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The Companion Community: How Car Producers Promote Hybrid Car Consumption

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ABSTRACT

Consumption communities and brand communities do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, they are part of an encompassing social system made of multiple interacting communities. The recognition of this greater picture is enabled by the shift in interpretation from the mechanical systems perspective to the constructivist systems perspective. In this article, we focus on a specific form of community, which we call the companion community, that supports the hybrid car consumption community through development and provision of requisite physical and symbolic resources. We find that the concept "sustainability" is constructed as a symbolic resource and has a different meaning within the two communities. It is suggested that citizens should be wary of the reductionist perspective of sustainability promoted within the companion community.

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Introduction

In consumer studies, there has been a steady increase in research that focuses on communities and subcultures (Cova 1997; Cova and Cova 2002; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muniz Jr. and O'Guinn 2001; Wenger 2000; Wenger and Snyder 2000). Communities are formed on the basis of consumption practices and brand interests (Cova 1997; McAlexander et al. 2002; Muniz Jr. and O'Guinn 2001), or, alternatively, professional but also non-formal affiliation (Wenger 2000; Wenger and Snyder 2000). In particular, brands can become means of consumer bonding. Brand communities are defined as "specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand" (Muniz Jr. and O'Guinn 2001, p. 412). However, brand is not a simplistic concept: it symbolises a communing context of producer-consumer relations, experiences, and communication, rather than representing an independent ontological object (de Chernatony 1993; Fournier 1998; Gummesson 1999; McKenna 1997). From a mechanistic perspective, producers or marketers are mostly seen as an external factor affecting a particular consumer community, whereas brand research emphasises that they are at the heart of brand/consumer communities. In this article, we visualise a companion community of marketer-affiliated individuals who enable consumer community development and operation through the provision of required resources (e.g., physical, financial, cultural, and symbolic). We draw on the constructivist systems perspective (Luhmann 1995; von Foester 2003) to investigate a form of community that we call

companion community. The main assumption in this research is that consumer communities do not operate independently. Rather, they tap resources from supporting companion communities within the wider framework of a common system. Hence, we define companion community as the set of interrelated producer practices and communications without which a consumer community would not exist.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the systems nature of community formation and operation with a particular focus on companion community. To accomplish this, we first compare the two contrasting conceptual perspectives: mechanist and constructivist. In this, we distinguish a double structure that represents the relation between community *of* consumption and companion community. The next section describes the constructivist systems method and analytical procedures used for the investigation. Then the results of the interpretation are presented and discussed. In the final section, conclusions and implications pertaining to research for consumers are discussed.

Interpretive Worldview

The concepts *system* and *community* are related. The commonly accepted definition of a system is that it is made of elements (e.g., individuals) and their relationships (Dixon 1991; Dixon and Wilkinson 1982). Similarly, community is seen as consisting of "its member entities and the relationships among them" (McAlexander et al. 2002, p.39). The similarity between the definitions is not coincidental, rather it is rooted in thought patterns which we refer to as mechanical thinking.

Mechanical Systems Perspective
Implicit in mainstream community research, the mechanical perspective consists in assumptions that observed phenomena can be reduced to deterministic mechanisms (e.g., systems) that represent the aggregation of analytical units (Eve, Horsfall, and Lee 1997; von Bertalanffy 1950). Cartesian thinking is the backbone of this perspective (Pollio 1982; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). Thompson et al. (1989) use the *machine* and *container* metaphors to unravel the implicit patterns of the Cartesian approach. The machine metaphor stands for a machine that is the sum of independent components. The container metaphor assumes dualism (i.e., the notion that external phenomena exist on their own), while a mind contained in the body creates the representations of the external reality.

From the mechanical perspective, community is conceptualised as follows. First, community is the direct aggregation of participating individuals (i.e., the unities of consciousness) and their actions (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006; McAlexander et al. 2002, Muniz Jr. and O'Guinn 2001; Wenger and Snyder 2000). For example, Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) discuss small groups of friends as a locus of community, whereas Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) consider community to be the aggregation of brand users. Although some researchers identified communities via cognitive characteristics such as consciousness of kind, shared traditions, sense of moral responsibility, and imagination (Anderson 1983; McAlexander et al. 2002, Muniz Jr. and O'Guinn 2001), this way of conceptualisation tends to describe a situation from the perspective of an individual who can be a researcher or a community member reflecting on his/her experiences.

Second, the researcher faces a difficult task of reconciling the motives of an individual and those of community. The mechanical perspective gives rise to "problems" that are more analytical than actual in the tradition of the tragedy of commons, the prisoners' dilemma, or a macro-micro paradox which depict problematic tensions between individuals and community (Shultz and Holbrook 1999; Smith 1997). The concepts of consciousness of kind (Muniz Jr. and O'Guinn 2001), social intentions (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006), and relationships with a brand (Algesheimer et al. 2005) are proposed as forces that bring a sense of community into individuals' minds and behavior.

Finally, an input-output schema might run as another assumption: community is seen as a process that turns inputs into outputs (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006; McAlexander et al. 2002). Hence, the definition of community changes depending on how inputs and outputs are defined. For instance, community is an industrial marketing system if inputs and outputs are defined as resources (Hunt and Arnett 2003). Alternatively, it symbolises knowledge generation if inputs and outputs are information (Wenger 2000), or an experience milieu if inputs and outputs are mental processes (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006; Thompson and Troester 2002), or a cultural process if inputs and outputs are norms and traditions (Holt 1998, 2002, Muniz and O'Guinn 2001).

Constructivist Systems Perspective

In contrast to mechanical thinking, the constructivist systems perspective is based on conceptualising social phenomena as living systems (Luhmann 2006; Maturana and Varela 1992, von Foester 2003). The perspective draws on the general systems theory (von Bertalanffy 1950) and the theory of social systems (Luhmann 1995). The general systems theory posits that social phenomena cannot be adequately explained by reductive deductive science, since social phenomena exhibit wholeness (i.e., unity) and organisation (von Bertalanffy 1950). Further, von Bertalanffy (1950) argues that the problems of organisation rather than fragmentation (reduction) hold genuine scientific value. Luhmann's theory of social systems (1995) applies the general systems theory to social phenomena. Luhmann defined system as *difference* between a system and its environment. The word *system* in the definition is repeated, and as Luhmann notes this is not accidental. This definition is built on two premises: a) systems form through differentiation; b) systems are self-referential (Capra 1997; Schaefer 2005). According to this theory, community as a complex system refers to communications that differentiate this community from its environment (Luhmann 1995; Poerksen 2004). The perspective maintains that a discrete component (e.g., an individual, a consumption action, an experience) is less likely to reveal the full extent of the contingent nature of social events (Juarrero 1999; Parsons 1977). This complexity is barely distinguished in mechanical models. Moreover, it is recognised that interactivity cannot be fragmented without losing the "social" (Bagozzi 2000; Glimcher 2005; Juarrero 1999).

Community communications assert meaning though distinctions (Cooren et al. 2006; Leydesdorff 2002, Luhmann 1995). Luhmann (2006) saw communication as the generation of system/environment differentiations that are used in successive communications that are linked as a network. Accordingly, the assumption is that community consists of operationally linked communications that assert the difference of the community from the environment. Also, this perspective draws on two assumptions: radical temporalisation and deontologisation (Seidl and Becker 2006). Radical temporalisation means that community is reproduced moment-to-moment at each instance of communication rather than holding constant observable objective existence "out there". In the community literature, temporality is only discussed as the characteristic of communities that form on a seasonal basis (McAlexander et al. 2002), while radical temporalisation is mostly ignored. On the other hand, the structural element of community – communication – is deontological: it has no meaning outside the system. It only exists within the network of other similar communications. The emergence of communication and its use within a community are not two separate stages (Thompson et al. 1989). The meaningfulness of communication within the chain of other similar communications is existential; that is to say that its usage implies its existence, and the existence means that it has been used (Luhmann 1995).
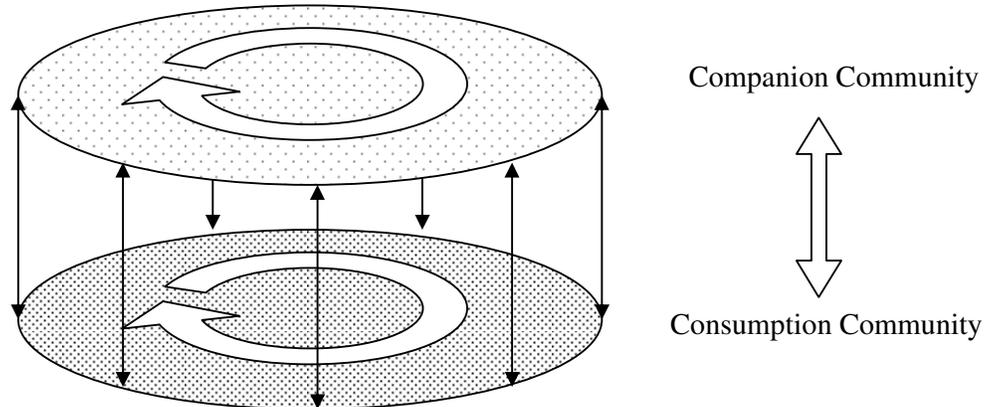
Companion Community

Applying the constructivist perspective, we suggest that community is a domain that is closed (i.e., distinct) in its self-referentiality: communications distinguish a particular community from other communities. A consumption community forms as consumer apprehension and appreciation of marketer action and offerings, and vice versa. It means

that a common system comes about through the interdependence of marketer and consumer communities.

Figure 1 depicts the general view of how corresponding communities develop co-existence. We argue that a *consumption community* has its corresponding *companion community*, the purpose of which is to sustain the consumption community and to exchange resources with it.

Figure 1: Relation between Companion and Consumption Communities

Communities are closed in their recursive boundaries of communication; that is, they may not be operatively related to each other. For instance, a consumption community comprises the practices of interactive meaning-making via product use, modification, disposal, and communication, while a companion community deals with the general meaning of practices related to production, logistics, marketing, and recycling. However, these are not totally blind towards each other; rather each system is "interpreted" by the other. They are "cognitively open" to perturbations in respective communicative structures (Luhmann 1995). Companion and consumption communities can only enforce internal changes (i.e., communication) in their operative domain to interpret the other community. In this sense, a direct effect from one to another is not possible because any influence is an interpretive influence that must make sense within the respective internal structure.

Interpretive Method

We now discuss an investigation in which the constructivist systems method and associated analytical procedures were applied to understand a particular example of a companion community.

Context

The hybrid car marketing system came into existence as a result of the market introduction of the first hybrid engine car brand, Prius, by the Toyota Motor Corporation in 1999 (www.toyota.com). Other automobile manufacturers - Honda, Ford, General Motors, and DaimlerChrysler - have also introduced or started developing their own versions of hybrid car brands. A consumption community identified by both ethos and practices of driving hybrid car brands such as Toyota Prius, Honda Civic Hybrid, Chevrolet Silverado, GMC Sierra, and Ford Escape Hybrid has also emerged (de Haan, Mueller, and Peters 2006; Kadirov and

Varey 2006; Reed II and Bolton 2005). The focus of the current investigation is not the hybrid car consumption community, but the companion community that operates among hybrid car manufacturing organisations and their respective networks (Byrne and Polonsky 2001; Kadirov and Varey 2006).

Research Procedure

We retrieved the textual content of leading hybrid car producers' corporate reports, corporate websites, and corporate PR sources, ordered them, and transformed them into text format files. We used the qualitative data analysis software QSR NVivo 2.0 to organise and code this set of texts. A number of common themes emerged as the result of this analysis. The interpretation of these themes and their meaning was informed by the constructivist systems perspective. The list of information sources is given in Table 1.

The analysis is focused on discovering both the content and form of communication (Hofstadter 1979). We observed the self-observer, that is, the community of car manufacturers (von Foerster 2003). The community is taken as a living system that is building its identity on the basis of distinctions (Cooren, Taylor, and Van Every 2005; Luhmann 1992; Spencer-Brown 1969). The task was to discover latent distinctions operated by the community, and to observe how these distinctions unfold in community practices.

Table 1: Information Sources

Environmental Reports	Websites	PR sources
Toyota environmental and social report 2005

Honda environmental annual report 2005

Ford sustainability report 2004/2005

GM corporate responsibility report 2004/2005

The sustainable mobility project: The full report 2004 | Toyota corporate website content on corporate values, sustainability and environment, the environmental action plan (www.toyota.co.jp/en)

The website of Toyota NZ branch on sustainable action (www.toyota.co.nz)

Honda corporate website content on environmental, social action and policy (www.honda.com)

Ford corporate website content on environmental/social action and policy www.ford.com)

GM corporate website content on environmental/social action and policy (www.gm.com) | Toyota news (in the corporate website)

News about Honda Civic hybrid (in the corporate website

News about Ford's sustainable action (in the corporate website)

Sustainable mobility news: E-mail newsletters' content (www.wbcsd.com) |

The contradicting character of communications can be understood and observed by looking at community operations from a *meta-level*, that is, the level which is one step abstracted from the level of operating. The meta-level is the locus of *observing the observer*, that is, second-order observation (Bateson 1979; Luhmann 1995; von Foerster 2003).

Interpretation

From the very beginning, marketers recognised that buyers and sellers exchange not only goods and services, but also symbols (Levy 1959). The companion community, in the physical sense, supplies hybrid cars to the particular consumption community. This is a physical resource. Also, more important and subtle is the transfer of a symbolic resource – the concept *sustainability* – that is understood differently in these communities. For the companion community, sustainability is the way of dealing with own problems, both internally and externally. For the consumption community, sustainability (as a symbolic resource) is the signal to consume more. Moreover, it is the signal to consume narrowly, in terms of more of the physical resource offered as a "remedy", rather than considering other prudent alternatives (e.g., public transport, walking, cycling). In this, the sustainability purpose defeats itself. It can be seen that sustainability indeed inspires and sustains communities, but only as a temporal theme for linking communications. In general, our interpretation shows that environmentalism is "hijacked" when the notion of sustainability is made a symbolic resource to be exchanged between companion and consumption communities rather than being about the general judgment of the quality of a social system.

How the concept "sustainable" is constructed

> While the growth in vehicle demand around the world presents great growth and sales opportunities, it also presents major challenges. The key…corporate responsibility issues: sustainable mobility, conventional air emissions, greenhouse gas emissions and road safety, are discussed in the…report (General Motors Corporation, 2005, p. 3-14).

The passage indicates that a discursive turn has occurred in self-observation. The community defines itself through the present communicative selection – sustainability. The underlying assumption behind this communicative move is to pinpoint a distinct identity – aspiring towards sustainability. However, the distinction is not ambiguous, rather it is transformed into an operationally defined specific distinction:

> GM has set aggressive performance targets and has achieved significant gains in 5 key areas in 2004 – vehicle safety, quality and fuel economy, global facility energy consumption and GHG [greenhouse gases] emissions reduction (General Motors Corporation, 2005, p. 1-3).

The passage shows that the corporation selected particular areas out of many possible on which performance metrics are developed and observed. This move reduces (impoverishes) the complex concept of sustainability into a process that is manageable via a corporate toolbox. In a similar vein, Toyota focuses on recycling and energy conservation as basic functions:

> Toyota recognises that future growth will become dependent on responsible technologies, and the principles of reducing, recycling, and reusing – the active principles of sustainability…Toyota supports the environment by increasing local environmental practices through recycling and reducing waste...(Toyota NZ, www.toyota.co.nz, retrieved November 2005).

Here sustainability is taken to be about identifying the processes that can be labeled as reducing, recycling, and reusing. Review of the areas mentioned in the corporate texts allows us to classify sustainability practices into four domains: safety, impact, efficiency, and diffusion (see Table 2). More often than not, unsustainable events play an important role in providing a meaningful backdrop to these industrial practices. The (communication about)

practices are meaningful only to the extent to which they relate to environmental and social problems.

Table 2: Emergence of the concept Sustainable within companion community

Sustainability Domains	Practices		Environmental and Social Problems
	Vehicle Related	**Corporate Related**	
Safety	Improving driver safety	Improving worker safety	Road accidents; traffic congestions; workplace accidents; global mobility trends
Impact	Reducing harmful fuel emissions Recycling parts and end-of-life vehicles	Reducing harmful facility and production emissions Recycling materials, waste and containers	Deteriorating atmosphere; the ozone-layer problem; global warming; increasing landfill, corporate footprint etc.
Efficiency	Improving fuel efficiency	Saving energy and materials	Increasing cost of natural resources; global turbulence; regional conflicts
Diffusion	Promoting newly designed fuel-efficient vehicles	Administering social and environmental programmes	Ignorance and apathy about environmental issues; erosion of traditional community and culture, values, and ethics; destructive globalisation

There seems to exist the general realisation that most societal problems are perpetuated from within the industry. The industry finds itself in a very unsustainable position to start with. Therefore, self-correction is deemed critical:

> CO_2 emissions attributed to energy use in the production domain came to 467,600 CO_2-tons in fiscal 2004, up 5.1% from the previous year's level (445,000 CO_2-tons) (a 24.0% reduction over the fiscal 1990 level). CO_2 emissions were thus reduced by 2.8% compared with the numerical target of 481,000 tons (Honda Motor Co., 2005, p.35).

The companion community naturalises the feeling that eco-social problems are normal: it is the natural outcome of operating and there is no way around it. Moreover, the problems are conceptualised as manageable. This is taken as a matter of fighting against own vices. In the texts, sustainability is posited as the piecemeal annual reduction in greenhouse gases. Metaphorically, it is the same as saying that one becomes a good person as an outcome of voluntary scaling down one's own harmful behaviour. Another contradiction is that hybrid vehicle brands (Prius, HCH, Silverado, Sierra, and Escape Hybrid) are promoted as the paragons of care for the natural environment as they seem to offer substantial levels of fuel efficiency, while to maintain this uniqueness, inefficient "gas-guzzling" vehicle brands are required to also be in place as a point of reference. If the conventional car models become more efficient, the hybrid car fuel-efficiency appeal would vanish. Accordingly, the companion community is built upon the difference between sustainable and non-'green' brands. Hence, in contradiction to the common perception that the value of a green offering is reduced or mitigated by a non-green one, this community tends to create meaning by *maintaining* a considerable gap between the levels of fuel efficiency for different models.

Expanding the community

Interestingly, sustainability as self-correction has only internal appeal. This appeal extends within the companion community (across different corporations) through expansion strategies such as decision premises and the fiction of a decision maker. Decision premises consist in a communication that takes preceding communications as a premise (Seidl and Becker, 2006). Within the companion community, past communications are not questioned and are taken for granted as the bases for decision-making. Past communications are reflected in programmes, narrated history, and cognitive routines. Programmes are general scripts that outline requisite action steps in particular situations. Programmes legitimise the courses of action: a decision to act in a particular way would seem natural when considered within the context of an existing programme. For instance, Toyota considers the hybrid technology as part of kaizen (Imai 1986), a programme of continual marginal improvements over the existing technologies:

> …as well as their potential strengths, as evidenced in such ways as their amenability to continuing kaizen…[The company] also believes that it is important to conduct continual and constant follow-ups (Toyota Motor Corporation, 2005, p. 58).

Kaizen suggests that a hybrid car is a meaningful option as it is the logical result of past improvements. A decision premise can also be seen in employment of self-referential history. The history of a corporation is retold as the history of sustainable action:

> Since its establishment…, Honda Motor Co. Ltd has remained on the leading edge by providing products of the highest quality that create new values…In addition, the Company has conducted its activities with a commitment to environmental protection and enhancing safety in a mobile society. Honda's slogan, "Blue sky for children," was created in the 1960s when the problem of environmental pollution became acute. To give substance to this slogan, Honda unveiled the Compound Vortex Controlled Combustion (CVCC) engine, which used the company's unique low-emission technology developed in the United States and Japan. [The company] also undertook an aggressive campaign of environmental improvement at that time. Later, we developed the Variable Valve Timing and Lift Electric Control System (VTEC) and the i-VTEC series engines, whose innovative technologies achieved both a high level of performance and reduced emissions for production vehicles. And in 1998, we furthered our efforts to preserve the global environment with the release of hybrid vehicles with the highest fuel economy in the world. Honda, while developing such technologies to achieve "ultimate" functions, made a new, challenging decision: to introduce the new-generation designs to various engine classes, to be the world's No.1 in terms of power, clean energy, and fuel economy (Honda Corporate Website, retrieved in January 2005, www.honda.com).

Within the community, the history is not considered objectively but through the lenses of current community distinctions. The "re-interpreted" past becomes a logical basis for current operations. Of course, one may argue that objective histories do not exist: the past has always been reinterpreted to link it to current practices. Another type of decision premise is a cognitive routine. A cognitive routine is the way the companion community constructs other communities. For example, consumers are seen as follows:

> No matter how good the environmental performance, customers will not purchase vehicles that sacrifice driving performance…If the spaciousness of the interior were sacrificed, the functionality and comfort of an SUV would be lost, even if the vehicle is made a hybrid. No compromises were made so *environmental performance could be enhanced without losing any functionality* (Toyota Motor Corporation, 2005, p. 46).

Here consumers are constructed as rational decision-makers. Again paradoxically, this grand simplification of the consumption community forms the basis for sustainable action (Schaefer and Crane 2005). Sustainability is reduced to a product attribute – it becomes a symbolic resource to be sold. The companion community's logic of self-correction would seem appropriate in the light of consumers being seen as *homo rationalis*. One wonders if ignorance about consumer culture (Arnould and Thompson 2005) is the condition of corporate sustainability. The *fiction of a decision maker* is also introduced: sustainability practices are taken as the direct consequence of rational motives exercised by decision makers. In this way, the paradox of self-correction is made invisible or "merely moved out of sight" (Seidl and Becker 2006, p.29). Often the decision maker is represented by environmental committees and/or environmental management systems:

> …the company established an Environmental Committee in 1991, as a body that would take the central role in corporate environmental activities. The organization was subsequently expanded for environmental conservation in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Oceania. In 1995, the World Environmental Committee was established to plan and implement worldwide environmental conservation activities. In 1999, the Committee was given a position equal to the Executive Committee, which enabled the company to make management decisions more speedily and more globally in the environmental field. At [the Company], environmental activities are conducted as follows: First, the Executive Committee decides upon medium-term environmental policies, based on which each department makes their own plans. The Environmental Committee discusses and approves the plans and then each department subsequently conducts environmental activities based on the approved plans. The results are then examined and evaluated by the Environmental Committee (Honda Corporate Website, retrieved in January 2005, www.honda.com)

Communicative Transvection

The companion community exhibits a complex self-organisational structure. It has always been difficult to define the essence of organisation, although it is commonly known that there is a difference between 'organisation' and "*the* organization". Organisations are traditionally defined in terms of structures and operations that have ontological existence and are thus readily observed. The alternative view, the interpretive constructivist perspective, looks at organisation as the unity of communications, interactive networks, and conversational flows (Bouchikhi 1998; Cooren et al. 2005; Czarniawska-Joerges 1998; Luhmann 2004; Seidl and Becker 2006). Following this perspective, the process we see in the corporate textxs can be explained in terms of diffusion, but in this case, the diffusion of sustainability communications that employ analogous distinctions. The concept *transvection* perhaps contains enough descriptive power to explain the essence of the process. This concept has been introduced by Alderson (1965) to explain the transformational, interactive nature of linked exchanges happening in marketing systems. We adopt the constructivist version of the notion and name it "communicative transvection". C*ommunicative transvection* refers to the process of diffusion of communications based on the same distinction along the vertical and horizontal channels of the companion community (refer to Figure 2).

A vehicle manufacturer within the companion community can be seen as one of many self-observing points. These points combine to comprise the unity of community decisions and discourses. Communication is copied along vector B (refer to Figure 2): the corporations situated in the horizontal dimension use the distinction "sustainable/unsustainable" as the basis for their communication. The vertical chain in the community, depicted by vector A, is the locus of communication diffusion at an industrial level that comprises suppliers, the suppliers of suppliers, and intermediaries. The discourse in the public domain, where the organisations participate as corporate citizens, is depicted by vector C. The inverted arrows

and their penetration along the structure illustrate the process of how sustainability communications are reproduced within the companion community.

Community boundaries are extended through creating a *common platform* for the transvectional diffusion. This is done through promoting the international standards of environmental management systems (EMS), internally developed audits, and dealer certification programmes:

Figure 2: Transvectional Diffusion of Communications
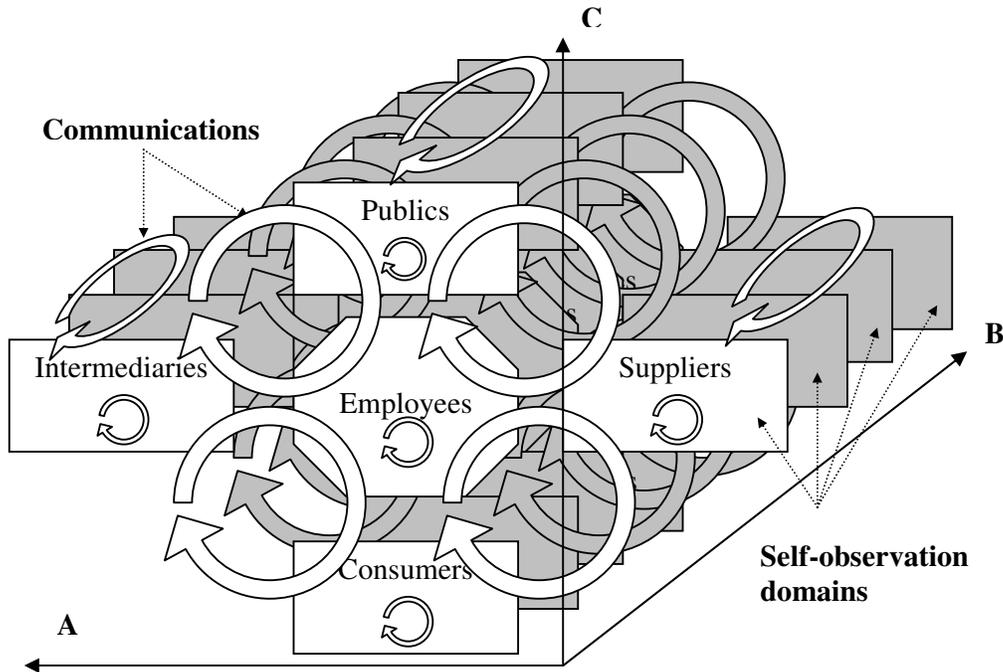
TOYOTA …considers it important that initiatives to reduce environmental impact are not implemented by TOYOTA alone, but rather carried out on a consolidated basis involving all related companies, over the entire lifecycle of the vehicle from development through production and sales. TOYOTA, as a company that conducts business on a global level, considers it important that initiatives to reduce environmental impact are not implemented by TOYOTA alone, but rather carried out with the involvement of all consolidated subsidiaries… TOYOTA presents its global environmental policy to all companies subject to consolidated EMS and offers guidance and support in sharing of best practices, exchange of expertise, conduct of audits, and other areas. …The consolidated EMS covers a total of 563 companies (Toyota Motor Corporation, 2005, p. 18).

Honda has introduced the Green Dealer certification system* to its automobile dealers as the company's unique environmental management system and promotes the acquisition of this certification by all of the dealers' stores. As of the end of March 2004, 2,524 stores are certified as Best Green Dealer stores. Best Green Dealer certification is the next step after being certified as a Good Green Dealer store (Honda Motor Co., 2005, p. 42).

... the scope of the audits will be expanded to include suppliers other than the 130 initially audited. In addition to these activities, during the implementation of supplier audits, suppliers are requested to produce their own check sheets to cover their own

suppliers and to create opportunities for education concerning SOCs [harmful emissions] to the end of the supply chain (Toyota Motor Corporation, 2005, p. 59).

The process of communicative transvection underlies the expansion of a common platform upon which similar communications are created and linked to each other. This common ground for understanding (of distinctions) legitimises and naturalises communicative solutions suggested in rectifying the paradoxical nature of community emergence.

Discussion

The Companion Community

The companion community is not bound within the frontiers of a single corporation. It defies physical, geographical, and organisational boundaries. The closest comparable concept in the extant literature is communities of practice (COP) (Wenger 2000; Wender and Snyder 2000). A COP is a "group of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise" (Wenger and Snyder 2000, p.139). This concept assumes that people ascribed to a COP keep explicit contact among each other using meetings, e-mail networks, and events. Whilst similar, the companion community is conceptually different from a COP in two fundamental ways.

First, a COP emphasises the physical presence and subscription of individuals. The companion community takes neither individuals nor discrete actions as the basis, but rather interactive communication. A discrete action presupposes an actor, while actors are the source of action. However, in the case of a companion community, a communication is not attributed to particular individuals. Communication is a community operation, while engagement in community communication, even if it happens from moment-to-moment, defines individuals. The same individual may become part of both a companion and a consumption community depending on his/her engagement in specific community communication. Our conception of community does not emphasise membership, rather it focuses on engagement. A person may participate in several communities, and this happens not through switching from membership to membership but through changing the direction of self-observation and the meaning of engagement in various communications. Self-observation is at the heart of community communication, yet this self-observation is not individualistic but social in all aspects (Luhmann 1995).

Second, a COP requires direct substantive links to be present among members. In contrast, a companion community presupposes loose communicative links. A communicative link arises when community members operate and observe similar distinctions. Similar forms are repeated and copied ubiquitously, defying spatial and temporal boundaries. This is quite possible, as research shows that different human cultures developed similar social institutions even when direct contacts among them were not substantial (Glasersfeld 1995). Also, the qualities of community commonalities – *a shared knowing of belonging*, *shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility* – discussed by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), do not necessarily require explicit contacts but come into existence through independent engagement in common communicative acts.

Community Reflects Community

The logic of equivalence is employed: a community can only be influenced by relevant communities rather than a discrete unity (i.e., a corporation). The role of companies in promoting communities is essentially recognised in the extant literature (Algesheimer et al. 2005; Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006; McAlexander et al. 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001),

where it is indicated that corporations nurture and encourage consumption communities. We maintain that corporate self-observation effectively veils the communing nature of corporate actions. We suggest that the concept of *the relationship of corporation-community* needs to be replaced by the view of *community-community* relations.

Symbolic Aspects of Community Engagement

The relevant literature has long argued for the importance of meaning creation in the marketplace (Alderson 1965; Bagozzi 1974, 1975; Bartels 1970; Levy 1959). Accordingly, the essence of communing for promoting sustainable consumption is grounded in the creation and communication of highly contingent meanings that divide the reality into distinctive forms. In this work, the companion community is conceptualised as the system of meanings that is reproduced across transvective chains. This operational definition of community emphasises the operative flow of interactions that become self-referentially meaningful to constitute the sense of community. It is in stark difference to the view of the phenomenon in terms of individuals being members and collectively making up a community.

Research on community has so far focused on how culturally shared and communicated meanings are utilised within certain consumption communities and microcultures (Cova 1997; Cova and Cova 2002; McAlexander et al. 2002; Muniz Jr. and O'Guinn 2001; Thompson 1997; Thompson and Troester 2002; Wenger 2000; Wenger and Snyder 2000). Particularly, Thompson and Troester (2002) conceptualised community as a value system that consists of narratives which share, represent, and use social meanings. However, there always exists the danger of falling back into the "default" of reductionist mechanical thinking: limiting the description of meaning to individual experiences. This view fails to represent *social* meaning-making dynamics. Our conceptualisation emphasises the operative side of meaning-creation. Meanings, and thus, communities, are not, in our view, the result of individualistic sense-making and reflection. They come forth (are distinguished) by communications that rise above any individual, and thereby become contingent and germane to reciprocal interactivity. Luhmann (1989) noted that it is communication (community) that communicates, not an individual. The alternative conceptualisation of a companion community posits that individual thoughts, conscious states, motives, and identities cannot be taken as comprising the structure of community. Quite to the contrary, these factors probably represent the state of environmental complexity for community operation. These factors are reduced into the wholeness of self-observation that projects community as a unity. The identity belongs to community - an emergent self-referential system (Hofstadter 1979; Poerksen 2004; Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991). The latest achievements in cognitive science seem to support this view – the individual identity per se is an emergent relational phenomenon situated within interactive social systems rather than representing static entitative human experience (Poerksen 2004; Varela et al. 1991). Hence, community is seen as an emergent unity which is not explainable in terms of individual identities.

Community Epistemology

It may appear that communications imply the realistic state of matters. Particularly within the companion community, actions seem to communicate sustainability values. This in turn confers the naturalistic existence of communications, and also implies validity claims in representing "truths", thereby offering researchers seemingly reliable foundational criteria to measure phenomena. In this way, the emergence of action is seen as a logical deduction of similar contributing factors that can be measured. Communication is seen as necessary as the effects of particular factors are believed to produce certain results. Therefore, there seems to be no contradictions within the boundaries of a companion community. The community expands by extinguishing any contradictory meaning creation, thus projecting its image in a simple mechanistic form. However, the second-order analysis shows that the nature of the process is extremely contingent. We note that communities distinguish

themselves from what is considered to be the chaotic, complex, and indeterminable environment, and thus reproduce their identity. Self-reproduction is unpredictable. Heinz von Foerster (2003) calls this kind of systems "unreliable", as they take their own (self-referenced) state as an input factor at each "operational turn" (p. 309). The occurrence of self-reference proves to have a damaging effect to the consistency and completeness of any logical system (Casti 1991; Hofstadter 1989). The community starts with differentiation by enacting a meaningful difference (distinction), and then expands on this basis (Hunter and Suttles 1972; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) quote Maffesoli (1996) describing the "mystic nature" of community formation that is ingrained in meanings created by communications that indicate the self in reference to other-than-self.

Implications for Consumers

The conception "rational consumer" is a convenient notion operationalised by the companion community to naturalise meanings created internally, especially its perspective of sustainability. The term *consumer* has negative connotations that allude to characteristics such as passiveness, irresponsibility, instinctiveness, need gratification, utility-maximisation, and unit of revenue. The problem is that citizens in society end up accepting such false consciousness about their own reality. They fail to realise that one is not born as a brand consumer, but is made into one through commercially motivated interpretation. Our inquiry suggests it is impossible to pinpoint a natural member of a particular community, and in this way attribute an actor to a particular micro-culture such as 'consumers'. A person can participate in many communities at the same time, and this is by participation in and apprehension of community-specific-communications. As a matter of fact, the same action can be seen as belonging to several communities at the same time due to communities operating with the self-created meanings of communication, and not with natural independent facts. Society citizens should be wary of accepting impaired identities that are reflected in companion community communications. For example, one can be a green consumer whilst still choosing to increase consumption of a green product.

Citizens should also understand that most green (sustainable) products are simply the symbols of industrial self-correction. In fact, the case of the very existence of such products (e.g., hybrid cars) indicates profound societal problems as well as reluctance by major producers to radically tackle the roots of these important problems and instead resolving on gradual reformist tinkering. Citizens should not take a green product as a signal of appropriateness of more consumption of the very product itself. Specifically, buying and driving more hybrid cars would not solve global mobility problems (fuel consumption, manufacturing impacts, and road building and congestion, noise, and accidents would increase). Instead, non-companion-community-suggested-solutions such as public transport, cycling, and walking, or even not traveling, can be considered.

Citizens should not feel that they are not responsible for choices they make. The blame cannot be always directed at producers (i.e., companion communities). This is simply because it is the same people (citizens – not producers or consumers) working and living in the same social and market system who engage in temporal communities, be they companion or consumption. The matter of attaining a sustainable society in the future is not a matter of selecting this or that green product, but a matter of engaging in community that appropriately interprets the current global eco-social situation.

Moreover, it must be realised that communication consolidates anti-communication. In the case of hybrid cars, overemphasis on reducing the notion of sustainability to the driving of fuel-efficient vehicles can create a consolidated anti-movement of non-hybrid gas-guzzler driving. Communities will expand out of opposition, finding it appealing to be non-hybrid, non-green, and uncomplicated. This is how meaning operates as difference. Genuine

sustainability efforts should transcend beyond efforts in limiting hybrid versus gasguzzler communing practices.

Future research

Research on community (especially in the domains of consumption and production) needs to transcend beyond the micro-managerial focus on individuals. The macro-level implications of community interactions in society need to be further investigated. Here a particular interest lies in detecting the conditions of sustainable development of society to be found in micro-cultures, tribes, and communities, including social movements and other form of resistant "associations". The focus on particular brands and organisations is to be replaced by constructs that defy organisational, commercial, and regional boundaries. Community-as-communication can become a powerful construct. Particularly, future research might investigate the systems properties and interactions of various interrelated communities.

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