The role of Engagement on Serious Leisure: a study of an Online Consumption Community

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Participation in online consumption communities has frequently been studied as a leisurely, hedonic activity consumers engage in (e.g. Kozinets 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). We propose to extend current examinations of consumers’ engagement with online consumer communities and examine it as serious leisure, defined as “the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of its especial skills and knowledge” (Stebbins 1992, 3). Our goal is to unveil the work-like aspects of the activity, including the efforts it requires, its costs, disappointments, its unfolding, career-like nature, and its ending. Although discussions of consumers’ extended involvement in brand communities exist in consumer research, these studies mostly focus on consumer relationships to other community members, and/or engagement with the brand or activity the community is centered on. Therefore, we lack an account of consumers’ engagement in the creation and management of online consumption communities as serious leisure. The implications of this type of consumer engagement with online communities to other aspects of the brand and consumption community literatures are still unknown. We address this gap by investigating the trajectory of consumers who created and manage online consumption communities. We ask the following research questions: “What is the nature of consumers’ engagement with an online consumption community they created and manage?” And “How does this engagement vary through time?” We address these questions through a longitudinal qualitative study of a Brazilian-based, consumer-managed, online community of Xbox players.

Marco Teórico
Overall, the serious leisure perspective has problematized the rigid binary of work and leisure, as well as challenged the hedonistic constructions of leisure by identifying negative outcomes and costs associated with it (Raisborough 1999; Kjølsrød 2009). For people who have little work or no work at all, as well as for those who find their jobs too unsubstantial to invest positive emotional, physical, and intellectual energy on, serious leisure seems to act as a non-remunerated substitute for work, propelling the development of a leisure lifestyle (Stebbins 2001; 2007). For the unemployed or retired, serious leisure may be the only option to develop a central life interest (Dubin 1992). Schau, Gilly, and Wonfinbarger (2009) found that the number of Americans who prefer leisure to work has been increasing exponentially over the decades, and the availability of attractive leisure opportunities can be related to the flowering of a “retirement lifestyle” (257). In addition to offering opportunities for identity development, serious leisure also contributes to community formation and to the societal integration of individuals (Stebbins 2001). As a substitute for work, it offers a unique opportunity for people to connect with a network of like-minded individuals and become part of a vibrant social world which usually includes important strangers, local and national organizations, audiences, spectators, admirers, and onlookers. Despite its benefits, serious leisure requires significant efforts. Participants are expected to develop the skills, knowledge, and acquire the resources necessary to progress and become an expert in a serious leisure activity, eventually building a career on it (Stebbins 1992). They also need to persevere in face of adversities (as fatigue, anxiety, embarrassment, and fear), and face dislikes that require significant adjustments from participants as they attempt to avoid certain features of a serious leisure activity. These efforts, adjustments, and costs could be considered the “dark side” of consumer engagement in online consumption communities, and our study will be particularly
attentive to their manifestations. As characterized in consumer research, consumer engagement is an interactive process, which may emerge at different intensity levels over time reflecting distinct engagement states (Brodie et al. 2011a). Its consequences include consumer loyalty and satisfaction, consumer empowerment, connection and emotional bonding, trust, and commitment (Brodie et. al 2011b). Brodie and colleagues (2011b) noted that consumer engagement in a virtual brand community involves specific interactive experiences between consumers and the brand, and among community members. Their findings highlight that consumer engagement is a context-dependent, multidimensional concept comprising cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral dimensions. It is also relevant to consider the three basic drivers that motivate consumer engagement in online brand communities (Wiertz et. al 2013). These drivers are brand-related (brand identification and brand’s symbolic function), social (social benefits and social identity) and functional (functional benefits, uncertainty avoidance, information quality, and monetary and explicit normative incentives). Some of these drivers, particularly the social ones, suggest that the notion of consumer engagement with online consumption communities is similar to serious leisure, but this relation has not been examined thus far.

Método de investigação se pertinente
Our involvement with this study’s context is characterized by long–term immersion. Throughout eight years (2006-2013), the first author observed, participated in, and collected data from two large online communities dedicated to Xbox, one managed by consumers and one managed by Microsoft. This process can be categorized as netnographic observation (Kozinets 2010). Further fieldwork was conducted that centered on the consumer-managed brand community, where this author also attended three offline events organized by this community, and personally interviewed the brand community managers and founders, several of its moderators, and other community members. Follow-up interviews were conducted on Skype with community creators over the years to keep track of developments within the community. The most recent interviews were conducted with two of the founders and a new manager (previously a moderator) in July 2013, after the community transitioned to a new platform and changed its name from Portalxbox to PXB. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 90 minutes, and were audio and/or video recorded, and transcribed. To complement data gathered through observation, participation, and interviews, we have also collected online archival data on the community discussion forums, Facebook groups, specialized websites, and media outlets that covered game related news. Apart from the archival from the communities, our dataset include 3 hours of interviews recorded over Skype and 10 hours of videotaped interviews that generated over 200 pages of single-spaced transcribed text. They cover the development of the consumer-managed community from its launch in October 2005 (as Portalxbox) to December 2013 (as PXB). All data were coded by one of the authors with the assistance of QDA software, and all three authors conferred to discuss the emergent themes and build their interpretation of the data.

Resultados e contribuições do trabalho para a área
The community studied was created by 3 friends (pseudonyms will be used to preserve their anonymity): MrAx, DH and Dicco. The PortalXbox begun its activities in 2005 and it was kept running until 2012, when Dicco left, in order to invest more time in his professional life. MrAx and DH created a new brand, PXB, that nowadays, about one year since its launching is bigger than the previous one, with 140,000 active users. They invited Raphael – who had been moderator of the previous community for several years – to join them both as an administrator and as the new programmer. In analyzing the trajectory of the three consumers who are involved in the management on an online consumption community, we find evidence that
consumer-managers develop a “culture of commitment” (Gillespie, Leffler, and Lerner 2005). The notion of a culture of commitment, initially developed by Tomlinson (1993), differs from the continuance commitment and value commitment to serious leisure as observed by Stebbins (1992). Tomlinson’s “culture of commitment” refers to “the attachment of individuals to groups and to what they can do for those groups, as opposed to what they can gain from the groups for themselves.” Between all managers involved in this study, MrAx is the one who has more deeply incorporated the culture of commitment. He is fully committed to the community, to its users, and to his ideal of leaving a legacy for future generations of gamers. DH is also committed, but his commitment nowadays is much more related to MrAx and the friendship they built up through the community rather than only with the community itself, where members are no longer close friends, as they were at the origins of Portalxbox. Disappointment, the hidden cost incurred by individuals who engage in serious leisure, and defined as “the absence of expected rewards and their manifestation...born in the failure of high hopes,” (Stebbins 1992, p.100) has been extensively investigated as dissatisfaction in marketer-consumer relationships (Chan and Wan 2008; Patrick, McInnis, and Park 2007; Deighton and Grayson 1995), but had been neglected in studies of online consumption communities. Our study addresses those disappointments in the context of consumer-managed online communities, and shows how disappointments may have different implications to one’s serious leisure career. DH affirms that, for him, the biggest earning gained in the community was learning how to manage people. However, it’s noticeable that his devotion to the community and the ideals defended in it is not the same as it was a few years ago. He is the one who manifests the most disappointment. However, when it comes to analyze the involvement of MrAx, things are significantly different. His commitment is as strong now as it was years ago when one of us first met him. His skills, however, have evolved, as well as his reasons for dedicating time and effort to managing the community. Raphael is the new generation to whom the project makes sense. Because his disappointment with the end of Portalxbox actually led to an even better opportunity for him, Raphael is the only one that really believes he can make a real leisure from his serious leisure. As Portalxbox was the beginning of his professional experience, fun and work are much more interrelated. Also, as being a generation younger than the other managers he can afford to invest time without compromising work or family, as the others could a decade ago. Our findings are congruent with Stebbins (1992) suggestion of the application of the concept of “careers,” an essentially work-related term, to serious leisure. Our study is the first, which we are aware of, to investigate the fuzzy boundaries between leisure and work in consumer-managed online communities.

Referências bibliográficas