and cultural context (Mutch, 2021) for everyday relations of *mutual aid*, where members recognise the value of each person and take responsibility for one another through everyday social relationships (Graeber, 2004; Springer 2020). To do so, we follow De Carteau (1998) in exploring 'The lived practice of everyday life' through the context of online, common interest consumption communities. It is from this foundation we consider how the 'linking value' (Cova, 1997; Cova and Cova, 2002) of *specific* consumption categories of interest might provide a backdrop to a more essential form of consumer community through which members enact relations of *mutual aid*. Much like subcultures of consumption and brand communities, the two communities for this research concern a specific class. One is a fan community of a rock band, the other a community for readers of fantasy and sci-fi literature. Yet, these interests offer the opportunity multifaceted consumption practices which can vary in terms of cultural preference and taste as a form of cultural (or subcultural) market (Choi and Burnes, 2016; de Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan, 2007; Skandalis et al, 2019). Due to this, these common interests offer various fluid and playful forms of consumption through books, adapted tv series, live performances or records, much like the ephemeral consumer communities often labelled as neo-tribes (Goulding et al, 2013; Wickstrom et al, 2021).

Data collection for this study involved a four-month period of netnographic immersion, in which the researcher's experiences and observations were included in the data as an immersion journal (in a similar method of collection and reflection as the field notes of an ethnographer) (Kozinets, 2020). This involved the lead researcher entering the selected data sites on a weekly basis for a period of four months and taking notes of their observations and experiences (Kozinets, 2020) as well as screenshots to further contextualise the data and gain and retain a feel for the content and dynamic of the communities (Canavan, 2021). Ten interviews were conducted from an insider perspective with

members of the online communities to add further depth and insight to the data set across this period. The interviews were semi-structured and conversational and performed from the perspective of an insider to the communities. This meant that the researcher was able to ask additional questions and use prompts where necessary to further clarify information which appeared illuminating around the respective interests (Kozinets, 2020).

We found four practical themes through which members self-organise to meet each other's needs through the context of the online consumption community.

These consist of:

Contextualising everyday engagement: Both of the communities in question were much more ingrained into their members everyday lives than a typical consumer tribe (Goulding et al, 2009), and remained stable like a brand community or subculture of consumption (Canniford, 2011a). Members modified their behaviour to meet the needs of others and themselves through providing and consuming information, knowledge and opinion around their interest. This was true of how members related to each other in the community as well as to the interest around which the community developed.

Affording social recognition: members developed additional forms of social relations through which they empathised with and recognised themselves through the feelings and experiences of others. This indicates a sense of social recognition signals a relationship of shared sociality and an embeddedness into a social structure which underpins mutual relations within communities (Arnould and Rose, 2015).

Solidarity, intimacy and interdependence: in online social and emotional engagement members took responsibility for one another. This also facilitated another instance of mutual aid through providing a shared critical analysis of what members lacked or struggled with outside of the community (Spade, 2020). For some members, this feeling of solidarity fulfilled a need for further socialisation around their interest. For others, there was an additional element of emotional engagement through their common interest and the community space in which they felt safe to discuss it when they hadn't done so with friends or family.

Alternative markets: It is difficult to separate a community culture from a form of market (Arvidsson et al, 2018). In this instance, tangible manifestations of social relations were often sent and received in the form of gifts and social invitations.

These findings provide practical insight into how the consumption community provides a context for enacting social relations *between* and the production *of* their members (Graeber, 2011a) in the as a form of mutual aid. Through these practical insights, we go on to theorise how digital consumption communities can provide a context through which members might self-organise a digital *common* within online platforms. In doing so, we outline how the consumption interest of specific music or literature forms can lead to instances of members putting the community before the interest itself, rather than the consumption interest before the community (Canniford, 2011a). This is found to be consistent with recent scholarship has asserted that communities do not simply regulate the commons, members also define them and give them value through their social relations (Arvidsson, 2020; De Angelis, 2017). In closing, we consider how everyday tactics of the common person (De Certeau, 1988) serve to organise and sustain everyday common spaces which exist within their subjectivities in between the logics of the private market or the public state (De Angelis, 2017).

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