From Aesthetic to Epistemic Consumption: Analyzing Knowledge Pathways in Consumption Collectives

Jan-Hendrik Bucher, Johanna Gollnhofer, Niklas Woermann

Abstract—This paper explores the collective pursuit of quasi-scientific knowledge practices as a consumption activity. By empirically analyzing the highly-specialized collective practice of game-breaking, we grant insights into consumption collectives constituting knowledge systems. We show that the collective explorative endeavor of epistemic consumption relegates the aesthetic dimension of collective consumption to the backstage. By uncovering knowledge pathways, this study sheds light on the structuring forces of knowledge in consumption collectives in contemporary consumer culture.

Jan-Hendrik Bucher, University of St. Gallen, Institute for Customer Insight, St. Gallen, Switzerland, jan-hendrik.bucher@unisg.ch. Johanna Gollnhofer, Institute for Customer Insight, St. Gallen, Switzerland, johannafranziska.gollnhofer@unisg.ch. Niklas Woermann, University of Southern Denmark, Department of Marketing & Management, Odense, Denmark, woermann@sam.sdu.dk.


I. INTRODUCTION

For well over 2000 hours, Informant 1 (26 years old) has now been playing the video-game Super Mario 64, a game he used to play as a child. However, instead of casually playing through the game, letting the game guide him, getting lost in the game’s storyline, and immersing into the colorful world of Super Mario 64, for hours Informant 1 has been concentratedly playing the same sequence over and over. Together with ten fellow-players, Informant 1 tries to save time, some frames or even some seconds if they do well. By division of labor, they are currently working to complete the game in less than four minutes and 55 seconds. In fact, Super Mario 64 is not about speed at all, but about reaching the end of the game in the first place. Released in 1996 by Nintendo, the game is designed as a single-player game for six hours of gameplay or more. By now, Informant 1 and his fellow players know every aspect of every single level, every trigger, every opponent, every item, and everything about the physics of the game, which allows them to further break the game and thus to save more time. For further analysis of the game, frame-specific data regarding the frame count, the position in space, the memory cache, Mario’s speed per frame, and much more information is displayed.

Game-breakers like Informant 1 are well-connected and engaged technology enthusiasts who are keen to experiment. They enjoy the intellectual challenge of creatively exploring the game to overcome limitations and to achieve novel and clever outcomes. To reach their goal they collectively, dedicatedly, patiently, and persistently engage in, sometimes painstaking, quasi-scientific processes for hundreds over hundreds of hours of exploring, analyzing, deconstructing, and optimizing. Hereby, consumers become researchers and developers. We define game-breaking as a highly demanding activity of collaboratively exploring a focal game to optimize for speed. Game-breaking exists since video games have been around. However, once an underground hobby conducted by videogame players exchanging footage through obscure internet forums, since 2010 it has become an ever more rapidly growing global phenomenon, influencing the multi-billion dollar video game industry (Lewis, 2020; Warman, 2019). Worldwide, game-breakers actively discuss in forums and via livestreaming platforms and stream and upload videos, with the most popular videos viewed tens of millions of times. Studying game-breaking is interesting because it allows us to better understand the epistemic dimension of consumption in consumption collectives. This case is theoretically rich, as game-breakers do not (primarily) focus on the aesthetic and/or symbolic dimension of consumption but consume epistemics. Hence, this collective is heavily and obviously pervaded by (epistemic) knowledge. New insights into knowledge-intensive consumption collectives allow us to better understand...
phemonena in contemporary consumer culture such as expert systems (Latour & Deighton, 2018), nerd-cultures (Seregina & Weijo, 2016), self-trackers (Bode & Kristensen, 2016; Etkin, 2016; Lupton, 2014), users of smart technology (Bardi & Eckhardt, 2017; Bettany & Kerrane, 2016; Hoffman & Novak, 2017), online forums (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015), open-source (Arvidsson, 2011), fandom (Kozinets, 2012), craft consumption (Campbell, 2005; Watson & Shove, 2008), and consumers communing around complex focal objects (Muniz & Schau, 2005). This literature has shown us, that collective consumption is inherently intertwined with knowledge and that there are no consumption collectives not pervaded by knowledge. However, we know little about the epistemic dimension of consumption since prior analysis of collective consumption has primarily focused on its symbolic, aesthetic and/or cultural dimension (cf. Kozinets, Patterson, & Ashman, 2016; Maciel & Wallendorf, 2016; Schau, Muñiz Jr, & Arnould, 2009; Seregina & Weijo, 2016). To close this gap, we do not take knowledge, its existence, and its characteristics in consumption collectives as an epistemological a priori but ask: How is Knowledge Practiced in Consumption Collectives? To answer this question, we conducted a case-study on game-breakers, using interviews and netnographic inquiry (Belk, Fischer, & Kozinets, 2013). We followed game-breakers online, as well as on special occasions such as on fairs or meet-ups, resulting in numerous hours of netnographic investigation, as well as in ten informal interviews and eight recorded in-depth interviews. We extend the state of research as we study game-breaking collectives by focusing on pervasive circulating knowledge pathways. Hereby, we learn (1) how individuals communize1 around knowledge-intensive domains provoking complex consumption activities, and (2) how the epistemic dimension of consumption decisively shapes consumption practices. We contribute to the analysis of know-how (Maciel & Wallendorf, 2016; Seregina & Weijo, 2016), of consumption knowledge (experiential expertise) (Clarkson, Janiszewski, & Cinelli, 2012), and of tacit knowledge (Arsel & Bean, 2012) in consumption collectives. We uncover that consumers craft epistemic knowledge in quasi-scientific ways internally in consumption collectives. Adding to the vast literature strand on aesthetic and/or symbolic consumption we show, that these individuals do not only contribute to the knowledge system for building social status (Kozinets, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), for establishing interpersonal connections (Cova, 1997, 1999), or for defining their identity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) but that knowing and the knowledge-system (at least partially) guides their passion. Hereby, we neither draw on knowledge in a Bourdieuan sense of accumulable field-specific disposition nor in a Wittgensteinian sense of (sub)cultural competence (Schatzki, 1996; Warde, 2005) but analyze knowledge and knowledge pathways in their epistemic sense (Knorr Cetina, 1999).

1 Translated by Schatzki (2002), original: Vergemeinschaftung (Weber, 1922)
investigative and explorative practices in a spirit of playfulness to craft understanding than an aesthetic consumption object as which it was originally designed. That is why we conceptualize the game as an epistemic object (Knorr Cetina, 1997; Zwick & Dholakia, 2006).

This study grants insights into knowledge-intensive consumption collectives constituting knowledge systems. Not only consumption communities in their narrower sense but all collectives pervaded by knowledge can hereby be re-enquired. We show a new but increasingly important form of consumption collectives where consumers primarily communize to enter the knowledge system, as well as to contribute and hereby challenge the market, and do not (only) do so for aesthetic and/or symbolic reasons.

III. REFERENCES


Cova, B. (1999). From marketing to societing: When the link is more important than the thing. Rethinking marketing: Towards critical marketing accounting, 64-83.


