The Companion Community: How Car Producers Promote Hybrid Car Consumption

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ABSTRACT

The authors distinguish between two kinds of community: consumption and companion communities. It is known that the consumption community encompasses consumers and their interactions in acquiring, using, modifying, and disposing of a specific brand or product category. In contrast, the companion community comprises marketers and their network partners who nurture and enable the consumption community by providing necessary resources such as brands and services, as well as meanings that accompany these brands. Focusing on the particular companion community that promotes and generates meanings for hybrid cars, the authors find that the meaning of sustainability constructed within this community is self-focused: manufacturers contend that they have become “sustainable” because they admit their guilt about acting destructively towards the natural environment and marginally improving the situation. This is a subtle controversy and its implication for consumers is clear. Instead of seeing the hybrid car as the paragon of absolute sustainability and a signal to consume more, consumers should regard it as a monument to industrial wastefulness.

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Introduction

In the marketplace, communities are formed on the basis of consumption practices and brand interests. In particular, brands are said to be a means of consumer bonding. In the same way, we argue that brands unite marketers into what we call companion communities. The companion community stands for marketer-affiliated individuals who enable consumer community development and operation through the provision of physical, financial, cultural, and symbolic resources. Traditionally, researchers have seen marketers as an external factor separate from consumer communities. We argue that both consumption and companion communities are closely intertwined so that they represent two aspects of the same wider social system. Neither community exists without the other.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how meanings are formed within companion communities. To do this, we first compare two contrasting conceptual perspectives: mechanist and constructivist. Then we theoretically explain how communities of consumption and companion communities are related. Next we describe the method of investigation. Results are presented and discussed. In the final section, we discuss conclusions and implications.
Interpretive Worldview

The concepts of *system* and *community* are related. The common definition of a system is that it comprises elements (e.g., individuals) and their relationships. Similarly, community is seen as a group of members and their relationships. This similarity between the two definitions is not coincidental. It is rooted in the tradition that we call mechanical systems thinking.

Mechanical Systems Perspective

People coming across complex social happenings often try to simplify them in order to grasp their essence. A person who uses the metaphor of a machine to understand community or system is more likely to have mechanical thinking patterns. Machines are made up of individual components that work and mesh together. Similarly, from this perspective, community can be seen as the aggregation of participating individuals and their actions. Researchers are also prone to such simplification. Some discuss a small group of friends as an example of community, and others consider community to represent the aggregation of brand users.

Second, it is a challenge to explain why individuals act as a cohesive group when they are part of community, while economic theory emphasises that they should operate as individuals who seek to maximise their own utility and minimise costs. If a particular community is made up of individuals, then problems such as “the tragedy of commons” should arise. The tragedy of commons metaphor highlights how individual actions can undermine the long-term interests of society: individual members of society maximise their own well-being by using more and more of natural resources while together they might completely destroy the replenishing capacity of nature and thus compromise the very source of their well-being. The paradox is that the existence of community as the aggregation of individuals is impossible when each individual acts out of self-interest. If one admits that there are communities, then the individuals who make it up cannot be called individuals in an economic sense.

Constructivist Systems Perspective

In contrast to mechanical thinking, the constructivist systems perspective is based on seeing social happenings as whole systems. Von Bertalanffy (1950) has long argued that social structures should not be reduced into simplified fractions. Following this logic, Luhmann (1995) defined a social system (community) as self-defined *difference* that separates this system from its environment. According to his theory, a system (community) is a set of communications that differentiate this system from its environment.

Community-specific communications are linked, one follows another and they make up a common network. The existence of community is not continuous but it is temporal (i.e., it is reproduced moment-to-moment with each instance of communication). The instance of communication makes it visible, albeit temporally. This phenomenon is called radical temporalisation. On the other hand, communications have no meaning outside community. To understand the genuine meaning of an action, one must be able to trace prior actions and their meaning and also subsequent actions and their meaning within community.

Companion Community

Applying constructivist thinking, we defined community as a domain where community members’ communications distinguish this community from other communities. Consumption community is the result of consumer appreciation of marketers’ offerings. Similarly,
A companion community is assumed to sustain consumption community through the exchange of both physical and symbolic resources. For example, car manufacturers sell hybrid cars to consumers. The hybrid car consumption community comprises the practices of meaning-making through the use, modification, disposal, and exchange of hybrid cars. At the same time, the hybrid car companion community deals with the general meaning of practices related to the production, logistics, marketing, and recycling of hybrid cars. However, these two are not totally separate from each other; rather each system is “interpreted” by the other. In this sense, some effects are symbolic and interpretive rather than physical.

Interpretive Method

Context

The hybrid car marketing system came into existence as a result of the market introduction of the first hybrid engine car brand, Prius, by Toyota Motor Corporation in 1999 (www.toyota.com). Other automobile manufacturers - Honda, Ford, General Motors, and DaimlerChrysler - have also introduced or started developing their own versions of hybrid car brands. The focus of the current investigation is the companion community that comprises hybrid car manufacturing organisations and their respective networks.

Research Procedure

We retrieved the textual content of leading hybrid car producers’ corporate reports, corporate websites, and corporate PR sources and ordered and transformed them into text format files using the qualitative data analysis software QSR NVivo 2.0. A number of common themes emerged as the result of this analysis. The interpretation of these themes and their meaning was informed by the constructivist systems perspective. The list of information sources is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Information Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Environmental Reports</th>
<th>Websites</th>
<th>PR sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toyota environmental and social report 2005</td>
<td>Toyota corporate website content on corporate values, sustainability and environment (<a href="http://www.toyota.co.jp/en">www.toyota.co.jp/en</a>)</td>
<td>Toyota news (in the corporate website)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honda environmental annual report 2005</td>
<td>The website of Toyota NZ branch on sustainable action (<a href="http://www.toyota.co.nz">www.toyota.co.nz</a>)</td>
<td>News about Honda Civic hybrid (in the corporate website)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GM corporate responsibility report 2004/2005</td>
<td>Ford corporate website content on environmental/social action and policy (<a href="http://www.ford.com">www.ford.com</a>)</td>
<td>Sustainable mobility news: E-mail newsletters’ content (<a href="http://www.wbcsd.com">www.wbcsd.com</a>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sustainable mobility project: The full report 2004</td>
<td>GM corporate website content on environmental/social action and policy (<a href="http://www.gm.com">www.gm.com</a>)</td>
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Interpretation

Buyers and sellers exchange not only goods and services, but also symbols. The hybrid car companion community supplies hybrid cars to the hybrid car consumption community. This is a physical resource that is exchanged. Something that is more important and subtle is the transfer of a symbolic resource – the concept of sustainability – that is understood differently in these communities. For the companion community, sustainability is the way of dealing with problems peculiar to the industry, both internally and externally. For the consumption community, sustainability (as a symbolic resource) is the signal to consume more. Moreover, it is a signal to consume a guilt-free physical resource offered as a remedy to major mobility problems. Other prudent alternatives (e.g., public transport, walking, cycling) are silenced.

How the Concept “Sustainable” is Constructed

The hybrid car companion community builds identity – defining self using the concept of sustainability. The community’s identity is distinctive – it aspires towards sustainability. Sustainability is taken to be about reducing, recycling, and reusing physical resources. We classify sustainability practices into four domains: safety, impact, efficiency, and diffusion. The (communication about) practices are meaningful only to the extent to which they relate to environmental and social problems (Refer to Table 2).

Table 2: Emergence of the Concept Sustainable within Companion Community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sustainability Domains</th>
<th>Practices</th>
<th>Environmental and Social Problems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>Improving driver safety</td>
<td>Improving worker safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>Reducing harmful fuel emissions</td>
<td>Reducing harmful facility and production emissions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recycling parts and end-of-life vehicles</td>
<td>Recycling materials, waste and containers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficiency</td>
<td>Improving fuel efficiency</td>
<td>Saving energy and materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diffusion</td>
<td>Promoting newly designed fuel-efficient vehicles</td>
<td>Administering social and environmental programmes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The companion community communications naturalise the feeling that ecological and social mobility problems are normal and unavoidable. Moreover, these problems are portrayed to be manageable. Sustainability is understood as the set of processes targeted at the gradual reduction in the level of greenhouse gas emissions. Metaphorically, it is the same as saying that one becomes a good person by reducing the extent of his/her harmful behaviour.

Another contradiction is that hybrid vehicle brands (Prius, HCH, Silverado, Sierra, and Escape Hybrid) are promoted as an example of environmental care as they seem to offer substantial levels of fuel efficiency. To maintain this uniqueness, inefficient gas-guzzling vehicle categories are required to also be in place as a point of reference. If conventional car models become more efficient, the hybrid car fuel-efficiency appeal would vanish.
Accordingly, the companion community is built upon the difference between sustainable and non-green brands.

Expanding the Community

Interestingly, sustainability as self-correction only has internal appeal. This appeal extends within the companion community (across different corporations) through expansion strategies. Within the companion community, past communications are not questioned and are taken for granted as the bases for decision-making. Past communications are reflected in programmes, narrated history, and cognitive routines. Within the community, the history is not considered objectively but through the lenses of current community distinctions. The “re-interpreted” past becomes a logical basis. Objective histories do not exist: the past has always been reinterpreted to link it to current practices. Another type of decision premise is a cognitive routine. A cognitive routine is the way the companion community sees other communities. Consumers are seen as rational decision-makers. Again paradoxically, this grand simplification of the consumption community forms the basis for sustainable action. Sustainability is reduced to a product attribute – it becomes a symbolic resource to be sold. The companion community’s logic of self-correction would seem appropriate in the light of consumers being seen as rational beings.

Discussion

The Companion Community

The companion community is not bound within the frontiers of a single corporation. It defies physical, geographical, and organisational boundaries. The closest comparable concept in the extant literature is communities of practice (COP). This concept assumes that people ascribed to a COP maintain explicit contact with each other using meetings, e-mail networks, and events. Whilst similar, the companion community is conceptually different from a COP in two fundamental ways. First, a COP emphasises the physical presence and subscription of individuals. The companion community takes neither individuals nor discrete actions as the basis, but rather interactive communication. However, in the case of a companion community, a communication is not attributed to particular individuals. Communication is a community operation while engagement in community communications, even if they happen from moment-to-moment, defines individuals. A person may participate in several communities, and this happens not through switching from membership to membership but through changing the direction of self-observation and the meaning of engagement in various communications. Second, a COP requires direct substantive links to be present among members. In contrast, a companion community presupposes loose communicative links.

Implications for Consumers

The conception “rational consumer” is a convenient notion created by companion communities to naturalise meanings. The term consumer has negative connotations that allude to characteristics such as passiveness, irresponsibility, instinctiveness, need gratification, utility-maximisation, and the source of revenue. The problem is that citizens in society end up accepting such false consciousness about their own reality. They fail to realise that one is not born a brand consumer, but is made into one through commercially motivated interpretation. Our inquiry suggests it is impossible to pinpoint a natural member of particular community, and in this way attribute an actor to particular micro-culture such as “consumers”. A person can participate in many communities at the same time, and this is by participation in and apprehension of community-specific communications. The same action
can be seen as belonging to several communities due to communities operating with the self-created meanings of communication, and not with natural facts. Society citizens should be wary of accepting impaired identities that are reflected in companion community communications. For example, one can be a green consumer whilst still choosing to increase consumption of a green product.

Citizens should also understand that most green (sustainable) products are simply the symbols of industrial self-correction. In fact, the very existence of such products (e.g., hybrid cars) indicates profound societal problems as well as reluctance by major producers to radically tackle the roots of these important problems. Citizens should not take a green product as a signal of appropriateness of more consumption. Specifically, buying and driving more hybrid cars would not solve global mobility problems (fuel consumption, manufacturing impacts, road building and congestion, noise, and accidents would increase). Instead, non-companion-community-suggested solutions such as public transport, cycling, and walking, or even not traveling, can be considered.

Citizens should not feel that they are responsible for choices they make. The blame cannot be always directed at producers (i.e., companion communities). This is simply because it is the same people (citizens – not producers or consumers) working and living in the same social and market systems who engage in temporal communities, be they companion or consumption. The matter of attaining a sustainable society in the future is not a matter of selecting this or that green product, but of engaging in community that appropriately interprets the current global eco-social situation. Moreover, it must be realised that communication consolidates anti-communication. In the case of hybrid cars, overemphasis on fuel-efficient vehicles can create a consolidated anti-movement of non-hybrid gas-guzzler driving. Communities will expand out of opposition, finding it appealing to be non-hybrid, non-green, and uncomplicated. This is how meaning operates as difference. Genuine sustainability efforts should transcend the limited logic of hybrid versus gas-guzzler communing practices.

**References**

