Understanding consumers' collective action on the Internet – a definition and discussion of relevant concepts for research

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a new approach for understanding online collaboration and collective action of 'prosumers'. It is proposed here that theories of collective action and social representations theory, in particular, provide a theoretical framework for studying the structural and social context of online collaboration of consumers, the social actors involved, and how public discourse contributes to shared meaning creation and dissemination in online communities. Processes of naming, classifying, personalizing and institutionalization give their actions ontological reality and contribute to the sustainability of the common effort. An overview and definition of these processes and relevant influencing factors is given and possible indicators of these concepts in online communities are highlighted.

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INTRODUCTION

Consumer research has become increasingly aware of and interested in changes and new patterns of consumer behavior induced by the virtual environment of the Internet (Hoffman/Novak, 1996; Alba et al., 1997; Peterson et al., 1997; Erdem et al., 1999). The fact that the Internet allows consumers to play a more active role has further contributed to a more differentiated view of consumers highlighting their role as emancipated actors in value-creation processes (Dellaert, 2000). Virtual groups of consumers gather around favorite products and brands, provide support to other consumers and engage in active social discourse on various virtual platforms (Figallo, 1998; Kozinets, 1999; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). The groups I am interested here are extreme forms of emancipated online communities who actively engage in collective innovation and production processes. Previous research on emancipative consumption and consumer resistance suggests that those communities have a political component as well, striving for decommodification of digital goods from the market to the communal sphere (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Kozinets, 2002a). The 'open-source community' provides an example how enthusiastic consumers can successfully escape the market and change the way of doing business in the software industry. Whereas emancipative consumer behavior and resistance explain how consumers can escape the market active engagement in production by and for consumers constitutes a largely unexplored field of research. So far, research has been conducted to examine why individual consumers become involved in online joint-production (Lerner and Tirole, 2000; Kuwabara, 1998; Hemetsberger and Pieters, 2001). However, this leaves us

uninformed about *why* and *how* these individuals coordinate their actions towards the achievement of a common goal.

This paper seeks to contribute to the question of how social online movements develop and how people create a mutual understanding of what they are doing and why. It offers an integrative theoretical conceptualization of the structural context that enables the formation of online collective action, the social actors involved, and social-psychological processes of meaning creation and dissemination in online networks. To this end, theories of collective action are briefly reviewed and social representations theory, in particular, is introduced to highlight the process of meaning creation in online networks. Furthermore, relevant dimensions for research into on-line collective action and collaboration of consumers will be summarized and methodological implications drawn.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Collective action can be defined as all activity involving two or more individuals contributing to a collective effort on the basis of mutual interests and the possibility of benefits from coordinated action (Marwell and Oliver, 1993). Melucci (1996) defined collective action "…as a set of social practices (i) involving simultaneously a number of individuals and groups, (ii) exhibiting similar morphological characteristics in contiguity of time and space, (iii) implying a social field of relationships and (iv) the capacity of the people involved of making sense of what they are doing." (Melucci, 1996, p.20). This definition emphasizes three major questions that are important in order to describe and explain collective action. First, it emphasizes the morphological character of social movements and gives room to the proposition that we can find similar structures and patterns not only across 'geographical' borders, but also across time. Second, it highlights the relevance of the kind of

social relationships involved and thirdly, it asks for an inquiry into the process of how people make sense of what they are doing together.

Theories of collective action

In the 1970s and early 1980s resource mobilization theory (MacCarthy and Zald, 1979; Kerbo, 1982; Ferree, 1992) proved to be the most influential approach to explain more or less successful social movements. Briefly summarized, resource mobilization theory (RMT) argues that the key obstacle to be overcome in order to be able to act collectively is the lack of financial and personnel resources. Collective action requires the aggregation of resources, and that in turn requires organization. RMT provides a framework for analyzing the necessary structural conditions for collective action. Its main theoretical contribution refers to the assumption that group processes, interaction and interdependencies between individuals greatly influence collective action. It provides a model to explain how people get together or act together under certain conditions, and how they make use of available resources, recognize them and organize them for the purpose of achieving mobilization of resources (Melucci, 1996). It brought attention to the *how* and thus, left much room for future theorizing about the importance of *why* people act collectively.

Besides the insights gained in terms of properties of organization required for successful collective action and its emphasis on group influences, resource mobilization theory nevertheless applies an individualistic perspective. Thus, it neglects the existence of collective entities and socially constructed meaning as important social conditions for collective action as well as the emotional and affective background for individual decision-making and action. For the same reason it fails to answer the question of how social meaning is constructed and how it works as a driving force for action (for a more extensive critique see: Melucci, 1996; Kelly and Breinlinger, 1996).

In reaction to this critique, alternative approaches have been developed in order to provide a social-psychological basis that is able to explain the social construction of interests within a collective entity. The basic assumptions underlying those approaches concern the social embeddedness of social actors and the role of interpersonal communication in interpreting enthusiasm and grievances and constructing meaning. Possibly the most prominent field of research in that respect includes identity-oriented approaches like the 'action-identity' paradigm (Touraine, 1985; Offe, 1985) or the 'collective identity' approach (Melucci, 1996). Contributions showed a renewed interest in questions of how people make sense of their world; in social practices, and artifacts making their cultural products meaningful to them. However, there is still a gap between conceptualizations and research on 'objective' conditions and 'subjective' motives and orientations, structural determinants on the one hand and 'values and beliefs' on the other hand. This way, Melucci (1996) argued, we can never answer the question of how social actors came to form a collectivity and recognize themselves as being part of it; how they maintain themselves over time and how acting together makes sense for the individuals. Moreover, structural conditions could be preconditions as well as outcomes of collective action, shared beliefs the initiating force for action or the outcome of it. Thus, collective action could be both, a dependent and an independent variable (Klandermans, 1992).

The evolution of collective action is reflected in the history of a collective movement. Hence, the relationship between structural conditions and the social construction of meaning only unfolds if we incorporate a process view and look at developments of collective action. With respect to the aforementioned arguments, two processes are important to look at. Firstly, examining the process of group formation under the structural conditions on the Internet as well as the development of the specific structural conditions for coordination among and action by the group members should help us to understand under which circumstances online

collective action occurs and gains sustainability. Secondly, social processes of meaning co-construction are reflecting the discursive negotiation of the 'reason why' of a collective movement as well as signify its existence.

Social representation theory

Social representations theory provides a social-psychological view which explicitly emphasizes the importance of the historical context and social processes of meaning construction for the evolution of shared meaning and action. Social representations are conceptualized as ideas, thoughts, knowledge, images or a collective system of meanings which are shared by group members. In the understanding of Moscovici (1984) Wagner defines social representations as "a socially constructed and organized set of beliefs, opinions, symbols, metaphors, and images of socially relevant objects, which play a vital role in constructing the immediate everyday environment of people by virtue of its consensuality and its practical implications. Thereby a life-scape is constructed which appears as real, true…and independent from men's doing." (Wagner, 1996, p.247). People construct shared theories about the world that are descriptive, goal- and action-oriented in the sense of what is, why is it/it should be and how to act accordingly. It is through shared representations that a social group establishes its own identity and comes to distinguish and differentiate itself from other groups within society. When people share a social representation, they interpret their own conduct and that of others in the light of this knowledge. Representations also infiltrate people's minds and foster socialization. They restrain one's attitudes and perceptions, and one's attachment or repulsions with regard to objects (Moscovici and Hewstone, 1983, p.117f). When a social representation exists in a group, it is never only a shared mental event but essentially also the pattern of talk and action which "selects and relates persons and objects in such a way as to meet the stipulation of the group" (Moscovici, 1988, p.230). Social

representations can be found in everyday conversation, discourse and action. Thus, action is not only an expression of a specific representation but an integral part of it (Wagner, 1998). By means of communication, social discourse and action people construct a 'social reality' that reflects their perception, interpretation, and representation of their knowledge of the world.

The paradigmatic view of social representations described here makes a clear theoretical stance concerning the relationship between social facts and individual thought and action. It is the co-constructed social artifacts that infiltrate people's minds and cause shared individual representations and actions, rather than the other way round. Although individual predispositions filter and interpret social representations it is not just shared individual intentions and action that forms collective action, but collective intention and action that shapes the development of social movements.

This contribution promotes an integrated view of collective action that depends on the specific structural conditions on the one hand, and is characterized by a social process of meaning construction shaped by significant events in the history of the group on the other hand. In the following sections I offer a description and discussion of (1) the physical and structural conditions for collective action in a virtual environment, (2) the social actors involved in a virtual network, and (3) how its members make sense out of what they are doing. Finally, the discussion results in a synthesis of the factors and processes that shape the evolution of the structure and social meaning of online collective action.

THE INTERNET AS PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

Research on social movements suggests that collective action not only depends on the unique kind of common understanding but also the specific situational context in which a group operates (Marwell and Oliver, 1993, p.8). Online communities exist within a radically

different environment. First and foremost, the Internet is a network of digital information rather than physical objects. Information is produced by an interwoven network of actors and usually free and accessible to a global public.

This particular quality of the Internet has been said to considerably liberate and empower consumers (Dickson, 2000; Kozinets, 1999). Whereas in the ‘non-virtual world’ consumers mainly create value for themselves, their family and peers, they now own the means to produce, provide and share their digital goods with a global public. For example, consumers who produced a database of their favorite recipes would find it too cumbersome and costly to physically distribute their work to many others in absence of a computer network. In contrast to this, once produced, the distribution of digital products via Internet requires relatively little effort in terms of time and money (Kollock and Smith, 1998) which lowers the threshold for voluntary contributions. In addition to rational, economic arguments social psychologists have argued that the anonymity of the Internet has profound behavioral effects, too. The possibility to construct or reconstruct one's identity constitutes one major motivational source for individuals for 'going public'. Whereas in a face-to-face interaction attraction is highly determined by features of one's physical appearance and the social categories, roles and stereotypes they are associated with (McKenna and Bargh, 1998) individuals in a virtual world are able to carve out different identities and roles they wish to express and to get accepted. This freedom in identity construction and socializing with similar others might motivate a great deal of online interaction and self disclosure. Online identity is largely determined by social interaction and what individuals deliberately expose - texts, pictures, symbols, their work and other digital objects they share with others. Relationship building and group formation, then, is based on the attractiveness of these cues to relevant others, rather than on physical attraction and 'real-life' social status. This gives room to the development of roles and social status that are fundamentally different from non-virtual ones.

Social relationships are based on what one deliberately discloses online, and how relevant others interpret those cues. Thus, anonymity enables sharing a completely different 'virtual' life sphere with similar others one might probably not find in a geographically limited place. Additionally, it gives room to express opinions and grievances one would possibly not dare to express in the non-virtual public sphere.

Moreover, the Internet's democratic potential dissolves the isolation of individuals from societal and economic processes and enables participation in knowledge development and production. This egalitarian quality of the Internet, in turn, enables anyone capable and willing to participate in online collective action to do so. Furthermore, the huge and globally available knowledge base developed on-line provides the necessary resources for collective action of online communities. Particularly when Know How is of prime importance for value-creation online communities' creative potential becomes powerful. Additionally, the Internet ideology of sharing (Berners-Lee, 2000) helps bundling those resources for the achievement of a common goal and resistance against existing market structures and commodification of products. The few legal restrictions imposed on Internet access and usage has been a fertile ground for the evolvement of democratic and liberal cultures which set up their own rules of conduct. Offline power structures and social status dissolve and are rebuilt based on online group norms and culture. Hoarding of information as a source of power is impossible on the Net firstly, because the 'silent person' on the Internet is invisible and unrecognized (Wayner, 2000) and secondly, because there is always someone online willing to provide the information needed. Thus, in online communities 'power' and social status mainly derive from what people give away rather than what they possess (Raymond, 1999).

Collective action also requires coordination of activities. One of the most important prerequisites for coordination and cooperation on the Internet is provided by the functionality of various communication and groupware tools. They provide a meeting place for online

interaction without regard to time or physical location. It is the Internet's extraordinary capability to transmit information, knowledge and digital products which facilitates the coordination of activities. The functionalities provided range from archives and storage of digital data to asynchronous or synchronous bi- and multi-directional communication (Hoffman and Novak, 1996). These communicative qualities of the Internet represent one of the most important preconditions for collaboration and enable mass participation in collective activities (Melucci, 1996). The Internet enables a much larger, global community to gather together much quicker and easier than real-life groups (O'Reilly, 1999) and with varying degree of social interaction and cooperation. This contributes considerably to the effectiveness of a collective effort, simply by the opportunity to gather together a considerable number of people around the globe who share the same interests. Given this, even concerns of marginal importance to the majority of humankind find a sufficient number of interested people on the Net. Moreover, group activity and interaction on a global basis is not bound to specific time structures, but - contrary to 'non-virtual' group activity - is possible 24 hours a day. This ability of the Internet to bring people together who share the same interests, passions and grievances may be decisive for the transition phase from a small, insignificant group to an extended community of participating members.

Online communication also differs in terms of quality and content. In an e-mail message or newsgroup post, individuals are able to carefully select what they want to say, how much they want to say and how they want to say it without fear of interruption before being able to fully make his or her point (McKenna and Bargh, 1998). Hence, individuals have a great deal more control over their side of a conversation and can formulate their opinions and intentions clearly to the online public. However, researchers have also found that greater hostility and aggressive responses are more likely to occur online as an effect of anonymous communication (Kiesler et al., 1984). Such conditions can foster an inability to

form a group consensus and an inability to become task focused. Hence, similar to the non-virtual world, goal-oriented collective action is not possible under pure anarchy, but demands the development of social structures, group norms, rules and at least informal leadership based on a common understanding of the group's objectives. Based on the structural conditions given, specific networks of individuals and groups can form and create shared meaning. Appendix 1 summarizes relevant constituent dimensions and categories of online communities which will be further described in the following sections.

SOCIAL ACTORS, ONLINE COMMUNITIES AND NETWORKS

Generically, a community may be understood as "…a set of on-going social relations bound together by a common interest or shared circumstance and, in their intentional form, are capable of acting collectively towards a particular end" (Smith, 1992, p.16). Aggregations of individuals who share a common interest and meet in the virtual space have been given the notion of virtual or online communities (Rheingold, 2000). There is an interwoven web of relationships and an ongoing exchange of commonly valued things between members who feel part of a larger social whole; and the relationships between members last through time, creating shared history (Figallo, 1998).

However, the term community is ambiguous. In order to be able to disentangle the various social interactions within a community and their impact on culture and group formation a distinction should be made between different social actors and groups evolving around a common interest. Social actors have been defined as "…any set of living bodies to which human observers attribute consciousness and intention." (Tilly, 1998, p.456). Four types of social actors have been distinguished by network theorists: individuals, groups, networks and environmental actors. Individuals are the real-world subjects involved in network activities. They can be identified by their role within the community that constitutes

itself through others naming and classifying their actions. In online communities of interest a number of role models can be detected. Some of the most important ones include the inexperienced, so-called 'newbies' and the experienced 'experts'. A group is defined as two or more interdependent individuals who influence each other through social interaction. Reflexive groups, in addition, have criteria available for deciding who is a member and where members know their affiliation (Wagner, 1994). Kozinets (1999), for instance, segmented online community members according to their level of participation and strength of social ties. Online groups regularly meet on group specific platforms, such as newsgroups, chatrooms or mailing lists. According to network theorists a network consists of a number of individuals and groups. Distinguishing different social actors is important for social change could be induced by a single individual as well as the group as a whole. Both are able to act as social actors as defined by Tilly (1998). Online networks are embedded and overlapping social entities with varying degrees of interaction, focus and cohesion (Figallo, 1998). All actors that are not part of the network, but with which the networks interacts, are considered to be part of the network environment (Forsyth, 1990). They enter the group interactions only from time to time and do not take part in the collective activities. However, they are important moderators when entering group discussions as they foster the drawing of group boundaries and negotiating or re-negotiating important elements of a group's culture.

The organizational structures and roles of its members are not determined from the very beginning but emerge in a process of ongoing interaction among its members. Research shows that besides the existence of a common interest group structures have to be developed and maintained through discursive processes in order to maintain the existence and collaboration among its members (Staeyert et al., 1996; Stephenson, 1995; Kozinets, 1999). Furthermore, as common goals need to be accomplished, the development and maintaining of

a common understanding about the aim of the collaborative effort, corresponding actions, the discussion of group norms and rules in terms of behavior and decision-making are essential.

In the next section, the evolution of a common ground and understanding for collective action on the Internet will be conceptualized as the co-construction of social representations which is shaped by significant events in a community's history.

THE CO-CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

The forming process of "Social representation is defined as the elaboration of a social object by the community for the purpose of behaving and communicating" (Moscovici, 1963, p.251). The creation of social objects can be described by processes of objectification and processes of anchoring.

Processes of anchoring refer to the process of integrating new cognitive or unfamiliar elements into the pre-existing system of thought (Moscovici, 1981; Billig, 1993). The anchoring process moves from first being descriptive to first categorizations which are then elaborated by drawing conclusions, ascribing causal relations, drawing inferences. To anchor is basically a process of classifying and naming, thus, giving birth to something existing. Names constitute something 'real', things that have no name are not existing. An example for the result of a naming process is the 'alt.coffee' group's labeling of an espresso machine, named 'Silvia'. She is the female expert in brewing perfectly smooth and round espresso and 'she' is real in the group mind. Classifying and labeling also means evaluating. Thus, every communicative act about a social object reveals a group's 'theory' of society and things of value (Moscovici, 1984). However, those 'theories in mind' do not constitute themselves in isolation but evolve through social interaction and discursive processes.

Processes of objectification describe the changes theories have undergone at the common-sense level to become social representations. Within those changes social

knowledge becomes personalized, meaning that it is associated with an individual, group or institution that stands for it. One can observe that many online interest groups 'elect' expert persons who stand for the strivings of the whole group. In order to be more easily cognitively processed diffusion of knowledge is often based on metaphors and symbols developed through and spread via communication. The open-source community, for example, developed its own comic series which are full of symbolic and metaphorical content about important persons, events and appropriate and not appropriate courses of action. Social representations also develop an ontological character that gives these thoughts some sense of being. Logical and empirical relations are developed and confirmed by ‘living examples’ and narratives (Moscovici and Hewstone, 1983). First results of a netnographic research into an online community the author is conducting, revealed several stories of group members who describe their paths from entering the group as a ‘newbie’ or ‘(l)user’ to becoming a dedicated ‘freak’ and accepted member of the community. These stories help those who try to enter the group by explicitly or implicitly transporting rules, norms and appropriate courses of action. The developmental processes of a group commonly creating social reality have been termed ‘objectification’ which refers to the process of saturating an unfamiliar, remote and abstract concept with reality and ‘something existing’. Names and symbols are created and institutions founded in order to signify its existence to the 'outside world': ‘there is something out there and this is us’.

Continuous communication and action function as vehicles to transport and create meaning. Researchers found that communication and discourse in intentional online groups focus around the common task, socio-emotional relations and conceptual issues (McKinlay, Potter and Whetherell, 1993; Sudweeks and Simoff, 1998, p.50f). Whereas task-related communication deals with explicit work to be accomplished in order to achieve the common goal and has an informative character, socio-emotional communication deals with

interpersonal relationships. Task-related communication in online networks is often extensive and constitutes the means to knowledge creation and learning. Hence, members become experts in their field of interest over time. Task-related communication is the means to the achievement of a common goal. Socio-emotional communication is often a by-product of evaluations of the quality of a member's task-related contribution and is expressed with community-specific symbols and language. Social status and personal relationships are expressed and roles determined. Contrary to most non-virtual groups where visual cues (e.g.: gender) amongst others consciously or unconsciously lead to a predefinition of roles of community members, online status and social relationships develop during communication and are content specific unless an individual discloses his/her non-virtual social existence. Communication constitutes the means to create online social reality. Conceptual communication focuses on the creation of meaning and involves the creation of rules and norms. Rules of exchange, norms of practice, values and meaning are conveyed by means of narratives, metaphors, symbols, discussions and overt action.

Representations are exhibited in a series of constructive events. Events can be viewed as a bit of social reality in relation to others that precede and follow (Peterson, 1998). Representations in the present view are the convergent meanings derived from thick descriptions of events at a specific time in a group's history. This process is assessable as talk or as forms of doing. In online groups significant events are followed by extended and passionate discussions and even 'flames' about a 'hot topic' which strengthens and/or changes group boundaries, objectives, norms and social meanings within the group. Events are happening when a social object changes its property (Wagner, 1996). Those changes may be induced by community members as well as environmental social actors. According to findings of consumer resistance research social actors who state their opposition to the objectives of the collective effort and initiate rivalries constitute one important source of

change. Hot debates between Microsoft and Linux developers and users are just one well-known example. Those debates typically result in a sharpening of in-group out-group boundaries and re-confirmation of group goals. Other significant events may be task-specific or socio-emotional in nature. Events are a central concept for research into the development of collective action as they shape the specific structure, meaning creation and culture of online networks.

METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Social representation theory does not privilege any particular method of research. In this respect it is different from other approaches. However, theoretical frameworks and their underlying assumptions always rule out or suggest specific methods, respectively. Social representations as constructed by a social entity, like a community or group cannot be assessed by aggregating data which were collected on an individual level. As individuals do not construct knowledge independently from their social context, methods which sample only individual understanding are pointless. This is even more so for online community research as individuals, even if they share the same cognitions and understandings about the world, do not necessarily form a reflexive online group.

Therefore, methods have to be applied and data sources used that reflect group level action and reasoning. Researchers taking the social constructivist assumption seriously have always been looking for 'non-reactive' methods, like archival research, in order to avoid individualistic bias and elicit 'the collective'. Moreover, research into online cultures requires procedures and methods which suit the distinct online environment. Netnographic research (Kozinets, 2002b) seems the most appropriate course of conducting research into the cultural aspects of online consumer communities. However, aiming at uncovering cultural processes of social representations construction asks for an extended methodological approach.

Research into developmental processes requires data collection over a certain period of time and/or retrospective data collection methods. In order to be able to follow the process of social meaning construction, archival material has to be collected. Although in most of the cases relevant data will be found online, some historical roots may well go back to earlier days when the Internet was in its infancy or not yet existing. Hence, research into online communities does not warrant excluding offline sources. Instead, careful investigations should be made into the historical roots of consumer action. The cultural foundation of source code sharing we can observe now on the Net, for instance, dates back to the early days of computing in the 60ies. Especially when we aim at understanding the political component of consumer collective action, we should be aware of the fact that enthusiasm or grievances often exist long before they convert into consumer action. Moreover, it is not only historical reasons that induce us to include historical and off-line data sources, but also the need to fill explanatory gaps. Environmental actors, for instance, play an important role in the history and development of online communities; however, their actions mostly take place in the 'non-virtual' sphere. To analyze the impact of their actions requires collecting all relevant sources that give rise to discursive processes and social change within the community.

Environmental actors are not the only social actors who should be distinguished in online community research. Although the term community implicitly suggests a homogeneous group, online communities actually live from the fact that all different kinds of individuals step in, enter the discussions, are differently involved and committed to the community. Kozinets (1999), for instance, distinguished four types of group membership according to the level of activity involvement and strength of social ties of individuals. Distinguishing between those groups is important for, at least, three reasons. Firstly, research into consumer culture requires defining core groups with a high level of involvement and strong social ties, because they best reflect the very core of a community's culture. Secondly,

processes of socialization and social representation building only unfold if we observe and analyse discourse between 'newbies' and highly committed 'insiders'. And thirdly, classifying individuals alongside those dimensions helps us distinguishing community members from environmental actors.

Events serve as markers and signal for a change of meaning and/or action. Thus, they help us detect important developmental processes that lead to social change. Rising intensity of internal and external communication can serve as indicator for a relevant social event. In order to be able to judge the importance of an event or discussion topic, online postings, for instance, could be ranked by the number of replies per topic. Topics with number of replies above average plus standard deviation could be ranked as 'hot topics'.

Social representation theory suggests that cultural aspects and developmental processes are formed by a group's 'theory of the world'. Therefore, units of discourse should be analyzed that cover a whole line of argument and counter-arguments, consisting of the event or topic of discussion (what has happened, what is the concern), who is concerned (social actors), why did it happen or why is it important or not important (lines of reasoning) and how should people act, react, behave or not behave. Those lines of reasoning have to be interpreted within their historical and social context in which they occurred in order to asses the function of communication and discourse for the social object being created or changed. Careful attention should be given to communication not only as a means to transport content but as an intentional communicative act. According to Potter and Wetherell (1998), communicative acts should be treated as a social act in its own right rather than secondary routes to underlying attitudes or beliefs. Drawing the difference is important for research into the processes of cultural development. If we interpret a group discussion as an expression of beliefs, we might miss the actual function of their communicative acts. Communication content is one thing, what people intend and *do* when they communicate, another. By means of discourse online

groups define their common goal, propagate central ideas, challenge norms and roles, create commitment, and build relationships.

Some researchers argue for the importance to sample "culture as well as cognition" (Farr, 1933, 24), or the cultural environment as well as individuals' perception of their environment in order to be able to explain the construction of social objects and facts as well as its meaning for individual thinking and acting. Hence, additionally collecting individual reasoning and interpretation of social processes provides one possible mean for cross-checking the accuracy of a researcher's cultural interpretations. Moreover, individual data used for member checks constitutes a valuable possibility to increase credibility of the analysis.

DISCUSSION

This paper aimed at describing and discussing relevant concepts and factors that are crucial for understanding the influences and dynamics of collective action of online consumer communities. It was argued that a thorough description of the structural context and disentangling the various internal and external social actors involved in a network forms the basis for understanding *how* consumers organize their actions and acquire valuable resources for action. The fact that members of virtual communities of interest self-select and voluntarily contribute to a collective effort on the Net requires an inquiry into the *why* of member participation, how the community makes sense of what they are doing.

It was argued that the historical context of group development is important to look at in order to fully understand the development of an on-line community culture. Empirical reality suggests that consumer enthusiasm or grievance very often exist a long time before significant events and developments and/or social actors convert those energies into action. Therefore, sampling online and off-line data that date back to the historical roots of consumer

collective action is a must for being able to understand the very core of a community's culture. Events as reflected in 'hot debates' mark important developmental processes of a community's culture and its dissemination as social representations. The developmental processes of their cultural products are accessible through discourse analysis of member's 'lines of reasoning'. In sharp contrast to content-analyzing textual utterances as a secondary route to underlying constructs like attitudes and central beliefs of a community, social representations theory suggests to look at a group's 'theories about the world' with which they co-construct their reality. Moreover, if we want to explain online collective action, we should treat online discourse as a potent, action-oriented medium and textual utterances as communicative acts in their own right.

Social representations theory is a valuable concept insofar, as it makes us aware of the importance of social processes and the historical context of collective action. Based on its conceptualization of social meaning construction which is embedded within a specific structural context and shaped by significant events in time, we can lay out a research agenda for empirical investigation of online collective action of emancipated consumers that goes beyond a simple description of the status quo of a community's existence.

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Appendix 1: Constituent Dimensions of Online Collective Action of Consumers

Dimensions	Categories	Definitions	Indicators	Examples and sources
Social actors		"…any set of living bodies (individuals, groups and institutions) to which human observers attribute consciousness and intention" (Tilly, 1998, 456).		
	Community	"..set of overlapping networks of communication that remain stable for some duration and, in their intentional form, are capable of acting collectively towards a particular end." (Smith, 1999, 17). "..they are normally not rigidly or formally structured.""(ibid, 17)	Physically and/or virtually meeting and interacting on various linked communicative platforms	Online journals like slashdot.com and freshmeat.net that provide information, news, comments, a moderated discussion forum and a number of links to several other related sites for a wider interested public. Conferences like Linux Day where the community meets physically
	Reflexive group	"..a group is defined by its members, where the members know their affiliation and have criteria available for deciding who else is also a member." (Wagner, 1994, 207)	Meeting on group specific platforms (nominal group): Often subscription necessary Group boundaries are defined by explicitly stated aims and mission statements or mentioning every single group member	KDE developers homepage Linux user groups meeting physically or virtually Linux Documentation Project homepage for volunteers writing documentary

	Role	"…a bundle of communicative actions to which others attach shared understandings, memories, forecasts, rights and obligations" (Tilly, 1998)	Naming and classifying according to their actions	Individuals explicitly named and classified as 'hackers', 'gods', 'evangelists', propagandists', 'geeks', 'project founders' found on several community related sites, such as: userfriendly.org or in papers written by a community member, like 'The Cathedral and The Bazaar' by Eric S. Raymond
	Environmental actor	all actors that are not part of the community but with which the community interacts (Forsyth, 1990)	no regular communication and no contribution to the collective effort; however, their actions lead to group discussions.	Competitors and their community related actions (e.g.: Microsoft's Halloween documents) Governments (the German government discussing the official use of OS software for their administration) Media (Forbes launching an article about Linus Torvalds)
Events		an event is happening when a social object changes its property	Appear as discussion topics/issues on communicative platforms Internal: between group and community members External: between community and environmental actors	Internal and external events: The Halloween documents leaking out of Microsoft's headquater RedHat at the stockmarket The Tanenbaum/Torvalds discussion on the Minix mailing list
Communicative acts	Task-related	Communication that deals with explicit work to be accomplished and has an informative character	Technical information and feed back	Commented source code Project descriptions Software-related FAQ's
	Socio-emotional	Communication that deals with relationships	Person- and group-related topics of communication, friendly or hostile; does not include technical discussions or flames	Comments on friendship and behavior within the community, as in:www.heise.de/ix/artikel/2000/01/112

	Conceptual	Communication focused on the creation of meaning, norms and rules (Sudweeks and Simoff, 1999, 50f)	General and strategic discussions about OS, the philosophy of OS and how to act	Non-technical discussions about OS Manifesto's Paper on 'how to become a hacker' Descriptions and comments on OS licenses
Social representations		"… the elaboration of a social object by the community for the purpose of behaving and communicating" (Moscovici, 1963, 251)	On-going expression and discussion of common-sense theories, beliefs, images, metaphors, narratives and 'living examples' of action	Discussion of the 'Cathedral and Bazaar' metaphor Mission statements of the opensource organisation and the Free Software Foundation User Friendly comics Online biographies of project founders
	Objectification	attribution of ontological reality to imagination and beliefs (Moscovici and Hewstone, 1983)	Figurative elements and creation of social objects: Personalizing Figuration: Symbols, objects, models Institutionalizing	Identification of projects with the project founder Linux Penguin The OS business model Opensource.org
	Anchoring	incorporating something unfamiliar into our own network of categories and establishing relations between categories and labels (Moscovici, 1981, 193)	Labels Categorizations	Can hardly be found in archival data sources
Individual action		Task-specific activities that create a social object and change social conditions (Wagner, 1996, 169)	Visible and observable as communicative, creative, and productive acts on community platforms	Writing OS code, patches, bug reports and bugfixes; Commenting and documenting; Giving task-related feedback; Maintaining websites; Software downloads; Asking questions in user-specific mailing lists or newsgroups; advocacy,……