

Beyond the Screen: How Online Communities Shape Offline Consumer Behavior

Abstract

This research examines how digital communities reshape consumption, identity formation, and marketplace participation through an analytic-inductive qualitative design combining netnography, immersive journaling, and in-depth interviews. This research explores how engagement in online communities fosters offline participation and consumer behavior, revealing how creativity, mentorship, and shared identity are collectively constructed across digital and physical spaces. While research on consumer tribes and social identity has examined brand communities and fan cultures, little attention has been paid to digital collectives where leisure, artistry and commerce intertwine. Grounded in consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Arnould et al., 2019; Schau et al., 2009) and consumer tribes (Cova & Cova, 2002; Kozinets, 2020), this research investigates how digital engagement within groups translates into real-world behaviors.

Methodologically, the project employs an analytic-inductive qualitative design (Tracy, 2024), combining a netnography of online needlepoint communities and in-depth interviews with active participants.

Preliminary analysis suggests that online participation functions as both creative apprenticeship and social belonging, reinforcing participants' sense of legitimacy within the community. Initial findings show that digital sociability revitalizes analog practices while influencing purchasing behavior and community-driven innovation. The findings are expected to extend

conceptualizations of digital collectivism by demonstrating how online practices are revitalized through digital sociability.

Keywords: consumer tribes, digital collectivism, consumer culture theory, immersion journaling, netnography

Introduction

This study explores how online communities function as consumer tribes, where identity, creativity, and social interaction converge to influence offline actions such as event attendance, skill development, and marketplace engagement. While communities, both online (or digital) and offline (or in-person) are often structured around shared goals or affiliations, such as a brand or a cause, *tribes* are more fluid, emotionally charged collectives driven by shared lifestyles, rituals, and cultural expressions (Maffesoli, 1996; Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001).

The study seeks to answer the following research question: How does engagement in online communities influence offline participation?

Methods

An interpretive, qualitative design is employed through netnography (Kozinets, 2020) with an analysis of Instagram (immersion journaling) and Reddit (trace ethnography) needlepoint communities. Across four observation waves, the dataset includes 260+ pieces of content (approximately 240 stories, 14 feed posts, and 5 reels), complemented by engagement metrics (likes, comments, views, and interactions). A second phase of data collected through in-depth Interviews (n = 24) of active community members focus on motivations, identity and behavioral outcomes. The netnography documents online discussions, posts, and visual narratives that

illustrate how meaning and identity are co-created through digital exchange. Immersive journaling captures the researcher's reflexive engagement and evolving theoretical sensitivity (Kozinets, 2020).

The data is analyzed using an inductive approach, progressing from open coding to axial coding and ultimately to higher-order thematic development. This process enables patterns and insights to emerge directly from the data. Findings from immersion journaling and in-depth interviews are integrated to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how online community engagement translates into offline behavior. This approach captures both naturally occurring digital interactions and lived offline experiences.

Results

Emerging findings suggest that online communities function as creative apprenticeship systems, fostering learning and legitimacy. Identity and belonging drive transition from digital engagement to offline participation, where peer interaction creates social momentum, encouraging event attendance and purchasing. To that end, consumption is embedded in community rituals (e.g., stitch-alongs, trunk shows, retreats).

Conclusions

This research demonstrates that online communities do more than connect individuals, they mobilize action, sustain cultural practices, and shape marketplace behavior. In doing so, they play a critical role in preserving and evolving traditional crafts within modern digital ecosystems. These insights are valuable to both marketers and consumer researchers such that by uncovering the mechanisms that animate these tightly bonded online groups, the study sheds light on how communities influence marketplace behaviors in ways that extend far beyond the screen.

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