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Why subcultures are different from brand communities and the meaning for marketing discourse

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose is to investigate the concepts of subculture, subculture of consumption and brand community with a view to better understanding these three groups and their distinct differences.

Design/methodology/approach – The method relies on a literature review and a case study of sporting subculture. Using commentary from the surfing community as an example of subcultural groups we see how they define themselves against consumption oriented groups.

Findings – Subcultures are completely different from brand communities (or subcultures of consumption) and while they can be said to share certain common traits the broad philosophical foci of these two groups are vastly incommensurate with one another.

Practical implications – Marketing discourse has perpetually conflated subculture with forms of consumption, i.e. brand communities, yet they are different. By acknowledging and interrogating the key differences marketers may better apprehend the needs, character and activities of subcultural participants and market more strategically.

Originality/value – By dissecting the differences between subculture, subculture of consumption and brand community, this paper offers a re-conceptualisation of these terms in marketing discourse. In doing so, this paper seeks to dispel some fundamental misapprehensions in marketing and offer an entirely fresh perspective on the value and meaning of subculture.

Keywords Cultural studies, Brands, Consumption, Marketing, Consumer behaviour

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

The presence of subculture across a variety of disciplines has been well established and subsequently investigated for many years. Emerging in artistic, musical, cultural, sociological, anthropological and intellectual spheres and the concept of subculture endures.

In the instance of marketing, subculture also features prominently. Yet, in recent years, the meaning of subculture in marketing discourse has been encroached upon by the concept of consumption, hence giving rise to the phrase “subculture of consumption”, which in turn has spawned the study of “brand community”. This paper focuses on the concept of “subculture” in marketing discourse, arguing for a more critical delineation and understanding of subculture in the context of participants and consumption. It is suggested that subculture evolves in a social space anterior to consumption and that current marketing extrapolations such as brand community and subculture of consumption exist but that they must not be conflated with subculture *per se*. While this differentiation might at first appear purely anomalous, the conflation of subcultural and consumptive practices in marketing has led to frequent misrecognition of the socially and historically embedded values inherent to subculture and a failure to comprehend the context of people’s lives. While many marketing scholars have lauded the virtues of pausing to consider the desires, memories and



motivations of the consumer, this fusion of subculture and consumption tends to lead back to an analysis of subculture through the lens of consumption. Thus, this paper argues that while subcultures, subcultures of consumption and brand communities are not considered simply to be all the same thing in marketing, they each get viewed through the same limiting lens of consumption practices. In the cases of brand communities and subcultures of consumption this may not be problematic since the community is formed around and sustained by consumption. However, to view social subcultures simply through the lens of consumption neither explains or comprehends subcultural formation and perpetuation.

A study of subcultures requires a sensitive apprehension of the tendrils that envelop and protect its participants. To date, work in marketing has been done on community, subculture and so forth, yet few studies have transgressed beyond the threshold of a relatively simple analysis of the obvious characteristics attributable to a certain subculture. For instance, Christensen and Olsen's (2002) work on mountain bikers succinctly identifies "sharing and connecting", "escape to nature" and "ride for challenge, thrill and accomplishment" as some of the driving factors behind mountain biker groups. These three over-arching themes repeatedly emerged from the data they collected. Sub-components of the three dominant themes were then analysed; for instance the "escape to nature" construct provoked a series of sub-components including "spiritual connection", "in tune and balance", "harkens back to simpler times" and "holistic sensory experience" among other minor themes (Christensen and Olsen, 2002, p. 494). This kind of "conceptual mapping" is highly familiar to marketing, achievable through a manageable body of data and an effective software programme. However, it tells one little about why these constructs exist, their origins and what intrinsic characteristics these apparent subcultural themes represent about participants. While we might be tempted to look to facile questions of fun, fitness and team spirit, this paper suggests that it is fruitful to progress beyond such a reading and inquire into the core assumptions of subculture and the manifest expression of those core assumptions. Just as Schroeder and Zwick, (2004, p. 24), "view meaning . . . as the result of historical contingencies" this paper contends that subcultural discourses do not simply emerge but rather develop from a sustained cultural heritage. Equally, the consumption practices of subcultural groups, unlike brand communities or subcultures of consumption, do not emerge as dominant discourses within the subculture.

Thus, in this paper, it is intended that the concepts of subculture, subculture of consumption and brand community are interrogated so that we may understand the fundamental differences that underpin these three groups. Further, a study of a sporting subculture is offered by way of demonstrating how the differences between these key groups may be discerned and analysed in a material context.

Origins of the discourse on subculture

Subcultures have come under close scrutiny by marketing scholars for their individualistic and cohesive cultural practices. Yet there is no general definition to date that fully apprehends their structure. At first glance, the term itself "Subculture" with its opening prefix of "Sub" offers us intimation as to the fundamental condition of these groups. They operate beneath culture, eluding ascendant cultural meta-narratives and the surface world of mainstream society. The term "subculture" finds resonance in various fields of study. Western anthropology, with its tradition of studying exotic cultures, has turned its attention to studying more familiar cultures (hence discovering an exoticism and divergence within its own social and cultural spheres McKee, 2003)

but not before establishing its disciplinary parameters through observing foreign culture. Centred around factors such as geography (Morland, 1971), race (Kitano, 1969) and lifestyle choices (Irwin, 1962), anthropologists identified that subcultures existed within a large-scale society and in turn their “value judgments . . . abstract systems, logic and forms of reasoning could vary remarkably even within one nation” (McKee, 2003, p. 12). The practice in anthropology of apprehending divergence within and across cultures has traditionally had an inquisitive but also highly regimenting effect in the comprehension of marginal groups.

This propensity to earmark and relegate communities partially finds its origins in early colonial anthropology giving rise to such terms as “orientalism” to define difference and divergence. The study of orientalism was philosophically intended to understand and embrace difference. However, the Eurocentric views of its participants meant that orientalism became an adjunct to colonialism. Said’s (1978) hallmark work *Orientalism*, along with several other works such as Kabbani’s (1986) *Europe’s Myths of Orient* and Alloula’s (1986) *The Colonial Harem* interrogate the Western attitude towards the East during the last two centuries and outline orientalism as a anthropological movement that worked simultaneously with colonialism to control and subjugate the East. Contemporary anthropology has moved beyond such a culturally relativist view to consider the concept of otherness in the light of discourses surrounding the issue of representation. However, the inclination to understand communities through classification perpetuates in other disciplines.

In contemporary scholarship, the term subculture has come to refer to a manifold scope of social groups and practices, leading to interchangeability with other labels such as cult or sect (Kaplan and Loow, 2002; Campbell, 1987). The contemporary site of investigation into subculture, however, has resided principally within sociology. Sociological discourse has apprehended subculture in multifarious ways. The sociological evolution of the subcultural concept, as it is briefly outlined here, has in turn impacted upon contemporary constructions and understandings of “subculture” and what role subculture indeed performs. Relative to Durkheim’s (1964) theory of mechanical and organic solidarity, in which solidarity is theorised as the desirable norm, his subsequent derivatives of normal and pathological (which might be read as desirable and undesirable influences upon the social whole) implicitly position subcultures as pathological and thus undesirable. Durkheim (1964) recuperates the risk of subcultures being synthesised in this way by later introducing the return of the guild or workgroup who also manifest subcultural characteristics but who also adopt a practical, labour-oriented function. However the paradigm of dominant “healthy” society with its problematic (albeit occasional) deviations forms a foundational aspect of Durkheim’s work. As though to expand further, Parsons (1951) also regards subculture as a problematic deviation from the normative structure. Unlike Durkheim, Parsons theorises subculture as a miniature society, capable, through its own organisational processes, of undermining the cohesive social whole. However, Parsons (1950) also considers that subcultures may thus be rehabilitated into society since they are *per se* familiar with and educated into the normative structure of the subculture; knowledge which may be applied to their re-integration into the dominant culture. Parsons’ synthesis of subculture fits with the prevalent assumption of society as an organic whole, that is to say that inevitably subcultures are construed as problematic deviations from the norm (see also Irwin, 1962).

The Chicago School, with the primacy of the social actor at the vanguard of their theoretical matrix, contextualises subculture differently. Their work gives rise to the

concept of social ecology, elucidating society as a series of “micro-climates” which thus comprise the organic whole which exists in a state of “system equilibrium”. Chris Jenks outlines the potential (and problematic) incorporation of subculture into this theory:

Ecologies exist in equilibrium, the city (Chicago) is to be regarded as an ecological system, yet, empirical evidence reveals that the city demonstrated localized outbreaks of disequilibrium. Should this be accounted for by explanations in terms of individual psychopathology [as Durkheim would have it] or should we attempt to retain the macro-sociological notion of equilibrium by incorporating a series of culturally pathological micro-climates, namely subcultures? (Jenks, 2005, p. 66).

This potential inculcation of subculture as an explanatory panacea to the ills of the normative whole indirectly enforces subcultural status as deviant and problematic, although, at times, useful in its affirming binary relationship with the dominant society. The common link throughout these sociological discourses remains that of subculture as deviant, menacing and representative of a portentous underbelly. This discursive recurrence of subculture as deviant is further illuminated through the demarcation of subculture as criminal and working-class in nature. Ken Gelder points out those subcultural groups enjoyed a historicity that preceded the term subculture itself. However, the social groups depicted by this later term remain constant in form:

Subordinate and marginal social groups had been accounted for in various ways long before this term [subculture] gained currency. The culture of beggars and vagabonds, for example, was described as far back as the fifteenth-century in “beggar-books” which alerted readers to the kinds of tricks and deceptions these people might practice upon them. . . We can think of these compilations as early kinds of sociology, often involving extensive contact between authors and informers. (Gelder and Thornton, 1997, pp. 264-5)

As Gelder’s account testifies, the pre-Victorian assignation of lower-class “low-life” forms the foundation for the invocation of the term subculture as applied to sociological discourse. Later studies by English sociologists into “subcultural groups” invariably resulted in an exposé of lower-class life for the middle-class scholar. This tradition is sublimated into the CCCS theorisation of subculture which then stratifies subculture but further attributes a mode of political resistance to the subcultural agenda. In this respect, the concept of subculture is reformed, no longer referencing an undesirable social sub-element, rather a legitimate counter-force of political resistance emanating nonetheless from the working-class or youth sensibility since both cohorts feel a sense of dispossession of the dominant, normative super-structure. Phil Cohen best describes this ideological re-positioning of subculture:

Subculture invests the weak points in the chain of socialization between the family/school nexus and integration into the work process which marks the resumption of the patterns of the parent culture for the next generation. But subculture is also a compromise solution of two contradictory needs: the need to create and express autonomy and difference from parents and, by extension, their culture and the need to maintain the security of existing ego defenses and the parental identifications which support them (Cohen, 1972, p. 96).

Cohen goes on to make an even more expansive assessment of subculture, in relation to the hegemonic whole:

A distinction can be made between subcultures and delinquency. Many criminologists talk of delinquent subcultures. In fact, they talk about anything that is not middle-class culture as

subculture. From my point of view, I do not think that the middle-class produces subcultures, for subcultures are produced by a dominant culture, not by a dominated culture (Cohen, 1972, p. 97).

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Diane Crane re-iterates this point in her discussion of the CCCS group, commenting it is useful to suppose that “to understand a subculture or a counterculture it is necessary to understand its relationship to both the dominant culture and to the social class within which the subculture or counterculture is emerging” (Crane, 1992, p. 89). These comments from Cohen and Crane illuminate a significant shift in the ways the term subculture is employed and the social activities to which it refers. The underpinning doctrine that subculture metaphorically symbolises criminal, lower-class or pathological (in the tradition of Parsons) elements is subsumed by a newfound positioning of subculture as a licit product of the binary relationship between dominant and inevitably counter-culture.

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It might be argued that this break with classical extrapolations of subculture as representative of a disenfranchised, deviant subset gives way even further to contemporary syntheses of subculture. In legitimating subculture as a politically auspicious counter-culture of resistance, this re-positions subculture back into a culturally and socially relevant framework. Although subculture preserves its “marginal” status, this assignation of subversive social power opens up greater possibilities for how we perceive and situate subculture within dominant discourses.

Subculture in marketing

Michael Solomon comments that:

Consumers' lifestyles are affected by group memberships *within* the society-at-large. These groups are known as subcultures, whose members share beliefs and common experiences that set them apart from others. Every consumer belongs to many subcultures. These memberships can be based on similarities in age, race or ethnic background, place of residence, or even a strong identification with an activity or an art form. Whether “Dead Heads”, “Netizens,” or skinheads, each group exhibits its own unique set of norms, vocabulary, and product insignia (such as the skulls and roses that signify then Grateful Dead) (Solomon, 2004, pp. 472-3).

Solomon's definition signals several critical breaks with traditional discourses of subculture. First, his inclusive statement of subculture as existing “within” society, rather than at its margins (as classical discourse would have it), substantiates the work of both Cohen and Crane. Subculture, then, is simply a portion of society, a visible fragment of the greater whole. Further, Solomon suggests that everyone is part of subculture, thus undermining the concept of the organic whole in the first instance. For, if we are all subculturally allocated by virtue of our intrinsic features (such as age, ethnicity, sexual identity etc.), then there can be no dominant or normative core around which subcultures tangentially orbit.

Further, Solomon's work propounds that subculture requires no marginal, political or subversive agenda to legitimate its existence. Subculture exists by virtue of individual identity and activity or indeed by the act of consumption. Held together by shared experience, language (a point to which we shall return in much greater detail) and habits, subcultures draw on these facets to proliferate. Similarly, Sarah Thornton, in accordance with Solomon, de-politicises subculture, locating it instead within the praxis of consumption and taste (Thornton, 1996). In her work on club cultures, Thornton argues that the habits and consumption within that subculture are

systemically emptied of any political or subversive desire. Rather, the specificity of the subculture is preserved through an assimilation of media images, fashion and habits:

From within the economy of subcultural capital the media is not simply another symbolic good or marker of distinction but a network crucial to the definition and distribution of cultural knowledge (Thornton in Gelder and Thornton, 1997, p. 203).

Thus, at the end of the twentieth century, we could be forgiven for thinking that the role, function and social positioning of subculture would have altered dramatically. Seemingly relinquished from its sociologically based metaphoric signifier of deviance and marginality, subculture now apparently describes a relatively normalised cultural pre-occupation with fragmented, individuated habits and praxis. This definitional transference has perhaps been aided by the sublimation of subculture into disciplines such as marketing and cultural studies, rather than leaving subculture suspended in the net of sociological study. But is this actually the case?

Subcultures of consumption vs brand communities

Marketing discourse has inclined to implicate subculture into its own commodity-oriented sphere of reference by discussing subculture as though manifestly attached to objects which thereby sustain the subculture itself. Within marketing, the concept of subculture has evolved to collide with the idea of selective consumption. For instance, some, in their merging of subculture and consumption, see subcultures as a:

... distinctive subgroup of society that self-selects on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand or consumption activity. Other characteristics of a subculture of consumption include an identifiable, hierarchical social structure, a unique ethos, or set of shared beliefs and values; and unique jargons, rituals and modes of symbolic expression (Schouten and Alexander, 1995, p. 43).

While the first part of this definition solely emphasises the commercial or consumptive practices of subcultures, it is perhaps the second part of this definition that better encapsulates the actual structure of subcultures.

The conceptualisation of subculture in marketing has been most formalistically and elegantly elaborated upon by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) in their influential *Journal of Consumer Research* paper entitled "Brand Community". Muniz and Shau (2005) subsequently returned to the study of brand communities in his recent paper on the Apple Newton community. The 2001 paper laid the foundation for a subsequently accepted notion within marketing discourse of brand as both catalyst for and cornerstone of subcultural communities – subcultures of consumption – which in turn has sporadically usurped the label brand communities. The concept of brand community effectively conflated consumptive and social practices into one arena in which brand reigned supreme. This theorisation of brand consumption as connective social tissue, while shown to be valid in some instances such as those cited in the paper, does not describe the other layers and aspects present in subcultures. For instance, the language, historically embedded concepts and discursive formations that emerge out of subcultures are not found in a discussion on consumptive practices or brand community analyses.

The existence and function of brand communities is irrefutable and, as Muniz and O'Guinn demonstrate, there are communities throughout the world who exist solely because a certain brand or commodity pre-existed. These consumers of a certain brand inevitably find common ground in their collective appreciation of the brand in question

and thus a “brand community” begins to flourish. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001, p. 419) classify this relationship between brand users as a “consciousness of kind” where “members feel an important connection to the brand, but more importantly, they feel a stronger connection toward one another” thus ‘echoing Cova’s (1997, p. 307) assertion that “the link is more important than the thing’”. Brand community members conscientiously trace the evolutionary trajectory of their brand, noting subtle amendments to logo or advertising strategy, thus assessing the ethical, moral and authenticity issues associated with the brand since “members feel that the brand belongs to them as much as it does to the manufacturer” (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001, p. 429). Equally brand community members feel the need to differentiate their brand of choice from others in the marketplace, thereby using brand as a parameter for a self-induced sense of exclusivity. This is evidenced by “George’s” need to scoff at Volvos given that he is a Saab driver (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001, p. 421). Yet curiously, brand community members do not like to be perceived as marginal or counter-social. Muniz and O’Guinn comment that:

Brand community members possess a fairly well-developed understanding of their feelings toward the brand and their connection to other users. Members know it isn’t the most important thing in their lives – not even close – but neither is it trivial. They know they share a social bond around a branded, mass-produced commodity, and believe it is reasonable to do so. They do not wish to be confused with indiscriminate zealots who are “weird nuts” occupying marginal positions (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001, p. 419).

Muniz and O’Guinn locate these lovers of a brand within the discourse of community arguing that they slot into the contemporary theorisation of community via their lack of geographic specificity, demographic diversity and socio-economic liberation thus giving hope to the notion that “community” may survive the onslaught of postmodern fragmentation (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001, p. 415). While this claim to borderless love of a brand is somewhat undermined by the social, economic and demographic homogeneity of their data group, the larger question resides in the fact that brand communities must exist outside of spatio-temporal parameters since they are stagnant, mono-dimensional communities focused around a sole preoccupation. Members do not travel for the brand, have little *face-au-face* contact and make little linkage to each other on any basis other than that of common brand affection. Muniz and O’Guinn effectively confess to this mono-dimensional existence in their remarks:

We see brand communities as liberated from geography and informed by a mass-mediated sensibility in which the local and the mass converge. We also see brand communities as explicitly commercial. Moreover, this is not an occult or naive commercialism, but one that exists in full view, with communal self-awareness and self-reflexivity. We also see brand communities as less ephemeral and their members as more committed than the ones described by Cova (1997) or Maffesoli (1996). Brand communities can be relatively stable groupings, with relatively strong (but rarely extreme) degrees of commitment (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001, p. 415).

Brand communities can afford to be “relatively stable” since there are no elements other than the existence of the brand to either buoy or jeopardise them. Equally, commitment is easily proffered since there is nothing at stake. Commitment does not come at a cost to any other aspect of the member’s life (Figures 1-3).

Subcultures are completely different. While there may be certain aspects of the brand community’s existence that converge in part with life in a subculture, they are in essence two radically divergent entities. However we see the effect of the subculture of

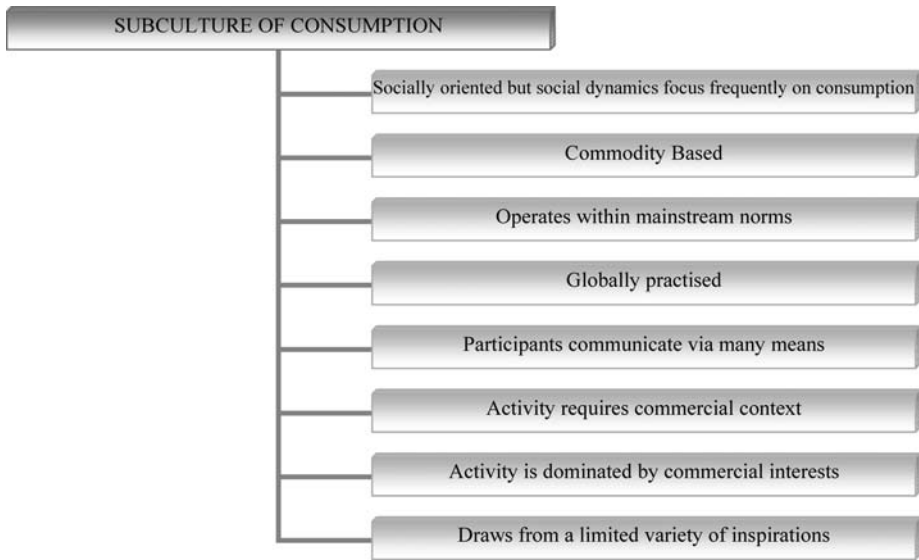


Figure 1.
Attributes of subcultures
of consumption

consumption – later brand community – legacy in marketing studies on legitimate subcultural groups. In Schouten and Alexander’s (1995) study of Harley Davidson riders (1995) and Christensen and Olsen’s (2002) study of Mountain Bike riders the temperament of the subculture itself is sublimated to a superseding pre-occupation

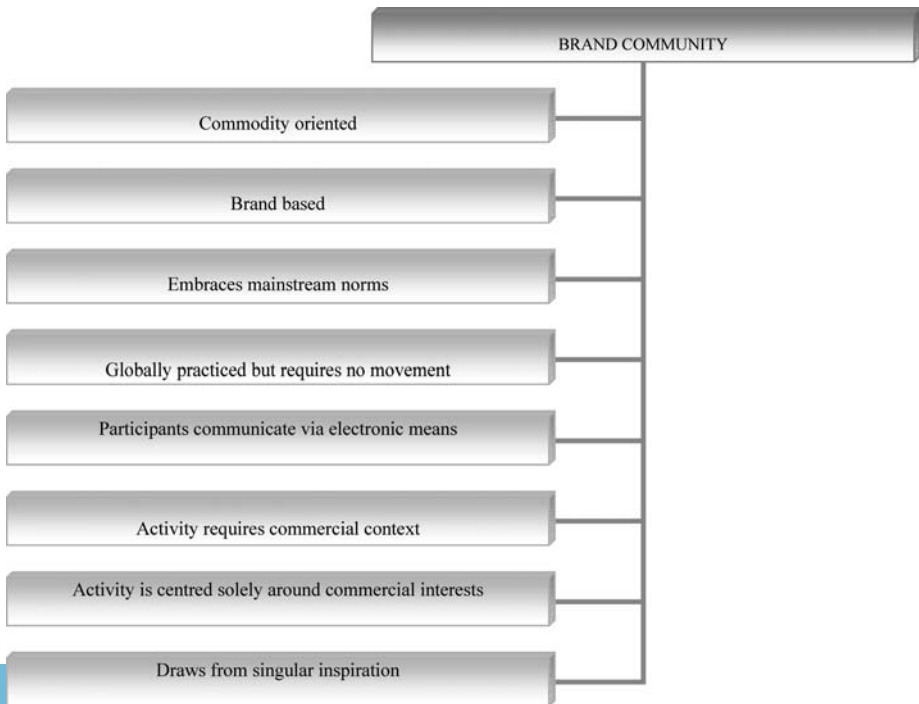
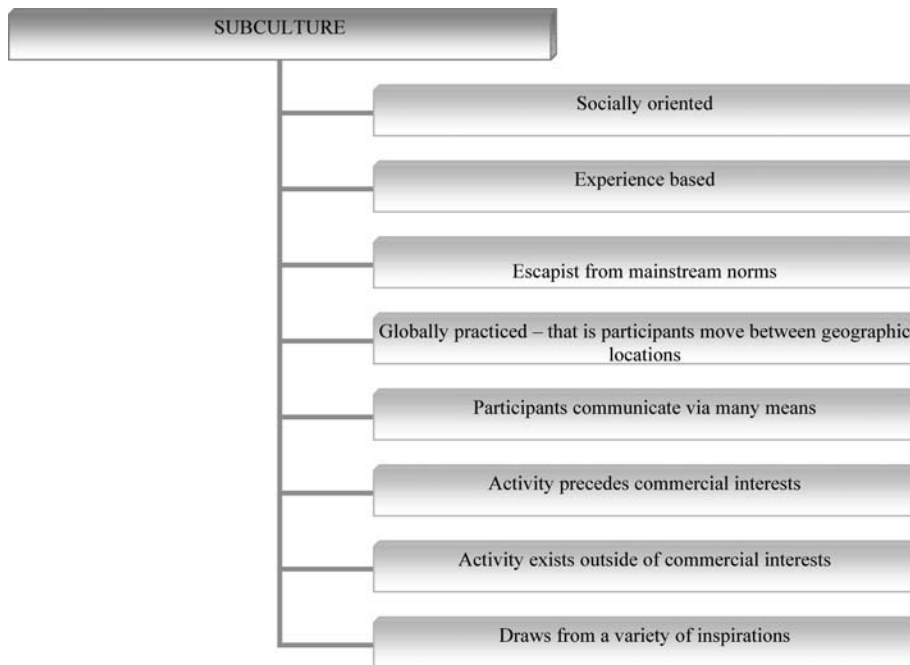


Figure 2.
Attributes of brand
communities



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Figure 3.
Attributes of subcultures

with the consumptive facet of the subculture. As a result, the information unearthed about the subculture itself is cast against the backdrop of consumption and the real value of the information regarding the subculture is lost. This has been the consequence of an emphasis on the “subculture of consumption” theorisation where the actual elements of the subculture in question are forfeited to a linear marketing perspective. In certain studies, the meaning of subculture has been fundamentally misconstrued and thus when classified against subcultures of consumption the key differentiations evaporate. For instance, Steven Kates’ work on gay communities makes this fundamental error of conflation in his discussion of subculture. In typical marketing parlance, he remarks:

The contemporary consumption landscape is visibly rife with consumers who have significant subcultural affinities: goths, punks (Fox, 1987; Hebdige, 1979), gays (Kates, 1998), lesbians (Weston, 1993), fundamentalist Christians (O’Guinn and Belk, 1989), Harley Davidson enthusiasts (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), Star Trek fans (Kozinets, 2001), mountain men (Belk and Costa, 1998), and all manner of consumers forming local, national, global, and even cyber-collectivities. Past subcultural ethnographies emphasize consumption as a critical site where identities, boundaries, and shared meaning are forged (Kates, 2003, p. 389).

Kates (2002) argues that consumption precedes subcultural participation or “consumers . . . have significant subcultural affinities” which firmly locates consumption as the predicate to subculture. Here he suggests that sexual identity, religion, sporting past times and fantasising escapism are all buoyed, linked and fore grounded by consumption when this is clearly not the case. Equally, if we consider Muniz and O’Guinn’s consideration of subculture where, using Schouten and McAlexander’s work

on Harley Davidson riders (a paper which also appears to conflate subcultural and consumptive formation), they comment:

This subculture has certain similarities with brand communities (e.g. shared ethos, acculturation patterns, status hierarchies), but two important differences... For one, the Harley Davidson consumption subculture is characterized as having "outsider status" (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995, p. 58), a significant degree of marginality, and an outlaw culture... The meanings that subcultures create stand in opposition or indifference to the accepted meanings of the majority. Brand communities do not typically reject aspects of the surrounding culture's ideology. They embrace them (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001, p. 414).

Here, we glimpse the fundamental problems associated with the conceptualisation of subculture in marketing. Perhaps the only valid statement in this paragraph resides in the suggestion that subcultural linkages extend beyond the mere realms of analogous brand interests to an "actual way of life". However, the notion that subcultures are defined by their anti-social consumptive habits and commodity use (along with their comfort at the social margin) not only continues to labour the consumptive facet of subcultures but also relegates them to an illegitimate space. This pessimistic theorisation of subculture echoes that of early sociological theories regarding subculture which, like the existent marketing discourse, situated subcultures at the periphery. To be fair, not all research in the discipline has espoused this view. Models developed by Holbrook (1993), Thompson (2004), Belk and Costa (1998), Arnould *et al.* (1999) and Holt (2002) all attempt to individuate consumer practices according to lifestyle which in certain cases (Belk and Costa, 1998; Arnould *et al.*, 1999) involve subcultural groups. The key component in the difference between these studies and more conventional ones lies in their acknowledgement of subcultures as existing in spite of and hence outside of brand. As Celsi *et al.* rightly point out:

Communitas is a sense of community that transcends typical social norms and convention. That is, communitas is a sense of camaraderie that occurs when individuals from various walks of life share a common bond of experience, such as skydiving and flow, that all participants consider special or "sacred" (Belk *et al.*, 1989). (Celsi *et al.*, 1993, p. 22).

In the case of activity based subcultures (such as sailing, surfing, white water rafting or skydiving), it is the "flow", thrill of the experience and the collective emotion created through that experience that generates the evolution of the subculture. This occurs outside of consumptive parameters, relying instead upon the naturalistic, escapist mentality of the participants. In particular, the ethnographical study by Arnould *et al.* conspicuously emphasises the esoteric, collective qualities of the white water rafting community, rather than their consumptive habits. Indeed, they remark that:

By privileging subject-centered experience and emotional-aesthetic concerns over reason in building self-knowledge, and offering a nonlinear ecofriendly conception of history and action, river magic intersects liberatory postmodern philosophy (Arnould *et al.*, 1999, p. 60).

Not only does this remark infer the tentative suggestion that subcultural activity may lend to the postmodern agenda but it demonstrates the internally referential, activity-oriented focus of its participants. Indeed, the research in this paper proposes that the function of subculture is to elude social focus upon consumption, escaping instead to a "magical" space where:

Rafting evokes formulaic language that makes tangible some of the immanent forces that participants experience. In short, which the trip is a contemporary commercial experience, the

magic is not. Shared adherent to performative conundrums transcends a commercially reproduced simulacrum of authentic experience (Arnould *et al.*, 1999, p. 59).

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The transformative effects of participation, along with the escapist ideology that accompanies the kind of activity described here, is also reflected in Schouten and McAlexander's work is indeed it is in Christensen and Olsen's work. Yet the affective nature of subcultural participation, its central important in individuals' lives and the simultaneously social/personal aspects of participation, as daringly described by Arnould, Price and Otnes, are disregarded in these other studies. Yet to ignore the fundamental nature of subculture, extrapolating instead a consumptive slant, is to ignore the very elements that constitute a subcultural community.

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This paper offers a third definition of subcultures that attempts to incorporate both the internal traits and cultural power of subcultures. A subculture, as the term is used in this research, is:

... a social subset of individuals bound together by a common activity, unique philosophy and outlook which finds its origins in cultural, historical and social influences. This commonality is practiced through specific language, formation of discourses that drive values and mores, commodity use, appearance and social organisation. While internal hierarchies may emerge, for the large part subcultures possess the philosophical capacity to re-appropriate external barriers such as class, race and gender.

While subcultures may, as part of their philosophy, seek to re-act against perceived authority institutions, alienation and lack of social mobility, they are internally content and concerned principally with the praxis of their own activities and agendas. Subcultures are pro-active.

Subculture vs brand community – a case study

While we might focus on any kind of subculture, whether it be artistic, social, musical or otherwise, sporting subcultures demonstrate the kind of important delineations one must draw when dealing with the key concepts of social vs consumptive groups. The world of surfing provides a ready study of the how one might differentiate a brand community from a subculture and indeed from a subculture of consumption. This pivotal sport which is practiced in degrees (anything from a relaxing pastime to a professional career path), is undoubtedly accompanied by a lucrative commercial juggernaut (Creagan, 1996). Companies such as Quiksilver, Rip Curl and Billabong have grown from small, backyard outlets in the 1960s to global empires producing all manner of clothing, accessories, boards, wetsuits and other accoutrements. Quiksilver cracked its one billion dollar profit ceiling in 2004 (Cuneo, 2003; Frew, 2003; Stolz, 2004), Billabong is a publicly listed company whose stock prices have soared (Wishenthal, 2004) and Rip Curl is starting to enjoy the fruits of its image changing labours (Baveystock, 2003). These companies all operate at the vanguard of international surfing, staging competitions and events all around the world. It is accurate to suggest that these companies (and thus brands) play a formative role in the world of surfing. However, does this mean that surfing is a subculture of consumption, driven by the brands that manufacture and market to the sport? Equally, is it fair to suggest that, in the absence of such corporate intervention, surfing would cease to exist in the way a brand community evaporates when its brand does? One might recall the Apple Newton community who feel besieged by the inevitable decimation of their community once their outmoded product falters once and for all (Muniz and Shau, 2005).

This research avers that surfing, like any other sport such as whitewater rafting (Arnould *et al.*, 1999) or sky diving (Celsi *et al.*, 1993), is neither driven by brand or at risk of annihilation if a specific brand were to disappear. As Dana Brown, self-avowed surfer and son of famed surfing movie director Bruce Brown, comments “surfing is a two thousand year old past time that’s become a multi billion dollar industry, still, it’s all about the wave” (Brown, 2004). It would appear that only the disappearance of the wave would arrest the surfing subculture. When asked, surfers do not comment on brand or their interest in the corporate aspect of their sport; their pre-occupation with the ocean and its possibilities dominate any surfer’s conversation (Brown, 2004; Falzon, 1997). While case studies of other sports equally suggest that participants are not brand or commodity oriented (Christensen and Olsen, 2002; Arnould *et al.*, 1999), this appears to be particularly acute in the instance of surfing since the sport itself demands a high degree of affinity with the natural elements and a spiritual commitment to the water. Big wave surfer Laird Hamilton best encapsulates this search for affinity remarking that “big wave surfing is an inner desire you have to go and challenge the sea or try to be in harmony with the sea in its most dynamic element” (Hamilton in Brown, 2004). Likewise, surfer Shane Beschen echoes Hamilton’s sentiments:

... when you’re coming down the line at G-Land [East Java] and you have all this room, you have your whole body to deal with to conform to the wave. You’re definitely free to express how you feel; the lines you want to draw... I think that surfing is definitely one of the purposes of my life (Beschen in Falzon, 1997).

This passion for the waves is expressed again and again both by global surfing superstars like Kelly Slater, Layne Beachley or Taj Burrow or just local surfers like Dale Webster who has made a life mission of surfing every day regardless of weather for over twenty five years consecutively (Brown, 2004). As Randy Rickard, surfboard manufacturer and event organiser, points out:

How many people do you know that go and gaze at a tennis court. You know, think about it, you know, ooh I love the surface of the tennis court, they don’t do that you know. I mean think of any other sport where they go and they look and people just go and watch waves (Rickard in Brown, 2004).

It is clear that consumption does not fuse the surfing community, rather it is united by a common love of the sport, nature and its elements or, as Brown (2004) puts it, “many of us have nothing in common except this grand passion”. That being said, surfers will travel the world, forge new friendships and allow their shared commitment to the search for the perfect wave to form the basis of a collective lifestyle and philosophy. In this respect, surfers have much in common.

If we compare the traits of a brand community with those of a subculture, as illustrated by the surfing world, it is evident that they stem from two divergent foundations and result in two vastly different hegemonies. Brand community firstly requires a brand for its inception, focus and survival. Subculture exists outside of brand and does not rely upon any particular brand to sustain it. Secondly, brand community members enjoy a fragmented and mono-dimensional relationship within the community that does not impact on their external lives (except in the event of more fanatical members). Subcultures, by contrast, require a higher degree of commitment, physical movement, travel and social participation. Subculture often encroaches on lifestyle and indeed, in the instance of surfing, become a lifestyle. These distinctions affect how we must view members of these communities; their values, philosophies and

priorities are manifestly different. In turn, the way in which marketers must approach subcultures vs brand communities or consumptive subcultures must also differ. The greatest error marketers can make is to approach a subculture as though it were a brand community by assuming a level of consumer loyalty and commitment to their brand when such devotion does not necessarily exist – their devotion is to surfing.

Conclusion

Subcultures do not function like a brand community or subculture of consumption where the relationship between consumer and product is stable and necessary in order for the consumer to participate in that community. This is not to suggest that subcultures do not consume since subcultural groups do consume in a focused way which is governed by lifestyle and personal factors, rather than product elements. The variances between these groups must not be underestimated or maligned. Instead, if marketing is sincere in its endeavours to study the behaviour of the consumer then these differences must be integrated into marketing discourse. It might be suggested that the notions of subculture of consumption and brand community are potentially restrictive to any nuanced reading of social and cultural formations that wax and wane over time. This paper would concur in the suggestion that such concepts (and indeed concepts generally) alter with time and experience. However, the propensity to read issues of (sub)cultural formation through the lens of consumption tends to have the effect of overlooking the historical, cultural and discursive factors that generate change itself. Thus, it is important to understand the differences and nuances that distinguish groups but also to understand the limiting effects those disciplinary lenses may have upon our endeavours to map human experience.

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