Crafting the value of the link: practices, inscriptions and hierarchical position in modding communities

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Construire la valeur du lien : pratiques, inscriptions et position hiérarchique dans les communautés de modders

Résumé :
La structuration communautaire reste peu étudiée en marketing, alors que le développement du Community Management rend nécessaire sa compréhension. Nous approchons ce phénomène par les pratiques communautaires. Celles-ci elles créent de la valeur tout en structurant le monde social. Cependant, le processus de structuration reste flou. A l’aide d’une approche netnographique, cette étude explore des communautés de modders pour comprendre le lien entre pratiques et hiérarchie. Nos résultats montrent le rôle central des objets, en tant qu’inscriptions, qui matérialisent les pratiques et la reconnaissance sociale qu’elles génèrent et ainsi d’accorder un haut statut hiérarchique aux membres les plus investis.

Mots-clés : Pratiques, Communautés, Hiérarchie, Don, Inscriptions

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Abstract:
As the Community Management practice develops, the understanding of the structuration of communities becomes important, but remains scarcely studied. We approach this phenomenon through the lens of community practices. They create value, but their consequences on the structuration process remain unexplored. We use a netnographic approach in order to understand the link between practices and hierarchy. Our results show that objects play a fundamental role as inscriptions materializing the practices and the social recognition they are rewarded with. They represent the material base upon which hierarchy is built: members materialize their commitment and are rewarded with a hierarchical status.

Key-Words: Practices, Communities, Hierarchy, Gift, Inscriptions
Crafting the value of the link: how personal contribution forms the hierarchical position in modders communities

Introduction
You could be surprised to see a Renault Kangoo in the videogame GTA IV (Rockstar Games). You could be more surprised if you knew that this is not a product placement. Seeing a branded object in a videogame has been common since 1983, the official release of Castle Smurfenstein, the first mod ever created. A mod is the modification of a game with software tools that are not part of the game (Poor, 2013). For example, Castle Smurfenstein was a modification of the game Castle Wolfenstein, and replaced the original enemies (German soldiers) with Smurfs. Some very popular games built their success on mods: the Elder Scrolls games (Bethesda Softworks) or GTA IV (Rockstar Games) gather very active modders communities. Modding is not a business practice but is performed by a certain subgroup among the fans of the game (Sotamaa, 2010). Modders commonly modify games by adding features based on commercial brands. Popular culture brands are communly used, like Star Wars. Some other mods reconstruct famous buildings like the Vianden castle (Luxembourg). Some mods use traditional brands: for example, a Fiat car was added to GTA IV. Relationships between developers and gamers communities are more and more dense (Auray and Davidovici-Nora, 2010). For illustration, see for example the GTA IV (www.gta4-mods.com) or the Elder Scrolls (www.nexusmods.com/oblivion) mod community.

Research on consumer empowerment focused on the power issues between consumers and companies (Cova and Pace, 2006), even in the co-creation activities (Humphreys and Grayson, 2008). But power phenomena also occur between consumers: brand communities are hierarchically stratified, for example through a three-stratum structure (hard-core, soft-core and pretenders, Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Co-creation research outline the fact that community practices (e.g. consumer participation) are important in a community context as they foster power effects (Füller et al. 2009) and have an impact on the community structure (through group norms and social identity, Dholakia et al., 2004). Our main goal is to investigate this hierarchical organization of communities. Community practices create value, as we present in the first section, and we postulate that the value-creation process is central to the community structuration.

The creation of hierarchy inside communities has powerful managerial implications, as the Community Management practice develops as a way to organize interactions, e.g. practices, inside a virtual community. Increasing participation in online communities is a key success
factor for a marketing strategy (Muñiz and Schau, 2011) and Social Media strategies (Kim and Ko 2012). Because increasing participation is a common objective of these strategies, it is particularly important to understand the “side-effects” of this participation in terms of hierarchical structuration: to understand how practices affect the hierarchical status of a member allows managers to use practices as a “metric” in order to reach the most influential members of the community. It also helps managers distributing rewards to active consumers according to their actual situation in the hierarchical order, so that these rewards appear to be legitimate, therefore limiting the risks of community protestations.

A netnographic approach was conducted on modders communities gathered around the Minecraft video game. This game was chosen for several reasons. First, it is very successful (100 million players in 2014, pushing Microsoft to buy Mojang, the development studio, 2.5 billion $). Second, many different brands are already used by Minecraft modders, like Star Wars, Jurassic Park, the Eiffel Tower, or even Peugeot. Finally, the fundamental goal of the game is free creation, only limited by the gamers’ imagination (see Box 1).

### Box 1. The Minecraft Game

In this game, released in May 2009, The player is dropped in a randomly generated universe, entirely composed of cubes. This universe is blank: deserts and mountains host wild animals. Two game modes are available: a “survival” mode, in which the player can be killed and has a limited inventory bar, and a “creation” mode, in which the player is immortal, has unlimited access to resources and can fly. These resources consist of “blocks” of various kinds (stone, wood, ebonite...). They are used to create buildings, like a virtual Lego game. Through creation mode, players can implement practices of creation. Some features allow building complex constructions, with moving items. The possibilities are virtually endless.

After a literature review interested in the influence of practices on value creation and the presentation of the methodology, the results will be structured into two parts. The first part presents a theoretical framework based on practice theory explaining the relationships between practices, value-creation and hierarchical structuration. The second part presents an empirical study aiming at verifying and completing our theory. In the end, the results link community structure and individual behavior through mechanism of value formation and attribution. Its formation is explained in terms of practices. Value attribution is based on the individual contribution to it and creates the hierarchical structure.
1. Value creation through practices

The consumer is no longer a “consumer”: he is a coproducer. Disparate streams of management literature – including innovation research (Von Hippel 2005), consumer culture theory (Muñiz and Schau 2007) or service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch 2004) – modified the way we now look at consumption activities. Consequently, the marketing discipline has begun to reconsider the reciprocal positions of this coproducer and the brand. Neither the former nor the latter owns entirely the process of value creation. The co-created nature of the value leads to two main questions: “what should the brand do?” and “what should the consumer do?”. The brand side of the action (a.k.a. the co-creation strategies) have been strongly investigated (see for example Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004; Payne, Storbacka and Frow 2008) and will not be of our concern. Co-creation research also investigated the consumer side, but rarely by focusing on action. One stream relates to the co-creation activities *stricto sensu*, as discussed in new product development research (see Füller, 2010 for an integrative framework). The only kind of practice discussed here is what Füller calls the “innovation task” (Füller, 2010, p. 116), referring to “generation of new ideas” and “evaluation and further modification of existing ideas”. Despite the strength of these findings, they are too contingent to a domain of activity and may not represent the richness of value co-creation practices. Another stream of research focuses on “consumer participation”. They treat it as a whole, a “bunch” of practices referring to the consumer “doing something” in the creation (Troye and Supphellen, 2012) or consumption (Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo, 2004) process. Outside the co-creation stream, one of the first practice-based approaches is found in the work of Holt (1995) and Belk (1995), who illustrate how individuals derive value through interaction with a specific product.

In a community context, Canniford and Shankar (2013) explore how surfers’ practices resolve internal contradictions. But the most significant advance in our point of view and our major inspiration for this article is found in an article written by Schau, Muñiz and Arnould (2009). Through a broad analysis of nine brand communities and a meta-analysis review of literature, they propose a typology of 12 practices gathered in four groups: impression management, social networking, community engagement and brand use. They also illustrate how all these practices participate in value creation for both the individual and the community. But their rich and inspiring results do not respond to our main interrogation: the role of practices in the structuration process of communities.

2. Value and social exchange system
Research has outlined the fact that offers can “gain or lose value through and because of their role in the performance of practices”, as Marion (2013) says. Moreover, the entire Service-Dominant Logic research stream is based on this fundamental idea. Value is created or co-created by consumer by integrating resources (Grönroos, 2011), this resource integration process being a “series of activities performed” (Payne, Storbacka and Frow, 2008) or in our view, a series of practices.

Most of these studies investigate the value-creation process with a focal on a single consumer interacting with an object or a company. Like Schau et al. (2009), we situate our study in a community context. Following Cova (1997), value originates in social bonds between individuals: products or services derive their linking value from these social bonds, e.g. from the community. Community-based co-creation processes strengthen the linking value (Cova, Dalli and Zwick, 2011). This value is created through practices in a community context. But how can we jump from individual practices to a global community value? To do this, we use a social exchange approach. This choice is not arbitrary: value-creation through practices is embedded in the very foundations of the social exchange theory (Mauss, [1925] 1990). Füller (2010, p.114) refers to social exchange theory when studying co-creation.

We link communal practices to a gift system, as practices are “given” to the community without an instant reward (Schau et al., 2009). Social exchange is indeed characterized by the absence of an immediate and nominally equal counterpart (Godbout and Caillé, 1992), causing the appearance of a state of positive debt: “a state where the giving back tends to dissolve as a principle, to the point where, to the limit, in these relations, one does not give back anymore, on gives only; or instead one is still giving back, the important thing here being that the difference between giving and giving back fades and is no longer meaningful” (Godbout, 1994, p.210).

Gift giving has been studied in consumer research since the pioneering work of Sherry (1983), and has developed mostly around a dyadic gift system (see Sherry and McGrath, 1989; Belk and Coon, 1993). Giesler (2006) expands this gift system to a community level, showing that gift-giving “maintains the essential vitality, viability and identity of the surrounding society” (Giesler 2006, p.289). In the same way, Weinberger and Wallendorf (2012, p.89) show that intracommunity gift is a way to “provide tensile strength to the network of connections between people”. Belk (2010) acknowledges the obligation of reciprocity inherent to the gift, and separates it from sharing, which implies a dilution of ownership (Belk, 2014). Gift and sharing research is consequently focused on the circulation of objects, either material (Bradford, 2009) or immaterial (Giesler, 2006). We use practice theory to expand these
findings to the gift or sharing of actions. In that way, the gift of an object becomes a specific kind of action. Schau et al. (2009) show practices resulting in the circulation of objects (the customizing practice, for example the editing of a fan magazine – Kozinets 2001) or in “pure” actions (the welcoming practice). These given practices benefit to the entire community, and create a collective value (Schau et al. 2009, p.40) given as a whole to the entire community. This theoretical development is summarized in the following scheme (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Formation of the collective value](image)

3. Value creation and structure

Practice theory posits that practices influence social structures. While Giddens (1984) indicates that practices produce and reproduce structure, Bourdieu’s habitus (1990, p.57) is “the generative principle of regulated improvisations … which reactivates the sense objectified in institutions”. In the same way, Schatzki (2002) asserts that practices enact social orders. Along the whole practice literature, “everyday actions are consequential in producing the structural contours of social life” (Feldman and Orlikowski 2011, p.1241). While most of the practice studies in management take place in the fields of organization science and strategy (where practices structure the organizational reality), we find several practice studies in a community context. In countercultures such as the punk communities studied by Fox (1987, p.365), “a hierarchy existed that ranged from the most involved … to the less involved”. Hardcore punks are committed to a “lifestyle” (ibid., p.352), and express it through “overt behavioral and physical attributes” (ibid., p.354). The main difference found between
hard-core members and pretenders is the same in another study (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1990, p.269): the pretenders’ “motives are insincere in so far as they are not adopting the over-arching lifestyle of the subculture”. They cannot be on top of the hierarchy because they do not embrace fully the global practice of being a hard-core member. These studies tend to identify the hard-core/soft-core structure with issues of authenticity: the “high-ranked” members are the most authentic. This difference is also manifested by the “doing/being” opposition, the authentic behavior being the one who embraces “the focal activities of the community” (Beverland, Farrelly and Quester 2010, p.712). These findings resonate with Kozinets’ (1999) typology of virtual community members: the more important members, the “insiders”, are the ones committed both to the consumption activity and to the community, who enact community-directed and consumption-directed practices. We conclude that members reach a high hierarchical status when other members recognize them as embracing a complete range of community practices, e.g. contributing more to the collective value than the others (see Figure 2). The following section will confront this theoretical proposal to empirical data collected in specific consumption communities: communities of modders.

![Figure 2. Attribution of the value](image)

4. Method
A qualitative approach was adopted, allowing a global understanding of the subject. Thanks to the use of a netnographic method (Kozinets, 2002) we investigated at the same time the
individual behavior and the group dynamics. Two French-speaking forums were studied: "What the craft? Forum" and "Minecraft forum", fulfilling the criteria of selection of Kozinets (see Table 1). Permission to collect data was asked before the beginning of the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>What the craft? Forum</strong></th>
<th><strong>Minecraft forum</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16990 registered members</td>
<td>1552 registered members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74234 posts</td>
<td>12437 posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Users up to 50 years</td>
<td>Young users (average 12-18 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short and many messages</td>
<td>Long but fewer messages</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1. Description of the communities under study (October 2012)**

Minecraft players often take videos of themselves while playing (alone or with a group of other players) where they comment on their game. This additional source of data grants access to the immediate reactions of players facing what is happening in the game, limiting the biases associated with *a posteriori* rationalization which may be present in a forum.

Data collection occurred between October and December 2012, after a preliminary observation of the forums. A body of 55 pages of text was collected, including textual data from messages (written between November 2011 and December 2012), and verbatim excerpts from 11 videos made by members of the two forums. After the first analysis, returns to the field have been carried out in order to seek additional verbatim, deepening the analysis and verifying some theoretical findings. Data analysis was conducted through an emerging encoding during the data collection (Corbin & Strauss, 2007), each author working independently (one per forum, one for the videos). The abductive process allowed a focus on new emerging dimensions of analysis which guided the data collection. At the end of the first month, the three thematic grids were compared for harmonization. A second harmonization took place when the three researchers reached the semantic saturation threshold.

Some phenomena were observed which are extremely close to modding even if they do not fit the strict modding definition. Indeed, the creation in Minecraft can be performed with external software (allowing the creation of visuals, textures), but also in the game itself: in this case, players use the materials present in the game to create structures they offer to other players, like a mod. Players also create servers. While the mod is a distributed creation, the server is a
rooted creation: it is a specific and unique virtual space which can be joined by multiple players. The server is similar to the mod: it is an object built by players and used by other players in order to enrich the game. In-game creations, servers and mods do not need a different treatment according to the observations. All of them are therefore treated equivalently in this study. All these activities remain qualified as 'modding'.

5. From practices to community hierarchy

5.1. Social status and the role of inscriptions

Consistent with our postulate, we can call the modding activity a “quest for social recognition”. When modders give authorization to others for using their creations, they ask for citation: “[Clement_Guerin, Minecraft forum] I will give you the right to copy it. if asked who influenced you, quote me.” Players create their reputation by broadcasting their name through others’ creations. Subscriptions to modders’ Youtube channels or Facebook pages produce tangible marks of reputation for this person (number of subscribers, number of likes). Pseudonyms do not usually differ between social media so people can assign creations to the right person (for example, one of the members of the community minecraftforum.fr, Daxx42, keeps the same pseudonym on Facebook and on Youtube, see Appendix 1). The focus on concrete reputation markers is strong: modders record their activity, giving it a tangible existence. These recordings bring together all the things the modder did. Outside the community, two supports are mainly used: a Facebook page where all the creations are posted and a Youtube account where videos are hosted. Inside the community, topics created by members manifest their activity.

Other reputation markers exist inside the community: the "ranks". They can be given to a member automatically (a software application grants a rank, when the member meets certain criteria, usually the number of posts and the number of "likes" granted to these messages) or manually (the community’s administrator distributes the ranks, which often correspond to functions occupied by members, like moderator). It was impossible to find the specific criteria of the studied communities, but they are generally based on participation and marks of approval (there is a “like” function similar to the Facebook “like”, but within the community). These ranks are a manifestation of the activity of the modder and provide information on the “status” of the member involved (for some examples, see Appendix 2). Members usually try to reach the highest rank, even though they know that ranks do not really reflect a member’s value:
“[Micronazes, WTCraft Forum] This day begins well for me too. Thanks Tech¹, I’ve become an appreciated member!” [Tech, WTCraft Forum] “I have more messages and likes than isild and gmmal and then they’re appreciated and not me! *going to kill whoever created those stupid ranks*”

We call those marks *inscriptions*, drawing from the etymological meaning of the word “inscripcioun” in Middle English: “statement giving the author or title of a book” (American Heritage Dictionary, 2013). They are signs meant to convey a message about the individual’s identity. The message describes the individual and links him to his activity. Inscriptions have two natures. They are formative, as some inscriptions create the social status, but also reflexive, as other inscriptions indicate the social recognition given by others. They are simple information showing the member’s position in the community and are tied to a meritocratic system. There is here a hierarchical organization, revealed by the ranks and structured by the experience of the member.

5.2. Inscriptions, practices and hierarchy

The relevant modding skills are multiple: creation, administration and game performance. “[Link Thanos, WTCraft forum] I was moderator or admin on multiple servers”. These practices create the player’s position and are used as a resource in order to reach higher functions (moderator, server administrator). Minecraft modders build careers and by the way a hierarchical structure based on practices. In the end, an experienced player may choose to engage in a project and be legitimate to request the collaboration of the most talented modders. The most extreme the investment is, the most value it creates: “[healxfer, WTCraft forum] I created each module to share … All this took me about a month. But the construction itself took me a week”. In the end, the construction is an inscription.

Inscriptions manifesting the modders’ activity are a tangible expression of their practices: it shows their personal contribution to the formation of the value. If this value is collective, social recognition research aims at reassigning a part of it to the individuals who created it. These omnipresent inscriptions are what make the modder recognized. Through them he can say: “I contributed to the link to some extent”. They are the career of the player, the comprehensive representation of all of his value-creation activities and all the social recognition he earned from them. This value being fundamental, it may represent a legitimate basis to create a hierarchy. This is why members do not just use the existing inscriptions

¹ The rank was granted after the member Tech liked Micronazes’ last message.
proposed by the community architecture (the ranks): they create their own, and mix several contents and platforms. They often use signatures (shorts text, images or links displayed under every post they produce) to manifest their activity. Every time they send a message, the signature shows their career (see Appendix 3 for examples). In this way, they broadcast their career everywhere they can be seen on the community.

The hardcore modders, those who are at the heart of the community, are not hierarchically superior because they were here before. They are superior because they made the community exist, they created the community link, and they are the ones that gave it its value. The recognition made by members is therefore the regulatory resource of the hierarchical ordering: to express gratitude is to accept the contribution of an individual to the link’s value. The modder gives individually to the community and the community gives back collectively to the individual. Competence is not enough to reach a high hierarchical level. In the “job opportunities” requirements as in the ”resume” broadcasted in the communities, the technical competence is not enough: “[thenono, WTCraft forum] Then, my nickname is TheNonorenaud37. I'm mature. I respect the players, I judge everyone the same way, I ask respect. I am known on the server, Level pvp 7/10 Level redstone 6/10 Level 9/10 Architecture”. “Maturity” and “respect” refer to human qualities that guarantee pacific coexistence among people: beyond technical competence, the modders need to prove that they are able to participate in the creation of a good atmosphere. Their practices go beyond technique, and embrace all the aspects that give value to the link. More important, the “marks” members give to express their skills are, again, inscriptions.

6. Discussion

6.1. Theoretical and managerial implications

This article, through the study of modders communities, aimed at explaining the structuration of communities. Starting from the study of modding as a practice, we expose results congruent with the previous literature on community practices (Schau et al., 2009). We support our first idea that practices create hierarchy, but our main contribution lies in the exposition of the role of inscriptions in this process. As tangible marks of the individual’s activity and social recognition, inscriptions translate the intangible “career” into figurative or textual material. This material is then used as the structuration base of the community. In this way, we can enrich our first model (see Figure 3: dotted lines represent intangible objects, plain lines represent tangible ones). Surprisingly, despite the omnipresence of objects in
consumption and especially in communities (Schau et al., 2009), they were only seen as passive material waiting to be interpreted by consumers (Holt, 1995). Our result show that objects are not only passive receivers: they are active relays, transmitting someone’s voice to others through (virtual) space and time. Why else would they be everywhere we look?

Figure 3. Inscriptions as creators of hierarchy

This is nothing more than what the Actor Network Theory says. In this view, objects are actors who translate a message (Callon and Latour, 2006). They are a way of convincing others, as they are mobile, immutable, presentable, readable and combinable (Latour, 2006). Modders are not relevant actors: socially relevant “actants” (Callon, 2006) are made of a network of objects and subjects who speaks only one voice. Inscriptions become “spokesmen” of modders, they tell others how grand the modder they represent is, how much time and energy he invested to the community.

Managers must take into account these inscriptions and what they mean. They can, first of all, use them as a “metric” to judge the hierarchical position of members. When opinion leaders become more and more interesting targets, traditional network analysis have shown its limits as centrality is not the most important indicator of influence (Watts and Dodds, 2007). But inscriptions mean something: they express value-creating practices. Managers must thereby foster value-creating practices and provide members with inscriptions in order to record them. This can help the brand distribute rewards according to the member’s participation inside the community, and create a formal hierarchy based on involvement.

6.2. Limits and research perspectives
This study is not without limits: it has been done more than a year ago and renewing it on a newer community of modders, e.g. *GTA IV, Skyrim* or other successful games would be interesting. The non-participant observation conducted here should be converted to participant observation in order to refine the results. The use of other methods, qualitative (projective methods, for example) or quantitative can also be conceived with the underlying conceptual frameworks. The acceptability of brand intervention remained unquestioned. It is an interesting research perspective because this study was only interested here in spontaneous creations. Similarly, it would be fruitful to conduct similar studies in communities created by brands in order to see if the origin of the community (spontaneously created or brand-created) changes the members’ perception of the co-creation activity.

Finally, this study opens several research perspectives. First, this study took place in a community of peers. These phenomena occur also in brand-managed communities (Pitt *et al.* 2006). The brand becoming part in this social exchange contributes with its investment in the community and receives in terms of information but also in terms of discharge of work when members are asked to respond to others problems. As a result, the brand must balance hierarchical status and contribution. The dominant position of the brand should not be explained only because it owns the community, but because it contributes enough to earn the right to manage the community.

Our results expose somehow a unique hierarchy in the observed communities. We were not interested in the power issues between several subgroups inside one community. How they use practices in order to challenge other subgroups, how they use inscriptions remains unstudied. We adopted an “angelic” view of competition, whereas communities are, like other social fields, strategic arenas where people struggle in order to gain power. The understanding of these strategies may help Community Managers in their everyday practice.

But one of the most stimulating research perspectives lies in the role of inscriptions. Treating objects more as actors than as passive receivers may foster the understanding of major challenges in consumption research. Consumers manipulate product and brands, and enact their own social world by doing so (De Certeau, 1980; Giddens, 1984). How it may result in fields like consumption communities (where the hard-core/soft-core difference is made partly by the use of objects), co-creation activities or service delivery remains an unexplored area.
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Appendix 1. Following the member Daxx42 on different platforms

Figure 4. Screenshot of one of Daxx’s videos on Youtube

Figure 5. Screenshot of Daxx’s Facebook Page
Appendix 2. Examples of ranks

Figure 6. Awarded automatic ranks examples (Beginner, appreciated member, very appreciated)

Figure 7. Granted ranks examples (Moderator, Journalist, Server moderator, Website administrator)
Appendix 3. Examples of signatures

Figure 8. Example of signature containing links to Steam and Twitter account

Figure 9. Example of signature containing a link to a YouTube channel