THE SOCIAL FORM OF NAPSTER:

CULTIVATING THE PARADOX OF CONSUMER EMANCIPATION

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Abstract

Consumer emancipation of consumption-related yet market-distanced social entities is developed and explored in this paper as a process conditioning communication about ideologies, meanings, norms, and values in the social form of emancipation. A social form of emancipation is theorized as an operationally closed, self-referential, and consumption-related social system, which, by social communication, is engaged in a permanent process of ensuring a social distinction between itself and its environment, which is the only device to be used to reproduce itself in the course of time. Interviews conducted with Napster consumers, netnographic fieldwork, observations, and archival data were collected over the past two years to map micro-emancipatory consumption discourse and practices and build an understanding of the moderato social processes constructing Napster as a subculture community. Our findings reveal that consumer emancipation is the reassurance of social difference through communication, and the implicit self-paradoxification of centering into the cultural crosshairs of the social form of emancipation those entities it wishes to distance from. Implications for consumer research are considered in a concluding section.

Extended Abstract

Aggregating more than 10 million users in the first six month period and attaining a growth rate of 200,000 new subscribers in a single day, the online music file sharing service Napster.com became the noisy center of a new social reality that struck terror into even the most sturdy of music entertainment executives. In this exploratory netnographic analysis of Napster consumption meanings, we analyze 80 cyber-interviews, 52 emails, 70 homepages and 80 entries on message boards to map micro-emancipatory consumption discourse and practices and build an understanding of the moderato social processes that construct Napster as an emancipative consumption community.

We introduce the idea of the social form of emancipation. A social form of emancipation is theorized as an operationally closed, self-referential, and consumption-related social system, which, by social communication, is engaged in a permanent process of ensuring a social distinction between itself and its environment, which is the only device to be used to reproduce itself in the course of time. Consumer emancipation of consumption-related yet market-distanced social entities is developed and explored as a process conditioning communication about ideologies, meanings, norms, and values in the social form of emancipation.

Our findings reveal that consumer emancipation is the reassurance of social difference through communication, and the implicit self-paradoxification of centering into the cultural crosshairs of the social form of emancipation those entities it wishes to distance from.

By exploring and problematizing the distinctions between one particular social form of emancipation "Napster" and its environment, the present work helps consumer researchers better understand consumer emancipation as a conviction to difference, a difference which is being cultivated through social communication (autopoiesis). The specific autopoietical processes at Napster create the social form of emancipation as a space of choice against modern society's conviction to inclusion with respect to music corporations, commodification, and copyright. The work concludes that social communication, understood as the concatenation of operations of drawing distinctions and observations of these operations performed by drawing other distinctions, is an important yet equally under-researched dimension of consumer emancipation.

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"What record companies don't really understand is that Napster is just one illustration of the growing frustration over how much the record companies control what music people get to hear, over how the air waves, record labels and record stores, which are now all part of this 'system' that recording companies have pretty much succeeded in establishing, are becoming increasingly dominated by musical "products" to the detriment of real music. Why should the record company have such control over how he, the music lover, wants to experience the music? From the point of view of the real music lover, what's currently going on can only be viewed as an exciting new development in the history of music. And, fortunately for him, there does not seem to be anything the old record companies can do about preventing this evolution from happening" (The Artist Formally Known As Prince 2000).

Prince's pragmatic statement exemplifies a potent new trend in western consumer culture. A mode of entertainment consumption is forming around the idea that digitized music and other digitized information can be exchanged online from one consumer's computer to another's. Napster.com can be regarded the premier example of this way of information exchange referred to as peer-to-peer file sharing. Aggregating more than 10 million users in the first six month period and attaining a growth rate of 200,000 new subscribers in a single day, Napster became the noisy center of a new social reality that struck terror into even the most sturdy of music entertainment executives. Behind this threatening new reality stands a type of software combining the convergence of mp3 music files with an Internet relay chat feature and an informational website. Coordinated by a couple of central server computers, they enabled not only community, but also free access to and download of up to 100 million copyrighted songs archived on the private hard drives of up to 100 million subscribers worldwide. This fact is so important that it needs to be pressed. Napster's file sharing system constitutes an emancipative consumption scape leaping over the constraints of the music market. In fact, Napster suggests constituting a complex and contradictory online subculture community (Schouten and

McAlexander 1995), attempting to maintain a certain "outsider status" (p, 58; Hedbige 1979) from mainstream society's norms and values of music copyright, commodification, and corporations, and engaging in discourse supporting communality and disparaging markets, and the circulation of the gift as an alternative exchange practice of music (Giesler and Pohlmann 2002). However, what initially started as an emancipative expression of distance from music corporate forces seems to have become its virtual sponsor by now.

Napster's decline from the bad boy to the toothless tiger is preordained. Yet our understanding of the social processes conditioning its status in consumer culture, its emancipative relation to the capitalist market system, and its cultural evolution from an ignoramus to a sponsor of intellectual property in the course of time remains limited, yet our vocabulary to describe them is poor. Consumer research theory provides a useful, but incomplete, insight into tensions between the market and (subcultural) consumption communities and consumer emancipation. While a body of existing literature on market-community tensions problematizes the particular dimensions of decommodification (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991, pp. 27-28; Kopytoff 1986, p. 64), cultural capital (Holt 1998, p. 21), liminality and antistructure (Sherry 1990, p. 27), the construction of market-community dialectic (e.g., Wallendorf and Arnould 1991; Holt 1998; Jenkins 1992, pp. 278-284; Kozinets 2001; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Thornton 1996), power struggles and consumer emancipation (Firat and Dhalokia 1998; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Kozinets 1999; Murray and Ozanne 1991; Holt forthcoming), and the temporary and locally bound nature of consumer emancipation (Kozinets forthcoming), it has been silent about the socio-dynamics of emancipation, that is the *evolutory processes* by which consumption-related social entities of various forms attempt to create and maintain social distance from their (market) environment. Operating on a semantic

level, consumer research theory provides a number of loosely coupled concepts and ideas for the

emancipatory character of particular consumption-related social entities. It assumes an

understanding of consumer emancipation in snapshots and looks at characteristic "processes" as

marking practices of cultural entities, rather than those dynamic *processes* reifying and

conditioning the cultural transformations, understood as the ways whereby culturally

conditioning communication about ideologies, meanings, and values is evolving in the course of

time. Consumption theory is now equipped to move beyond the static identification and

interpretation of particular community-market tensions and move forward to a dynamic

understanding of the cultural transformation of various consumption-related yet market-

distanced social entities.

We introduce the idea of the social form of emancipation. A social form of emancipation

is an operationally closed, self-referential, and consumption-related social system, which, by

social communication, is engaged in a permanent process of ensuring a social distinction

between itself and its environment, which is the only device to be used to reproduce itself in the

course of time. Having this said, consumer research can draw on an extended epistemological

device for consumer research practice that looks at the ways how, by communication, three

distinctions are established and carried out: the social distinction between actor and observer, the

ecological distinction between social form and its environment and the temporal distinction

between past, present and future.

The paper begins with a theoretical overview of related consumer research literature and

goes on focusing on the used methodology in the second section. To develop the idea of the

social form of emancipation and some of its key facets, the third section netnographically

explores important discourse and practices used at Napster to emancipate consumers and

distance music consumption from commodification, corporations, and copyright. The concept and discussion section finally develops the idea of the social form of emancipation and offers a discussion of the theoretical and conceptual context in which it is set.

THEORY

The following section reports on relevant theoretical comments on the tensions between communities and markets and its ideological apex, consumer emancipation, in the discipline of consumer research, and in the allied social sciences and humanities. We discuss Kozinets' (forthcoming) classification of consumer emancipation as the apex of the oppositional relation between markets and communities with respect to social gathering in cyberspace. In doing so, the text demonstrates a variety of present conceptual deficiencies and weaknesses and clearly identifies its own genuine potential of contribution to the field in a critical summary.

Tensions between Communities and Markets

Firat and Venkatesh (1995, pp. 245, 255) theorize markets and their "totalizing" and "growing influence" to affect individual consumers and consumer communities. Markets cause the fragmentation of consumers into more isolated groups (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 255). Markets therefore are held to evolve and even undermine some important social institutions, such as community and culture founded on common experiences. In addition, the "overpowering" forces of markets are held to adversely affect individual consumers by causing them to adopt "increasingly passive" and identity-structuring consuming positions (Firat and Venkatsh 1995, pp. 255, 256). Wallendorf and Arnould (1991, pp. 27-28) describe the need to discharge the

threat of the market to familial communities by transformational acts of decommodification at Thanksgiving. Here they follow Kopytoff's (1986, p. 64) dichotomous notion of decommodification as a way of moving an item from the amoral market to a moral communal sphere. Decommoditization rituals ensure that some items remain unambiguously singular counter to the creation of homogenized values in everyday excessive commoditization.

In the study of the Harley-Davidson subculture communities, Schouten and McAlexander (1995, p. 58) report on the "outsider status" of the bikers' subculture of consumption and relate to the risks and opportunities of transferring this "outlaw mystique" to mainstream markets. Although the Harley-Davidson subculture is generically commercial, efforts to capitalize on the marketability of a subculture of consumption entail bi-directional risks. Likewise, thematizing tensions between new upscale bikers as outsiders and traditional bikers as insiders, for instance, Schouten and McAlexander lay ground for Thornton's (1996, pp. 122-128) notion of "selling out" as a powerful and common counter cultural narrative.

In a related stream, Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989) set out the dichotomous relation between communally sacred works, collectibles and spaces and profane monetization. Similarly, Turner (1967, pp. 391-392) develops the notion of communitas emerging from shared ritual experience "which transcend those of status-striving, money grubbing, and self-serving" and act as sacred "proofs that man does not life by bread alone." In his ethnography about the flea market, Sherry (1990) incorporates Turner's (1982) notion of liminality and antistructure, contending that the disorder of the flea market provides a corrective for some of the pathological aspects of consumerism.

Other correctives can be found in the oppositional relationship between media fan communities and the entertainment industry. Jenkins (1992, pp. 278-284) offers detailed account

on a corrective similar to Sherry's in the non-profit trade relation of media fan communities, which reject profit, monetizing the exchange value of goods and services, and extracting excess value, or profits from exchanges. In doing so, they discursively create distance from conventional consumer culture and excessive consumption in favor of a more communal exchange. Likewise, McCracken (1997, p. 87) contrasts corporate control over music and film via rigorous copyright policy with sampling practices in his analysis of social plenitude. Following Baudrillard's (1968) notion of consumption as the active manipulation of signs, social entities use common marketplace interests as the "social cement" to form their foundation (Kozinets 1999) and, as McCracken discusses, engage in sampling practices to produce formerly unimagined combinations of items, artifacts, and opinions. Thus they create a universe of social plenitude where "no genuine potentiality of being remains unfulfilled" (Lovejoy 1950, p. 52). McCracken reports that, in an age of plenitude, fans take possession of *The Simpsons* and *The X-Files* (see e.g. Clerc 1996), they sacrilize the commercial code, singularize, and internalize it. On the Internet evidence is found in the many fan websites containing own story interpretations, action plots, caricatures, picture collages and self-made comic strips. McCracken points out that these modified codes come to *belong* to fans and their "rights of ownership" must be honored. However, entertainment corporations view the sampling practices and discourse warily although these consumer communities obviously help spreading their products and even drive forward the processes of idea creation. Sampling practices and the culture of plenitude work well together, the culture of plenitude and the market logic do not (see e.g. Gaines 1991; Buhle 1987; Harris 1990).

In his ethnography about Star Trek fan communities, Kozinets (2001) elicits a reversed relation showing that fans are differentiated as members of the fan community by their lack of

profit motive, whereas the for-profit dealers are viewed warily. Pike (2001, pp. 74-81) revealed a similar tendency reporting on the rejection of commercial vendors at pagan festivals although these vendors bestow important social functions. The distance between the commercial as profane and the communal as sacred is symbolic of the broader cultural tensions between markets and communities and is even aggravated in the critical call for consumer emancipation.

The Call for Consumer Emancipation

The critical call for consumer emancipation in consumer research centers the notion that consumers distance themselves from the restrictive influences and constraints of the market or maintain "an autonomy from the mainstream market culture" (Firat and Dhalokia 1998, p. 157). In order to achieve this goal Murray and Ozanne (1991) synthesize elements of Baudrillard's (1968) code of signs and Habermas' theory of communicative action (1985) and develop what Holt (forthcoming) terms "*code-conscious deviance*." This means that emancipation requires the *reflexively defiant consumer* who is "empowered to reflect on his or her conditions to decide how to live" and who uses this critical reflexivity to defy the code in his or her consumption. Firat and Dholokia (1998) offer an alternative account on consumer emancipation mapping out the historical change of consumption patterns. These authors assert that the *hegemony* of the capitalist market has led to an overall individual-private-alienated-passive consumption. Emancipation is constructed as a good escape from this desperate condition of the individual from the evildoing realms of the market into the communal sphere of *theaters of consumption* (pp. 154-155), temporally unbound scapes of cultural interaction that exist *beyond* the market. Thompson, Pollio, and Locander (1994) and Thompson and Haytko (1997) argue yet differently

that consumer culture is a much more open-ended discourse with numerous countervailing positions that allow for individuated self-construction. Holt (forthcoming) argues that all of the above-cited critical positions share a similar narrative of cultural authority: marketers shape consumers' tastes and desires by vesting brands with powerfully seductive meanings. Then critics argue for various types of consumer resistance to combat the presumed authoritarian tendencies of marketing. In Holt's conceptualization, a mode of cultural sovereignty is promoted, whereby "marketing, in its postmodern incarnation, acts as a parasitic cultural machine that pilfers from public culture to cycle through commodities valued meanings and pleasures at an ever increasing velocity." In the future, Holt suggests, we will see the rise of gated consumption communities, "sequestered groups of consumers whose solidarity is premised upon creating narrowcast consumption domains to individuate oneself through consumption" and, again, to virtually distance oneself from what one filters out. Rather than constructing an individual or a distantly shared identity from all the signs in circulation, consumer emancipation means to aggressively delimit the cultural resources from which consumers draw to a handful of specialized interests.

In the most recent vision about consumer emancipation Kozinets (2002) concluded that communally enacted consumer emancipation, if possible at all, takes place in hypercommunity context, and must be conceived of as temporary and local. He demonstrates that negative market discourse, gift-giving, and the positioning of production and consumption as forms of self-expressive art at the Burning Man festival serve to temporarily distance consumers from particular market logics and corporate interests, rather than lastingly and from markets per se. For the first time in the study of emancipative consumption, Kozinets identifies *speed* as a key independent variable and explains, "that temporariness and speed of change are key cultural

factors providing a community's members with a sense that they possess an authenticity that can evade corporate appropriation. By dissolving shortly after it forms, the hypercommunity becomes locked into a historical moment, seen as singular and priceless because, exactly like a particular moment in time, it is incapable being reproduced."

Critical Summary

These studies present a helpful, yet incomplete insight into the oppositional relation between communities and markets and its ideological apex, consumer emancipation. As it currently stands, their authors generate understanding by capturing a variety of cultural still pictures revealing significant disjuncture between particular social entities appearing distanced from, outside of, or subversive to the dominant market environment. As a consequence, the various critical projects of individually or discursively enacted consumer emancipation neglect aspects of social organization undertaken by consumers in order to escape from the market. In fact, the entire concept of consumer emancipation has yet to prove its ability and usefulness to critically inform our understanding of the politically charged, escapist and distancing construction of communal consumption. Consumer researchers can now move forward the market-community discourse to a truly paradoxical vision of consumer emancipation. Instead of focusing their approaches on a particularly reified concept of consumer emancipation as the static punch line of cultural sovereignty against corporate authority, the present vision of consumer emancipation then goes beyond the "symptoms of distance" on the social surface, to be theorized here as the dynamic processes that "build" the emancipative space of choice as an aim and a consequence of social communication about ideologies, meanings, and values.

METHOD

To study how the emancipative subculture community Napster is constructed and altered in the course of time and to evidence some of the key facets of consumer emancipation in the social form of emancipation, we examine the phenomena that it structures: social communication about ideologies, meanings, and values. To pursue this goal we link a netnographic research method to map micro-emancipatory consumption discourse and practices to the analytical investigation of communication in order to relate to micro data the moderato social *processes* that build and maintain Napster's subculture community.

The data used in this study was gathered by the authors throughout a period from October 2000 until February 2001 and includes 80 cyber-interviews, 52 emails, 80 board postings, 70 homepages, functional and historical writings as well as the authors' own observation using Napster.com. All data was electronically catalogued and stored. As was suggested in previous research (Kozinets 1997) all informants' names were changed in order to guarantee confidentiality. In addition, informants' permission for direct quoting in this paper was explicitly sought by email resulting in participants' unanimous agreement.

NETNOGRAPHIC THEMES

Napster is a music consumption-related yet market-distanced subculture community that alters participants' consumption meanings through discourse, rules, and practice. Napster's consumption experiences are socially constructed as distanced from the economic realms of mainstream entertainment consumption and the music market. To oppose marketplace logics that

usually drive acquisition of music as a commodity, Napster is constructed around the circulation of music as a gift. Gift giving becomes a distinctive mode of communication and helps to build Napster as an alternative space of choice. Furthermore and concurrent to these observations, informants' comments reveal a dialectic that seeks to separate Napster's liberating ideology from the ostensibly corrosive forces of the music market. Napster sees itself as an alternative protocol to modern society's conviction to inclusion, to this extent, an inclusion through music commodification, corporations, and copyright. In doing so, Napster consumption practices are effectively disarticulated from market logics and rearticulated onto emancipative ground through social communication about mass cultural critique and Marxist ideologies. The following sections explore consumptive discourse and practice at Napster in detail.

Communicating Napster Against Modern Society's Conviction to Inclusion

Following Napster founder Shawn Fanning the motivation to start Napster's system of gift circulation and multiplication was rooted in "frustration not only with MP3.com, Lycos, or Scour.net, but also to create a music community. There was really nothing like it at the time." In the ancient world only barbarians and the semantic case of Satan were able to draw a distinction in order to observe god and his creation from the other side. As a natural consequence failing god was the price for seeing "the observed and the other," and the gaining of the supposedly "better position" the result. (At least the ideology of) today's functionally differentiated modern society largely gives up barbarianism and diabolism and replaces it with the all encompassing claim of liberal opening, freedom, equality and the market. Social control is being performed no longer via exclusion but inclusion, or in the Foucaultian (e.g. 1961) sense, even forced inclusion. In the functionally differentiated modern society of today, the engagement in Satan's observation

technique, the drawing of a distinction within a unity against the unity, and the similar yet postmodern indication of the supposedly "better position" has become the matter of cultural emancipation (or social protest): one enters society's prisons, lunatic asylums, and shopping malls, and it seems as if society's conviction to (forced) inclusion itself bears crystallization points of disappointing experiences that build the breeding ground for the various emancipative tendencies within Napster's social form of emancipation.

Opposing Commodification, Corporations, Copyright. Napster consumers circulate the gift and, in doing so, they seek to consume music in ideological opposition to the well established principles of a functionally differentiated system of modern music production and consumption in the triangle of commodification, copyright and corporations and against the ongoing de-sacrilization of music into the profane sphere of capitalist markets throughout the past 130 years. Napster, by contrast, understands itself as a locus of communally enacted social change and the fostering the regaining of social freedom. Informants often referred to the perils of copyright, which, following "Derek" (cable, sharing 693 copyrighted files), "has eaten those art species that are not accepted by the masses." while at the same time offering alternative ways to think about the status and value of information as "a free resource for all of us." Napster consumption and the circulation of the gift are taken as an antidote against the negative impacts of the contemporary music entertainment regime. The critique against modern music marketing is evident in the picture drawn by "Laura" (ISDN, 45 files shared). Her statement suggests a correlation between pop stars and fashion ideals like Britney Spears and being pressed by the "mass media dictatorship":

Whenever you switch on the TV today they just poison you with this army of Britney Spears girls and tomorrow you may dress up like her. A day later you are hanging over the toilet and puking yourself to the shape of Britney and so on. So what has Napster got to do with it? It just gives me a way to boycott this whole mass media dictatorship for the rest of my life!

Laura's comments reveal a dialectic that seeks to separate Napster's liberating ideology from the ostensibly corrosive forces of the entertainment market. Here self-orientation means self-extension (Belk 1988, Kozinets and Handelman 1998) in that Napster and the gift are used as an agent through which a personal violation of moral values is indicated, the differentiation from a surrounding evil is given form. Personal dissatisfaction with dominant social structures or predominant cultural practices affecting oneself rather than others, e.g. artists or society, is the motor for critical positioning. Consuming Napster is prized for its functional instrumentality in serving as a means to accomplish deliverance from the evils of mainstream music consumption culture and fashion dictatorship as a quest for personal harmony and ethical hygiene. Kozinets and Handelman (1998) have stressed the importance of "symbolic personal significance as a vehicle of self-realization and personal harmony" as a dimension of consumer resistance. The gift serves as a way to come closer to one's "ideal" self. The ideal "music fan" in the case of "Thomas" (ISDN, sharing 357 files), seems to hearken back to their discussion:

Boycotting the business is an issue for any real music fan! It's not fellow traveling some crazy fashion, it's for yourself!

Holbrook's (1999) typology of consumer value posits that ethics (including justice, virtue, and morality) is one of eight values that may be obtained in the consumption experience. Smith (1996) has suggested a distinction between altruistic and agonistic motivation of consumption experiences, and Napster consumption can here be interpreted as an agonistic act of ethical purification for oneself. In contrast to that, but similarly agonistic, some informants'

motivations to consume Napster are drawn from the impulse to belong and to integrate. Typically, participation in an emancipative social entity is an end in itself maintaining social ties while being only perfunctorily interested in the consumption activity that distance from the market. For example, "Sarah" (ISDN, sharing 72 files) illustrates that "It feels good to be part of such a powerful movement. Isn't it strange that people all over the world have somehow the same feelings?" Napster is seen as a movement to which "you wish to add yourself in order to add value to yourself".

Sampling, Re-Enchantment, and Revolution. In order to achieve the state of emancipation informants often communicated revolutionary, socialist, communist, and even anarchist semantic fragments when contrasting Napster and its philosophical underpinnings with their experienced "social inequalities" and disappointments in capitalist mainstream consumer society. For instance, informants who criticized that music production has become standardized and consumption passive often thematized mass culture critique applied to popular music. For many informants the creative and cultural possibilities had previously been corrupted by the corporate entertainment industry. As a contrast, Napster would present an escape from the masses and a return to individuality. Many of those comments re-invoke the castigating notions of "pseudoindividuality" and "regression of listening" of the early Marxian Frankfurt scholars Adorno and Horkheimer ([1947] 1979). Adorno and Horkheimer famously argued about what happens to music when it is subject to industrial capitalist production: it has no aesthetic value whatsoever and leads to a very specific type of consumption that is passive, obedient, and easily manipulated. Napster indicates that residues of the "mass culture" argument permeate discourse as an allusion to mainstream society's music market and culture. Visual proof for the interest in

the ironical sign game of combining the political matter of Napster with reanimated fragments of

the Marxist critique of the political economy is found in old-looking socialistic poster and graffiti

nostalgia like "Napster - la revolución", subtitling the portrait of Ché Guevara on the background

of rebellious labor class workers. "When you pirate MP3s you are downloading communism" is

the message of a faked, retro-looking, ironical comic illustration subtitled "Reminder of the

Recording Industry Association of America." It shows diabolical accomplice Lenin encouraging

an obviously American white Caucasian young male consumer who sitting in front of his Apple

IMac to download MP3s. "When you pay for MP3s you are rockin' out with the man," says its

counterpart illustration, this time, of course, a "Reminder from Gnutella, Freenet and Geeks

everywhere." Here a prototypical industrial capitalist male in a black suit, equipped with a cigar,

money wads, and a BMG (Bertelsmann Media Group) logo on his breast pocket flanks the same

young consumer. And apropos McCracken's (1997) notion of sampling culture, the "Napster

Manifesto", an anonymous call for "net communism" even makes use of a distorted version of

Marx's and Engel's ([1848] 1999) Communist Manifesto, containing terms like "music industry"

and "capitalism" instead of terms like "bourgeoisie", "bourgeois class" or "agriculture and

manufacturing industry." Where Marx and Engels cried "Abolition of property!" some Napster

users cry "Freedom of Information!" today. Both social movements center in its critique the

cruelties and injustice of the political economy. A deeper reading of the Marxist-flavored signs

in the consumption discourse at Napster suggests that the difference, which still had a meaning in

modern Marxist critiques, has become the source material for the communicative signification of

meaning in postmodernity.

CONCEPT AND DISCUSSION

The present netnographic examination suggests that *consumer emancipation* is the reassurance of social *difference* through *communication*, and the implicit self-paradoxification of centering into the cultural crosshairs those entities one wishes to emancipate from. Given these netnographic insights, my work can now turn to the discussion section to present its conceptual contribution: the social form of emancipation.

The Social Form of Emancipation

The social form of emancipation is a transdisciplinary concept endogenizing the concept of communication and difference as means to organize the nature and quality of consumer emancipation. At its core stands George Spence-Brown's ([1969] 1977) remarkable, yet widely unknown work on the continence of distinctions and the laws of form. Originally aiming at re-founding Boolean logic, Spencer-Brown builds up a complex system of explanation whose calculus is based upon the intriguing idea that the simplest form or structure we can imagine is a distinction. A distinction includes everything: the indication that the distinction makes, the non-indicated rest of the world, which the indicated is distinguished from, and the distinction itself, separating the states indicated from the states non-indicated. From there on Spencer-Brown's calculus of form formulates three generic axioms for any observer: the "calling" (confirming) of the distinction, the "crossing" (canceling) of the distinction, both on a "first order," and the self-referential re-entering of the distinction into the realm it distinguishes on a "second order." With the possibility of re-entering into the distinction, Spencer-Brown explicitly included (for the first

time in logic) an element of self-reference in the calculus it performs.[1] Starting from the mere definition of drawing a distinction, only these three axioms empower Spencer-Brown not only to prove Boolean logic in a few pages, but also to help us arrive at a hitherto unknown way of approaching consumer behavior researchers' paradox of consumer emancipation. As Baudrillard (1968) famously brought it up: Why can one not escape the political economy of the sign without still residing in it? In his inquiry of the community-market discourse at the Burning Man festival, Kozinets (forthcoming) refines this question with his observation that "it is as if by keeping the market centered in the cultural crosshairs, its alleged evils will be exorcised." We can move forward now and explore this paradox of consumer emancipation by conceptualizing the social form of emancipation.

The social form of emancipation is a complex self-referential social system (e.g., von Foerster 1969; Varela 1975; Varela and Goguen 1978; Luhmann 1997), which is engaged in processes engendering its own reproduction against, and only against, its environment through establishing control over causality by communication. We propose to see communication as a perfect example of the Spencer-Brownian concatenation of operations, performed by drawing distinctions and observations of these operations performed by drawing other distinctions. Communication then is nothing else but the permanent engagement in the three axioms for handling a distinction: accepting its motive (calling it); looking for different motives, values and contents (crossing it); or examining more closely its motive, value, and content (re-entering it). In doing so, communication reveals a triple insight. First it means creating the social form, a

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[1] Although it is not the intention of this paper, see the following works by Louis H. Kauffman for a discussion of the mathematical dimension of Spencer-Brown's theory: "Self-Reference and Recursive Forms," Journal of Social and Biological Structure 10 (1987): 53-72; "Ways of the Game – Play and Position Play," Cybernetics and Human Knowing 2, no. 3 (1994): 17-34; "Arithmetic in the Form," Cybernetics and Systems 26 (1995): 1-57.

space of choice, which comes into being through restricting the realm of the possible on the first

order. Secondly, it also means the exposition of the very act of restriction, together with the

realm of the nonrestricted and the observer responsible for the restriction (and its exposure) on

the second order. Paradoxically, on the second order of the observation, we can suddenly meet

inside of the social form the environment from which the social form wishes to emancipate, the

excluded side of the distinction, which has re-entered into the social form. The paradox of

emancipation reveals that a social form of emancipation keeps out what it has to keep out, but it

can only keep it out through knowing inside about the matter. Thirdly and through the operations

of creating, exposing, and re-entering the space of choice, communication necessarily means

bringing time into play. A social form of emancipation has to happen; it never *is* but permanently

performs through communication the creation of its space of choice. We can call this

performance autopoiesis and read it as the evolutory process that oscillates between and

combines available (internal) and unavailable (external) factors of self-production. Autopoiesis

describes the recursive iterations in communicative operations of the social form of

emancipation, which needs the permanent mental "triggering" of the non-indicated environment,

which the indicated is distinguished from. Yet the "cause" for the social form's autopoiesis is, by

dint of its self-reference, the social form itself, by designating the one and not the other side of

the distinction.[2] The insights into the autopoietical processes of a social form of emancipation

reveals at least two consequences: The first is that the paradox of emancipation is a yet virtually

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[2] It needs to be stressed out at this point that the social form of emancipation is not the only concept describing processes engendering their own reproduction; so does Giddens' (1984) concept of "structuration," Bourdieu's (1984) concept of "field," or White's (1992) concept of "control". Likewise, in thinking about autopoiesis, one encounters predecessors and relative concepts such as Peirce's (1958) "interpretant," Saussure's (1983) "arbitrariness of the sign," Bateson's (1972) "difference that makes a difference," as well as Jaques Derrida's (1982) "différance."

undescribed but natural matter of the self-paradoxical nature of autopoiesis of the social form of emancipation: you have to chase the king to ensure your status; likewise, chasing the king, you ensure his status. To repeat: the social form of emancipation can come into the social form of emancipation only as a paradox. Yet, precisely this is possible through the enactment of communication. Since each operation requires time and lets it pass, paradoxical communication can be comprehended only if time is included. The second insight therefore is that we could only make the paradox of emancipation available to us through a focus on consumer emancipation as (autopoietical) *processes*. An observer can no longer considers himself a subject who can still hope to find within him (e.g. Firat and Dholokia 1998; Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994; Thompson and Haytko 1997), or in reflecting on language usage and interpretation (e.g. Murray and Ozanne 1991; Kozinets 2002; Holt forthcoming), foundation for agreement with and solidarity of others. The present work rather demonstrates that concept of the social form of emancipation and its observer, are "in motion," they engage in a dynamic perspective. In doing so, it closes the "evolutory" gap in the understanding of consumer emancipation.

CONCLUSION: DOES COMMUNICATION STRUCTURE EMANCIPATION?

In his study about the Burning Man *hypercommunity*, Kozinets (forthcoming) suggests that, "the urge to differentiate from other consumers drives participation at Burning Man, and does not release them from grip of the market's sign game and social logics (Baudrillard 1968)." This netnography has aimed at investigating a possible conceptual framework for dealing with such an observation. By exploring and problematizing the distinctions between the social form of emancipation Napster and its environment, the present work helps consumer researchers better

understand consumer emancipation as a conviction to difference, a difference which is being performed as the highly precarious dance of autopoiesis through communication. The specific autopoietical processes create the social form of emancipation as a space of choice through communication against modern society's conviction to inclusion. This work suggests that communication, understood as the concatenation of operations of drawing distinctions and observations of these operations performed by drawing other distinctions, is a structural yet time-endogenizing dimension of emancipation.

Consumer researchers can relate to methodological concerns new epistemological questions of the social distinction between actor and observer, the ecological distinction between social form of emancipation and its environment, and the temporal distinction between past, present, and future. Finally, they can strive to improve the discipline's instruments of description and to build a greater amount of controllable complexity into the self-description of consumer society. As if by itself, more precision and rigor in one's own communication makes visible what it excludes.

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