Cross Border Consumption and Community: Meanings For Warhammer Enthusiasts

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Based on consumption tribe and gaming literature, this article examines similarities and differences between Warhammer gaming tribes in the U.S. and France. We discuss a number of cross-cultural themes based on in-depth interviews in each country. We then argue our results situate and synthesize the Warhammer gaming community in between postmodern and poststructural approaches, which suggests a rethinking is needed in terms of describing consumption experiences.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Conceptualization:
In his pioneering article, Cova (1997) examines how people form bonds through consuming products and experiences in a postmodern society. He suggests individuals form ‘tribes’ through these consumption processes. Each tribe contains unique social and interpersonal dynamics, which are often related to the shared product or brand thus forming what Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) name a “brand community”. These definitions present challenges as a result of the co-existence of sub-tribes within a given brand community that allocate different meanings to a particular brand. This plurality of meanings seems exacerbated for global brands where meanings are shaped by tremendously varying cultures. This paper explores tribe and brand community concepts within a gaming context by examining meanings inherent to consumption processes for U.S. and French participants of a battle reenactment game titled Warhammer. It argues that community attached to a global brand constitutes a complex phenomenon, one that both integrates and ignores geographical considerations.

Methodology:
In order to gain a greater understanding of cross-border consumption processes for Warhammer enthusiasts, we conducted a total of 24 in-depth interviews in Marseilles, France and Madison, Wisconsin (USA), as well as collected data via naturalistic inquiry during a three-week period.

Major Findings I-Comparative Acculturation:
Several consumption themes evolved from the interviews and observations in the U.S. and France. In terms of ‘socialization’ as a theme, both American and French Warhammer gamers socialize a lot among themselves when they play, however, they are less likely to hang out together outside of the gaming environment. The American gamers feel a sense of being looked upon as outcasts by the outside world due to their interest in Warhammer. On the other hand, French players seem to face a certain sense of opposition from mainstream society for their indulgence in an imaginary game with figurines now that they are young adults.

American Warhammer enthusiasts also hold a strong attraction to violent imagery when they describe the various aspects of the game. They are also interested in reading violent books and watching violent TV shows and movies. For French informants, violence seemed less relevant. What interests the French more is the opposition being bound by it.

In addition, gamers’ sense of accomplishment from personally creating figurines, can be considered a form of the extension of the self (Waskul and Lust, 2004). As American informants became more experienced, their focus moved towards winning the game rather than on other aspects such as painting. Thus, with experience, informants become more competitive, which can overshadow their need for socializing and the easy-going environment. French counterparts, on the other hand, were concerned less about winning and more about the other facets of the game. American gamers were often competitive to satisfy their urge to win the battle, while the French felt less of a sense to win and more of a desire to experience the game itself.

Finally for American informants, consuming Warhammer enabled them to imagine and create various war scenarios, and different historical periods to thus ‘transfer’ them back in time. In addition, the figurines created a conduit for the players to enter into a different reality through their fictitious names and physical forms. The French similarly enjoyed the opportunity to escape into another universe, but the emphasis was more on creativity through escapism and the interesting experience. Warhammer enthusiasts’ interests paralleled the interests of other fantasy role playing gamers in this respect (Fine, 1983; Douse and McManus, 1993).

Major Findings II-Contributions to Theory:
Our findings also highlight the elements of homogeneity and heterogeneity that reside in the cross-border meanings of the brand. Our study of Warhammer enthusiasts suggests individuals form bonds with each other based on consumption processes inherent to the game. They resemble a tribe described by Cova (1997), which exemplifies the synthesizing of poststructural and postmodern approaches. The meaning of Warhammer is suspended between the postmodern imaginary level (Cova and Cova, 2002) created by the Warhammer constellation of communities and the rooted structural meanings drawn from the local cultures. The tribal dimension lies in between, which influences the meanings attached to the game. The tribe is the postmodern engine, which connects imaginary meanings and cultural meanings, thus giving the subject the poststructural freedom to refer to his or her cultural heritage without being bound by it.

References


