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Engagement and Serious Leisure: the Case of an Online Consumption Community

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We examine the unfolding of the leisure careers of four online consumption community managers. Our findings detail the distinctive qualities of consumer engagement in online communities as serious leisure, highlight consumer roles in online communities other than those previously identified, and extend current knowledge on value creation in brand communities.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

We propose to extend current examinations of consumers' engagement with online communities and examine it as serious leisure: "The systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of its especial skills and knowledge." (Stebbins 1992, p.3). Brodie and colleagues (2013) noted that consumer engagement in a virtual brand community involves specific interactive experiences between consumers and the brand, and among community members. Their findings highlight that consumer engagement is a context-dependent, multidimensional concept comprising cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral dimensions.

Our goal is to unveil the work-like aspects of the activity, including the efforts it requires; its costs; disappointments; its unfolding, career-like nature; and its ending. To achieve this goal, we ask the following research questions: What is the nature of consumers' engagement with an online consumption community they created and manage? How does this engagement vary through time? We address these questions through a longitudinal qualitative study of a Brazilian-based, consumer-managed, online community of Xbox players.

Our involvement with this context is characterized by long-term immersion. Throughout eight years (2006-2013), apart from multiple interviews, using netnography (Kozinets 2010), we observed, participated in, and collected data from two large online communities dedicated to Xbox, one managed by consumers and one managed by Microsoft.

The online consumption community PXB is the third version of a previously existent community. Its evolution and renewals closely followed the history of Xbox. Three friends (Mr.Ax, DH, and Dicco), who met in the BrasilXbox community, felt the need to have a different online environment for discussion. That is how Portalxbox was born, aiming at being an online community more interactive that, instead of supporting piracy, encouraged gamers to buy original games, supporting the gaming industry in Brazil.

As this trajectory unfolded, the three consumer-founders left the role of brand fans to become brand community managers. Our findings report the trajectory of this evolving community as it intertwines with the history of these characters.

Although the growth of the community, and the relevance it gained in the game scenario (acknowledged by Microsoft) were felt as an added (and in many cases unwanted) responsibility by the ones who created Portalxbox, their decisions regarding what to do when facing these costs and challenges associated with the serious leisure varied.

For consumers who manage communities, gradual detachment seems not to be an option. Even when their engagement with the community is no longer pleasurable, some consumer-managers may feel the need to continue to dedicate to the activity. Although Portalxbox remained a priority for MrAx, after 2012, it was no longer a priority for his partner, Dicco, with whom, MrAx shared the bulk of the managing tasks. Dicco decided to quit. As MrAx believes the community did not belong to the managers, but to the 130,000 users, MrAx decided to keep the community alive, and counted on DH to help over this project.

In examining why MrAx remains strongly engaged with the community despite the increasing engagement costs, we uncovered deeper motivations, for which the engagement is instrumental. One of the reasons that motivated MrAx to start and continue his work is his belief that he can instill feelings of principal, moral and ethics on people through his management of an online consumption community.

Although PXB started with considerably fewer users than Portalxbox had, in a year the community already has 10,000 more users than Portalxbox in the beginning. Although the three consumer-entrepreneurs had never collected any income from PortalXbox – they spend averagely US\$500 a month to maintain the community working – MrAx is confident that he, DH, and their team of supporters can make PXB self-sustainable. DH, however, seems to have a different view. He believes the majority of new Xbox gamers are youngsters who do not identify with their community and therefore it is difficult to attract new users with such an engagement. He reasons that previous users are in the same situation as himself and MrAx: people who have been playing throughout their lives, who grew up as gamers, but who now have other life interests. For DH, the community has always been work, but nowadays is just a stressful work.

In analyzing the trajectory of the consumers who are involved in the management on an online consumption community, we find evidence that consumer-managers develop a "culture of commitment" (Gillespie, Leffler, and Lerner 2005). The notion of a culture of commitment, initially developed by Tomlinson (1993), differs from the continuance commitment and value commitment to serious leisure as observed by Stebbins (1992). Tomlinson's "culture of commitment" refers to "the attachment of individuals to groups and to what they can do for those groups, as opposed to what they can gain from the groups for themselves." Between all managers involved in this study, MrAx is the one who has more deeply incorporated the culture of commitment. He is fully committed to the community, to its users, and to his ideal of leaving a legacy for the future generation of gamers. DH is also committed, but his commitment nowadays is much more related to MrAx and the friendship they built up rather than with the community itself, where members are no longer close friends among themselves, as they used to be at the origins of Portalxbox.

Disappointment, the hidden cost incurred by individuals who engage in serious leisure, and defined as "the absence of expected rewards and their manifestation...born in the failure of high hopes," (Stebbins 1992, 100) has been neglected in studies of online consumption communities. Our study addresses those disappointments in the context of consumer-managed online communities, and shows how disappointments may have different implications to one's serious leisure career.

Our findings are congruent with Stebbins (1992) suggestion of the application of the concept of "careers," an essentially work-related term, to serious leisure. Our study is the first, which we are aware of, to investigate the fuzzy boundaries between leisure and work in consumer-managed online communities.

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