Effortless consumption: The ‘Anthropologie’ of a brand-focused online shopping community

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Abstract

This article examines the dynamics of the brand-focused online community blog Effortless Anthropologie, devoted to the popular retailer Anthropologie, with particular emphasis on how brand values are created, espoused and disputed by its members in a dynamic and interactive online forum. Using relevant literature on the concept of brand community, the net is expanded to capture the activities of a community that exists primarily online. We use examples of posts and commenting activity to demonstrate that it is the existence of the blog that facilitates and maintains such a strong sense of community. This, along with the fact that the blog exists independently from the retailer that it values – that is, it is not a company blog – forces us to reconsider our concept of how brand communities are formed and maintained in the virtual realm. From this analysis, we can learn how brand communities are facilitated by blogs and how they take on a unique dimension online. Consumers use blogs like Effortless Anthropologie to find a community of like-minded users and be a part of a community existing outside of the retail sphere. Retailers and marketers might engage with or be aware of the sense of trust, bonding and loyalty that such an online community engenders.

Keywords

Anthropologie

blogging

branding

brand community

consumption

online retail

I wouldn't call it a retail store. It's a place where culture and commerce intersect. It's more like the Silk Road – a sense of exploration mixed with the exchange of things and ideas. (Ron Pompei, Pompei A.D., architect and store designer, Anthropologie)

Introduction

When Richard Hayne created a retail marketplace in Wayne, Pennsylvania, where his wife and her friends could hang out, shop and sip lattes in 1992, no one could have anticipated the far reaching influence his gesture would have in creating a new kind of shopping experience – one that would transform the practices of basic consumerism into a veritable lifestyle. After hatching the initial idea, Hayne worked closely with architect Ron Pompei for two years. Together they scoured the globe for objects, art and ideas that spoke to the refined, worldly sensibility they sought to cultivate in the first Anthropologie store. In doing so, a two-pronged retail concept emerged that can be attributed to company's meteoric success. As Pompei explains,

[First] we developed Anthropologie as a place for [Hayne's wife and friends] just to just be. The way people evaluate themselves and others boils down to three things: what they have, what they do, or who they are. The mainstream culture focuses on what you have. Recently, what you do has become more important. We wanted to respond to the shift toward 'who you are'. (Labarre 2002)

Hayne and Pompei sought not only to provide a space in which a woman could cultivate her sartorial and aesthetic sensibilities: they also wanted to provide a space in which she could grow.

As Hayne and Pompei explained to *Fast Company*, ‘We wanted to create an experience that would set up the possibility of change and transformation, where the visitor’s imagination was just as important as that of the designer’ (Labarre 2002). They explain that they wanted to ‘spark interaction on a new level’ (Labarre 2002) wherein the experience of shopping at Anthropologie would transcend mere consumerism, turning the store into a space for the communal exchange of ideas, objects and a lifestyle sensibility.

In the two decades since Anthropologie’s doors first opened, the company has expanded to 175 retail outlets scattered across the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. It has also developed a robust online presence through a complementary and often-updated website (Figure 1), making the Anthropologie lifestyle available to more women than ever. Notably, while other stores suffered during the economic recession that began in 2008, Anthropologie has grown; sales increased 22 per cent in the first fiscal quarter of 2010 – a particularly low moment for other women’s fashion retailers (Team 2010). Especially important to mention is the relatively high price point of many of these items – \$250 sundresses, \$400 shoes and \$700 end tables – all aimed at a target demographic of ‘affluent, settled-down career women in their 30s and 40s, with an average family income of \$200,000 a year’, according to a post from 23 June 2010, on the business and finance website *trefis.com*. And while the company’s growth and profitability is remarkable, what is perhaps more so is the culture that has grown up around it, which far transcends the richly scented candles, vintage-inspired frocks and weighty coffee table books offered up within the stores. Despite spending a whopping average of one hour and fifteen minutes browsing, trying clothes on and chatting (Edelson 2003; Labarre 2002; Palmieri 2004), Anthropologie’s legions of consumers have sought out a space in which they could continue to engage with and live the ‘Anthro’ lifestyle long after walking out of the store’s heavy, reclaimed

oak doors. With Anthropologie maturing alongside the growth and refinement of the 'Blogosphere' (the constellation of online personal weblogs or 'blogs'), the most logical place for the modern Anthro woman to retreat to would not be Hayne's coffee shop in the first Anthropologie, but the Internet.

In this article, we explore the rise and impact of shopping websites devoted to particular brands, using the blog Effortless Anthropologie as a case study for examining the way such blogs facilitate trends, desires, obsessions and communities in the formation of brand communities on the Internet. Other scholars have examined the experiential nature of online shopping (Jeong et al. 2008; Kwon and Lennon 2009) and the consumptive habits online retail engenders (Kukar-Kinney et al. 2009). With Anthropologie serving as a case study, our article contributes to this growing body of literature by exploring the vibrant character of brand communities that have emerged online in recent years.

Brand communities, as first defined by Daniel J. Boorstin in 1974, are 'invisible [communities] created and preserved by how and what [people consume] that emerged after the industrial revolution' (1974: 89). James H. McAlexander et al. further explain that brand communities in the United States have shifted away from geographically bounded community groups 'into the direction of common but tenuous bonds of brand use and affiliation' (2002: 38). As geographical constraints have come to matter less and less in the formation of such communities, the Internet has emerged as a space in which consumer-fans can congregate. Effortless Anthropologie is the largest 'Anthro-centric' fan blog within a network of over 50 personal blogs dedicated to the retailer. Taken together, the blogs cultivate a space for continued consumerist behaviours outside of conventional retail spaces. Effortless Anthropologie features weekly postings of items that have gone on sale, reviews of products and a community report

feature where users can report sightings of rare items in store and online. Such behaviours cultivate what Hope Jensen Schau et al. describe as the collective creation of value within brand communities (2009). However, current research focuses on the experiential aspects of the retailer's website only, overlooking the possibilities for commerce and community inherent in brand-focused external websites. Additionally, previous research into brand communities (e.g. Crewe 2000; McAlexander et al. 2002) has focused predominantly on non-Web-based forms of community building and interaction.

In focusing on Effortless Anthropologie as a site where brand communities are fostered in the online realm by independent, non-corporate actors, this article seeks to provide insight into how the crowdsourcing and commenting inherent in blogs alters the experience of shopping and building fervent brand communities. We begin by addressing the business practices of the brand itself, which lend themselves to adoption into the online realm. We argue that Anthropologie in particular displays the brand characteristics that translate well into the kind of community building that occurs via Effortless Anthropologie. We then analyse the kinds of blog posts that run on the site and separate them into groups: those that facilitate consumption, those that police consumption, those that generate a brand community and those that simultaneously achieve all three of these goals. We situate our findings within the context of existing literature on brand communities and online brand engagement (Schau et al. 2009; Muñiz and Schau 2011). Through this discussion we arrive at an understanding of how the Anthropologie brand community is translated in the online realm and how these practices take on a unique dimension on the blog. Our article advances the discourse on brand communities and adds to it by demonstrating that an online community devoted to creating a dialogue around the brand can flourish even when it is maintained independently of the brand, owing in large part to the particular benefits the blog

format affords.

The mechanics surrounding consumer-generated content are of benefit to our analysis. Consumer-Generated Content (CGC), or content relating to a brand that is created by the user rather than the producer of the brand or its products, often takes shape within a collective of brand devotees (Muñiz and Schau 2011). This kind of content is not necessarily solicited by a company or brand; rather, it is oftentimes laboriously crafted by consumers with no seeming external stimulus. As Albert M. Muñiz and Hope Jensen Schau explain, ‘The true reward of CGC is the process and the outcome is not reliant on technical prowess but rather semiotic manipulation, narrative manipulation and complex brand character development’ (2011: 211). However, one still questions whether or not CGC can be ‘successfully integrated into larger firm objectives, where brand content is harmoniously co-produced’ (Muñiz and Schau 2011: 210). In the case of Anthropologie, the answer is a resounding yes.

Before further delving to the dynamics of the online Effortless Anthropologie community, we will first explore the unique brand positioning of Anthropologie itself and how it employs practices that foster a particularly strong brand connection that translates well to the digital realm.

‘Shopping like a Frenchwoman’: Cultivating the ‘Anthro’ community

As quoted by Naomi Klein in her oft-cited text ‘No Logo’, Walter Landor, president of the Landor branding agency has written that while ‘products are made in the factory [...] brands are made in the mind’ (2009: 201). Similarly, in the introduction to their article ‘Concepts and Practices of Digital Virtual Consumption’, Janice Denegri-Knott and Mike Molesworth explain, ‘commodities and market-based experiences provide opportunities for elaborate consumer

daydreams that sustain desire on the basis that they may be actualized via material consumption' (2010: 109). If this is the case, how then is Anthropologie – a constellation of different designers, found objects and one-of-a-kind art pieces – imagined by its dedicated consumer base, and how does it stand out within the diverse market for women's clothing? In short, what is the nature of the Anthropologie 'daydream' and how is it enacted by the Anthropologie brand community?

While other brands and retailers follow the ebb and flow of the fashion system from season to season, changing their merchandise and silhouettes based on current trends, the overall aesthetic of both the Anthropologie store and the merchandise within has changed remarkably little in the past two decades. Selling a reassuringly consistent selection of cardigans, sensibly heeled shoes, A-line skirted dresses and frilly bric-a-brac, the Anthro consumer is loyal to the brand because she knows she will always be able to count on the brand's timeless, feminine look even as hemlines fluctuate and silhouettes evolve. This core consumer, who has been the lifeblood of the Anthropologie brand, is a direct offshoot of that initial 'anthropological' research Hayne and Pompei conducted in 1992 in developing the store's concept. As former company CEO Glen Senk has explained, the Anthropologie woman is

well-read and well traveled. She is very aware; she gets our references, whether it's to a town in Europe or to a book or a movie. She's urban-minded. She's into cooking, gardening and wine. She has a natural curiosity about the world. She's relatively fit. (Labarre 2002)

Or, as Laura Compton of the San Francisco Chronicle wrote, this core customer sounds 'like every female friend I have who shops there, all of whom profess a deep love for this place and

confess, “Every time I go in there I just want to buy everything” (2004). Within the Anthropologie community, this woman is known as ‘she’, and it is ‘she’ who drives every marketing and merchandising decision within this close-knit retail community. Specifically, this woman is ‘28 to 45, usually in a committed relationship and has children. She often works in an artistic field and wants to have a unique look’, but could not be considered a ‘fashion victim [...] She’s going to save her clothes and wear them in different ways year to year’ (Compton 2004). As many have written (e.g. Compton 2004; Lebarre 2002), if this woman were a movie character, she would closely resemble the quirky, French Amélie from the eponymous 2001 film. In order for a brand community to thrive, as McAlexander et al. explain, it must be ‘customer-centric’ wherein the ‘meaningfulness of the community inhere[s] in customer experience rather than in the brand around which that experience revolves’ (2002: 39).

With this kind of intimate knowledge of their core consumer, traditional business acumen would suggest that the Anthropologie marketing team would parlay it into an extensive marketing campaign to draw her into the store. However, Anthropologie prides itself on the fact that the company has never spent a cent on external advertising. As Glen Senk has boasted, ‘One of our core philosophies is that we spend the money that other companies spend on marketing to create a store experience that exceeds people’s expectations. We don’t spend money on messages—we invest in execution’ (Lebarre 2002). By execution, Senk is referencing the immersive, homey quality of every individually tailored retail location, cultivated through a mix of new and found objects, large scale art pieces and elaborate window displays. The in-store displays and merchandising are site-specific, as is the architecture of each store, designed with the specific location in mind. Designers at Pompei A.D., the firm that designed New York’s Chelsea Market location, took the local character into consideration when designing the store:

‘The space references the industrial and maritime nature of the neighbourhood, and at the same time maintains Anthropologie’s feminine aesthetic. This personal, location-based store design is aimed at strengthening the customer’s identification with the brand’ (Mitchell 2010). James Smith, the company’s director of store design, added, ‘We look at the space we occupy individually and try to react to its inherent character or local architecture style... Aesthetically, we always want to have a connection – however abstract – between the store and the community that it serves’ (Mitchell 2010).

As fashion theorist and historian Christopher Breward writes,

The efforts of style-leaders, advertisers, editors and directors over the past 200 years have all in some way been oriented towards an epiphanic moment of engagement between customer and fashionable product which inevitably happens for the first time within the confines of the retail store. (2003: 143)

It is within this space that the meaningfulness of the Anthropologie brand and the legitimacy of the brand community are, in the words of McAlexander et al., ‘negotiated through the symbolism of the marketplace’ (2002: 38). Yet what is it about this space in particular that has lent itself so well to the formation of a cohesive brand community by the company’s loyal consumers? And furthermore, how does Anthropologie engage with this vibrant community base through its own community-building endeavours?

From the moment the woman walks into the Anthropologie store and out of the sterile fluorescence of the shopping mall, her senses are awakened and she is transported to another

place. As Polly Labarre describes the Anthropologie experience, it is not unlike shopping at a French flea market: it is not exactly 'efficient', but in the process you 'come away with a story' (2002). Evoking a bustling, global marketplace with its layers, colours and patterns, Anthropologie transforms shopping into a 'multisensory ritual, with its open-ended sense of discovery and the thrill [of what can feel like a] hard-won find' within an otherwise uniform and oftentimes boring shopping landscape (Labarre 2002). However evocative an Anthropologie store is of a quaint vintage flea market though, the core consumer can find solace in the fact that she, as Lebarre writes, will never have to search too hard for that perfect vintage-inspired piece. Rather, Anthropologie caters to a woman who, at one time in her life, trolled flea markets for hours on end, but now, perhaps busy with a family and a career, doesn't have time to do so anymore. The store's wares also cater to a woman who is perhaps too intimidated to seek out authentically vintage items. Within the vintage market, Alexandra Palmer concedes that there exists a steep learning curve that closely mirrors the loose system of hierarchy inherent in the term (2005: 198–99). Alison Clarke and David Miller elaborate in their article 'Fashion and Anxiety' (2002), explaining how within these chaotic spaces, 'individuals are frequently too anxious about the choices to be made to proceed without various forms of support and reassurance' (2002: 209). Thus, the initial Anthropologie experience can prove to be an overwhelming experience to an unacquainted consumer at first glance. However, there is a careful order to what on the surface appears so rustically organic.

Within the friendly space of the Anthropologie store, sales associates and personal shoppers help customers navigate the space, offering assistance where necessary. However, even without the reassuring presence of the Anthro-clad sales associates, the very layout of the store facilitates a broader understanding of the context of the sometimes esoteric goods. As journalist

Laura Compton writes, the overall narrative arc of each season is ‘interwoven throughout the store’ in the form of ‘vignettes that put the assortment of merchandise into a homey context’ (2004). Anthropologie’s creative director Kristin Norris further explains this strategy:

The front of each store typically shows a gardening or outdoor entertaining ‘statement.’ Mimicking the movements in one’s own home, the customer will decompress as you do in your own home, head to the dining and kitchen areas, then peruse bed, lounge and soaps, so by the time you get to the back of the store, you’re as relaxed as you would be by the time you get to bed. (Compton 2004)

Within Anthropologie’s domesticated space, the consumer is enticed to linger. In the process, as Hayne and Pompei had established in 1992, the experience of self-discovery appears to transcend banal consumerism within the shift of ‘what you have’ to ‘who you are’ (Lebarre 2002). As one *New York Times* reporter explains, the inside of Anthropologie ‘is a kitsch-ridden pastiche of fake leaves, fake moss, bottles arranged like cannon fodder and a cardboard rowboat floating in midair. It all seems so cheery and delightfully illusory, sort of like life itself’ (Fair 2010). The woman who is so drawn to the Anthropologie environment and its wares season after season sees herself as an individualist – whimsical, quirky and creative – and the store helps to round out her identity.

Because this woman sees herself as outside of the mainstream, an encounter with Anthropologie can be a revelation, but it can contribute to feelings of otherness or alienation within the consumer marketplace and within her lifestyle more broadly. Thus there is a tendency for the Anthropologie consumer to retreat back into the world of the store in order to feel as if

she belongs. As one consumer explained it, 'I can't help but be wooed by the atmosphere. They seemed to have nailed the exact fantasy so many of my [thirty-something] friends have. They make you feel like...you could actually live a life with 75 gorgeous pairs of pj's' (Compton 2004). In his influential text *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), anthropologist Erving Goffman explains how this sense of community affiliation fostered by the environment of the brand community, expressed by the aforementioned consumers, exists 'chiefly because the tradition of [the] group [...] requires this kind of expression [for] vague acceptance or approval' (1959: 6). He goes on to explain that 'everyone is always and everywhere [...] consciously playing a role [...] It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves' (1959: 19).

In her research on the second hand marketplace in Hong Kong, fashion studies scholar Hazel Clark identified a similar phenomenon in which the vintage shops attracted a niche market of avant-garde consumers (2005). These consumers, disillusioned with mainstream retail, sought to enact performances of individuality through vintage goods. Clark observed that amongst these consumer groups, vintage markets became places to 'be in and be seen in, not merely places to shop, demonstrating the role of consumption as a leisure activity' (2005: 162). Within the Anthropologie store, 'she' not only seeks objects and ephemera to round out her lifestyle but also seeks other Anthropologie-loving women with whom to socialize and to shop. Anthropologist Michel Maffesoli has described this kind of social engagement as the 'undirected being together' in which a given community 'will reinforce the feeling it has of itself' (1996: 79). In her work on the 1960s mod scene in Germany, fashion scholar Heike Jenss has demonstrated that these feelings of community affiliation within the space of a fashion scene are animated through the use and consumption of clothing (2005: 181). Through this embodiment of a shared affinity for a

particular style of dress, social cohesion is generated.

Yet it is not just within the store that this feeling, or the enactment of the Anthropologie fashion scene, occurs. As McAlexander et al. explain, the maturation of the Internet has allowed for this sort of brand community to expand into the online realm. Many marketing scholars have written about this (e.g. Granitz and Ward 1996; Kozinets 1997; Tambyah 1996), yet these studies 'have tended to be situated statically on the dimension of geographic concentration' and not so much on the social dynamics that form and facilitate them (McAlexander et al. 2002). In the following section, we explore how the Anthropologie brand community has extended into the online realm. We examine how that Anthropologie lifestyle is lived out online, who the principal actors within this community are and how that community shapes consumption, both positively and negatively.

Findings: Effortless Anthropologie and the online lifestyle

The contemporary retail sphere has in the last decade splintered. Understaffed and underperforming stores struggle to draw customers in while savvy, modern consumers escape these spaces by tapping in to online retailers, making an increasingly larger proportion of their clothing purchases on the Internet (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth 2010). Into this venue a number of blogs have emerged to supplement the online shopping experience. Their aim is to aid the consumer in making smart, fashionable choices, as well as to share common appreciation for a brand in a community blog setting. Effortless Anthropologie has emerged to fill this niche, and it has attracted a large number of viewers who use the website to track new, sale and hard-to-find items.

In addition to focusing its efforts on locating goods, however, the blog takes on other

functions in line with the experiential mission of the brand itself. This includes posts detailing reader-submitted outfits, community ‘fitting room reviews’ and styling suggestions. Reviewing these functions, we can loosely group these into three different kinds of activities: those that facilitate consumption, those that police consumption and those that generate a brand community. More important, however, is the fact that even those activities that seem to only revolve around consumption are actually enabling other practices. Conversely, a blog based solely on explicit practices of consumption would not lead to the strong sense of community fostered by a blog like Effortless Anthropologie. Consumption more generally is notable in that it enables other practices, such as building identity or forming communities. All of these different activities take on a unique dimension when performed in virtual spaces as opposed to the lived spaces of the store or the home.

The first set of activities, those that facilitate consumption, is easy to identify: posts of items that have recently gone on sale and sightings of rare and hard-to-find items seemingly exist for the express purpose of communicating the availability of goods to the potential consumer (Figure 2). But the question still stands: is this not one of the primary purposes of advertising, usually undertaken by the company itself? As mentioned previously, Anthropologie as a brand prides itself on not spending a cent on external advertising, instead focusing its marketing dollars on improving the customer’s shopping experience through in-store displays that carefully crafted to elicit emotional response. Largely through its carefully targeted visuals and reassuringly consistent brand identity, Anthropologie has amassed a very loyal following in the two decades it has been in operation. In the online realm, the brand’s followers – through subsequent activities occurring on the blog – take on the role of a quasi-advertiser-cum-best-friend by passing on deals and sale tips to their fellow Anthro friends.

In another example of blog activities facilitating consumption, the face-time that particular items garner when they are featured on the website have the opportunity to drive sales, if not incite desire in the minds of the readers. As one commenter named 'shannon' wrote to the head blogger, Roxy, in response to her set of dress reviews that appeared on 5 April 2012,

I love the Fern & Flower dress on you, and the Paris Halter Dress... va va voom! Stunning! I think I need the Cordova Maxi Dress. Wow! What a beautiful spring/summer dress. Thank you so much for these wonderful reviews. You're the best!

In this statement, the commenter shares her desire for a particular dress, sparked presumably by the dress review, which brought its particularities to the commenter's attention. Certain items can catapult to the top of this virtual water cooler discussion becoming highly popular within the community. In fact, Roxy even creates a yearly post detailing the top apparel items of the year, usually noting their popularity and success within the blog community. Such activities transcend the day-to-day activities of shopping because they instantly place the reader within a large community that can be regarded as what Herbert Gans would call a taste culture (1999). The instantaneity of such interactions and the community approach to brand appreciation shapes the taste culture of its readers in a distinctive way, and in a way that would not be as readily acceptable without the online format that aids its dissemination.

In contrast to the activities that facilitate consumption, there are also those that police consumption. While there are certain items that become popular within the blog community, there are others that get overlooked or are negatively received by the taste culture community of the blog. For example, when Anthropologie made high-level staff changes within its design team

in a calculated effort to be more in line with current fashion trends a few years ago, a noticeable shift took place on the blog. A series of wistful, ‘those-were-the-days’ posts and comments made clear the distaste for the newer items and those that were less in line with the brand’s original design aesthetic. Commenter after commenter bemoaned the boxy, 1970s style tops and high-waist flared jeans of spring 2011, noting their inappropriateness for the workplace, their overly youthful nature and their flimsy construction. One in particular – in response to a blog post titled ‘What does Anthropologie mean to you?’ from 19 May 2011 – included images of Anthropologie garments Roxy adored from seasons past. In the comments section, a reader with the handle ‘applesauce23’ also included images of garments she considered her ‘stand out’ pieces (Figure 3). She then proceeded to reflect on how she maintained her shopping habits despite Anthropologie’s recent stylistic departures:

Lately, I feel like I’ve been settling for pieces that seem to be the best of the worst as I browse through the sale racks. Also, if there is a really nice piece that comes out, I tend to see everyone [...] rave about it, which takes away from the uniqueness I loved about Anthro’s clothing in the past. [...] The huge flowy tops, boring basics, and cheaper fabric has made shopping for clothes at Anthropologie a little more difficult these past few months. Even though I had a \$250 gift card, I ended up buying two pairs of shoes (Floral Fandango heels and Nelumbo Kitten heels in black) because I didn’t really see any stand out pieces. The only purchase I made before that was a mug. The sad thing is that I don’t even feel compelled to hold on to my gift card to see future offerings because I’ve been so unimpressed with the clothing. I really hope that Anthropologie moves away from the trendy styles and goes back to the tailoring, quality, style, and details that it was known

for.

Aside from demonstrating her still-avid interest in the brand, this commenter uses the blog as a forum to discuss her decrease in purchases from the retailer. She owes this shift in her consumption habits to the retailer's implicit betrayal of her taste preferences. This reflective posting, as well as the floodgate of commentary that comes along with it, is part of the taste culture that develops online. Through this enactment of the taste culture, the original Anthropologie aesthetic is further cemented in the minds of the brand community while other, more divergent stylistic impulses are dissociated from the brand's identity.

Lastly, there is the set of practices that contribute to the generation and maintenance of online brand communities. Reader-submitted outfits and fitting room reviews – that while still conforming to the norms of the blog-generated taste culture – create the same reassuring sense of community the brand advocates through its in-store displays. In these posts, readers submit photos of themselves in their 'Anthro best', demonstrating the true diversity of the company's customer base. Within this microcosm of the larger 'Anthro' community, women from all over the country (and some abroad) of different ethnicities, varying ages and with non-normative fashion bodies are depicted (Figure 4). Through these posts, readers celebrate both their common taste – signified by their purchase of similar items – and their distinctiveness, evidenced by the unique way they choose to style their looks. From these posts, opportunities to locate and secure items for one another, including placing items on hold at other stores or alerting the community when they return rare items or locate them online, emerge. These activities, more than just facilitating or policing consumption, contribute to the development of a linked community defined by who these women are and how they personally interpret the Anthropologie brand.

This sort of community affiliation brings to mind Pompei's aforementioned quote in which he explains how Anthropologie exists as an alternative to mainstream consumerism in shifting the focus away from what you have and 'toward who you are' (Labarre 2002).

Using Schau, Muñiz and Arnold's four categories of value-creating practices within brand communities, we can see how a blog like Effortless Anthropologie continually advances and reinforces the values of the brand through the three types of posts mentioned above. These posts serve to facilitate consumption, police consumption and facilitate brand community. Social networking, or the first category of value-creating practices, is glimpsed in the very format of the blog. Through these social networking channels, commenting and following functions allow users to link into a like-minded community of fellow users bonded by their common love of the brand. The second of Schau et al.'s categories, impression management, includes the practices of evangelizing and justifying the brand's values. As the authors write, brand community evangelizers 'act as altruistic emissaries and ambassadors of good will' (2009: 34). This practice is particularly evident in the weekend in-store community posts (Figure 5). These posts, which go live every Friday afternoon, allow members to share their in-store and online 'field research' with the community. As Roxy notes in the body of each post of this kind, members can 'ask for help in finding an item, report back on what you saw in-store at your local Anthro, ask general questions, make a request, or just stop by to say hello'.

Community engagement, the third category of practices that create brand value, includes the activities of staking, milestone, badging and documenting important moments in the brand's history. Roxy's ruminations about the good and bad of Anthropologie's recent offerings are a clear demonstration of such activities whereby she stakes her interest in the brand and delineates her interest and focus. In one notable post, she recalls her first point of engagement

with the brand in 2008. Here, she situates this early moment of engagement as the starting point or milestone for her brand relationship, and she marks the present moment as a deviation from the legacy of the brand. This post therefore not only documents Anthropologie's decline, but also serves a plea for it to return to its glory days.

Brand use is the fourth of Schau et al.'s categories, and it includes activities of grooming, customizing and commoditizing. These practices are best evidenced in the weekly posts devoted to sharing reader outfits: a member who submits her outfit, and many do on a weekly basis, demonstrates her knowledge of how to care for, outfit and rework their Anthropologie garments into unique expressions of their taste.

Each of the twelve practices that create value within brand communities are at play to varying degrees within the Effortless Anthropologie community. These practices are also all undertaken by the consumer rather than by the company – the tasks the brands must perform to create value in the eyes of their target consumers have in this case been taken on fervently by the consumers themselves, an example of Muñiz and Schau's (2011) Consumer-Generated Content. In addition to demonstrating the strength of the Anthropologie brand community, Effortless Anthropologie demonstrates the unique dimension that brand-related activities take on when they occur in the digital realm.

Conclusion

As a community-based blog devoted to a particular brand, Effortless Anthropologie reveals the highly successful creation and maintenance of a brand community in the digital realm. In viewing the blog as a site where brand communities are fostered in the online realm by independent, non-corporate actors, we have demonstrated the unique dimension given to the

experience of shopping and building fervent brand communities online. Having addressed the affinity between the business practices of the company and the aims of the blog, we have seen how community building plays an active role in shaping meaningful consumer relationships to a brand. However, a few questions remain to be addressed. For one thing, how is interaction on the blog itself policed? What are the hidden aspects of such communities and what are the taboo topics that get swept under the proverbial \$600 rug? And if there is such a strong sense of trust that circulates amongst community members, does the anonymity of the Internet breed any kind of malice that has potential to dampen this trust?

All things considered, however, it is through the 'common and tenuous bonds of brand use and affiliation' (McAlexander et al. 2002: 38) that Effortless Anthropologie community members are so strongly linked to one another. Members are linked in ways that transcend mere consumption practices, engaging rather in the collective creation of value and meaning that such practices elicit. Within this context, the Internet serves as the space in which such community members may congregate; a corner of digital space is carved out and metaphorically bedecked in the warm, cosy comforts of home that Anthropologie both represents and offers for purchase.

Figures

Figure 1: The Anthropologie.com homepage, August 2013.

Effortless ANTHROPOLOGIE

HOME TRADEMARK SALEPOSTS EYECANDY DTD STYLED REVIEWS CRAVINGS

Monday, January 28, 2013

Perk Alert! Shop Runaway by Karen Walker for Anthropologie first!

ANTHRO

FIRST DIBS!

Karen Walker
Never-before-seen designs, including the stateside debut of her Runaway collection for Made In Kind, and perennial favorite Hi There.
SHOP BEFORE THE REST >

If your biggest complaint about Karen Walker's initial Made in Kind for Anthropologie collection was the synthetic fabrics, I've got good news for you. Her Spring 2013 collection, Runaway, is here and it's made from the good stuff. Plus, anthro members [get to shop it](#) before anyone else.

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KINDRED SPIRITS

Figure 2: 'Perk Alert!' from 28 January 2012 as a type of post that facilitates consumption.

@applesauce23 · 88 weeks ago

+6

My stand out pieces:

Wight's Sago Dress

First Frost Coat

Beanstalk Skirt

Figure 3: Comments from the 19 May 2011 post entitled ‘What does Anthropologie mean to you?’.

Sunday, January 27, 2013

Eye Candy: Effortless Anthro Reader Outfits!

Alyssa
Anthropologie *Sashed Sweater Skirt*
Anthropologie top

It's Sunday and you know what that means -- Reader Outfits!! Although I'm taking this week off you won't even notice because we've got 20+ lovely ladies decked out in some serious Anthropologie goodness. Please show your love for all of our contributors in the comments! If you'd like to submit a look for Reader Outfits please [read through the guidelines](#) and then snap away!

On to the outfits...

Figure 4: Reader-submitted Anthropologie and Anthropologie-inspired outfits as seen on EffortlessAnthropologie.blogspot.com, January 2013.

Friday, January 25, 2013

The weekend in-store community post

I have noticed a lot of community members sharing in-store deals and spots in the comments of various posts. Inspired by the weekly Seek & Find posts started by the lovely Alexis over at [J.Crew Aficionada](#), I think now is a good time to start a similar weekly post here.

[More This Way »](#)

Posted by roxy turtle at 12:05 PM

[Comments \(81\)](#)

Labels: [weekend report](#) +2 [Recommend this on Google](#)

Figure 5: In-store Community Post, Friday, 25 January 2013.

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shilpa 12/9/13 12:47 PM

Comment: Please expand the initials of the author.

***This is the author's alias; meaning, I can find absolutely no instances where the author expands "S.S." into her full name. I believe then that this is the proper way for it to be published, but please advise.

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