



Brand community of convenience products: new forms of customer empowerment – the case “my Nutella The Community”

New forms of
customer
empowerment

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Abstract

Purpose – To analyse the power that a virtual brand community exerts over a brand of a mass-marketed convenience product. To draw implications about the strategy that a company can employ facing this power shift. To track emerging trends in virtual brand communities applied to convenience product (as opposed to niche or luxury goods).

Design/methodology/approach – Case study of the web community “my Nutella The Community” promoted by the firm Ferrero in Italy. The study applied multiple methods and was conducted through interviews with key informants, netnography and document analysis.

Findings – The virtual community that gathers around a convenience product brand shows a new form of sociality and customer empowerment: it is not based on interaction between peers, but more on personal self-exhibition in front of other consumers through the marks and rituals linked to the brand. The company should play the role of non-intrusive enabler of these personal expressions, reducing its control over the brand’s meanings.

Originality/value – The literature on brand community has traditionally focused on communities born around niche or luxury brand (Harley Davidson, Mercedes, Saab). The paper deals with a mass marketed convenience product like Nutella (the worldwide famous hazelnut spread), showing noteworthy differences that would advance current knowledge on brand communities and customer empowerment.

Keywords Brand management, Postmodernism, Consumption, Virtual organizations, Internet, Empowerment

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Over the past decade, a postmodern outlook paved the way for so-called communal approaches to consumption (Cova, 1997). One paradigmatic example involved groups of Harley Davidson devotees, which were detailed in a pioneering article by Schouten and McAlexander (1995). The behaviour of consumers driven by a similar passion or ethos to form a group, thereby producing a sub-culture, came to be seen as an object of study with relevance to the field of marketing (Bagozzi, 2000; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; Cova and Cova, 2002; Dholakia *et al.*, 2004; Earls, 2003; Goulding *et al.*, 2002; Kozinets, 1999, 2001, 2002; Patterson, 1998; Thompson and Troester, 2002).

The advent of the internet subsequently advanced the idea that brands can create consumer communities revolving around their web sites (Banks and Daus, 2002; Gruen *et al.*, 2005; Hagel and Armstrong, 1997; McWilliam, 2000). Reincorporating recent studies on the complex relationship between brands and consumers (Fournier, 1998;



Holt, 2004; Oliver, 1999) into this consumer community construct, a “brand community” concept (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) then came to the forefront of the marketing scene, sharing the spotlight with a “brand tribe” construct (Arnould *et al.*, 2002; Solomon, 2003; Wipperfurth, 2005). *Business Week*, for example, devoted its ranking of the world’s 100 most valuable brands (9 August 2004) to the rise of brand communities and to their very positive impact on the health of brands they now call “cult brands” (Belk and Tumbat, 2005).

Although many studies have focused on the re-empowerment of consumers grouped into communities revolving around cult brands delivering niche products like Ducati, Harley-Davidson or Mercedes, even going as far as to highlight a more equal balance of power between these brand communities and the companies managing the underlying brands (O’Guinn and Muniz, 2005), none has ventured into the semi-virgin territory of brand communities for convenience products. On one hand, we find *quasi-deluxe* brands offering capital goods in niche markets, on the other food brands offering convenience products in mass markets, but do these two types of brands really represent the same type of community? The same empowerment of consumers grouped into communities? With the same advantages stemming from the management of brand communities? The present paper starts with an overview of current knowledge about brand communities before moving on to investigate, based on the work that Ferrero has done with its Nutella community, the possibilities for (and limitations on) developing communities around the brands that supply our basic products.

About brand communities/tribes

Today, just ten years on from studies like Gainer and Fischer (1994), analysts are no more questioning whether the concepts of community and/or tribe might have a place in marketing thinking. An abundance of literature on this topic over the past 5 years attests to its relevance. After a brief introductory phase marked by relatively descriptive studies that tried to define the characteristics for such consumer groupings (Broderick *et al.*, 2003; Kozinets, 1999, 2001; McAlexander and Schouten, 1998; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Muniz and Schau, 2005; O’Guinn and Muniz, 2005; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Thompson and Troester, 2002), research in this area appears to have gone off in three separate directions:

- (1) Following on from the article by Muniz and O’Guinn (2001), a cohort of French language-dominated studies (Cova, 2003) have been attempting to clarify the object of study by differentiating between the three neighbouring concepts of “brand community”, “consumption sub-cultures” and “consumer tribes” (or even “brand tribes”). However, it is impossible to say whether any consensus exists regarding these proposed differentiations. It should also be noted that Anglo-American authors seem to be less troubled by a lack of differentiation, moving seamlessly within one and the same text from the concept of community to tribe (Solomon, 2003), or from tribe to micro-culture (Thompson and Troester, 2002) and even sub-culture.
- (2) Some analysts have sought to transcend consultants’ currently fashionable incantatory discourses (see www.martinlindstrom.com) by stressing the formidable impact of situations in which a community or tribe exists in the orbit of a brand. The purpose here is to measure the real effects that the feeling

of belonging to a brand community can have on consumer loyalty (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005; McAlexander *et al.*, 2003; Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2005).

- (3) In the wake of an article published by McAlexander *et al.* (2002) in the *Journal of Marketing*, some researchers have recommended that managers create a brand community or try to leverage the existence of tribes of individuals impassioned by a brand (Cova and Cova, 2002; Solomon, 2003). Above and beyond check-lists drawn up by consultants claiming to be familiar with the keys to success in this area, which they call “tribal branding” or “cult branding” (Atkin, 2004; Ragas and Bueno, 2002), it is clear that efforts have to be made to strengthen good marketing practices in this respect (Broderick *et al.*, 2003).

For our research’s sake, we will then depict indifferently as a brand community or brand tribe any group of people that possess a common interest in a specific brand and create a parallel social universe (subculture) rife with its own myths, values, rituals, vocabulary and hierarchy. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) used three constructs to identify the distinguishing features of these brand communities or brand tribes:

- (1) consciousness of a kind, i.e. a sense of belonging to an in-group, thanks to a brand that is patronized by all of the group members;
- (2) evidence of the rituals and traditions that surround the brand; and
- (3) a sense of obligation to the community and its members which is often, but not always, shared by group members (concerning, for example, product repairs or services that are more personal in nature).

However, above and beyond brand tribes’ community-specific characteristics, to manage tribes of this sort it is also crucial to note the problems they can cause marketers (O’Guinn and Muniz, 2005). These include the following facets:

- Oppositional brand loyalty (a brand community’s nature is defined in its opposition to another brand and its own tribe).
- Marketplace legitimacy (there is a debate about who constitutes the brand’s legitimate purchaser, i.e. who is a true believer and a brand community member?).
- Desired marginality (brand community members actively try to keep the community small and marginal).
- The polit-brand (a brand community centred around a particularly politicised brand).
- The abandoned tribe (a brand community where the brand has been abandoned by its marketers, even as the community continues to thrive, i.e. Apple Newton; Muniz and Schau, 2005).
- Who owns the brand? “This is an obvious question . . . Brand communities assert considerable claims on ownership. . . These impassioned and empowered consumer collectives assert more channel power and make claims on core competencies formerly reserved for the marketer” (O’Guinn and Muniz, 2005, p. 268). The point here is that a new ethos of brand participation is emerging. Consumers now increasingly see brands as shared cultural property (Holt, 2004) rather than as privately owned intellectual property. Familiarity breeds ownership: brands “belong to us” and not to the companies that supposedly own them.

Consumer empowerment and brand hijack

Consumer empowerment has been defined (Wathieu *et al.*, 2002) as letting consumers take control of variables that are conventionally pre-determined by marketers; one of these variables is brand meaning. Indeed, as recently discussed by O'Guinn and Muniz (2005), one key element in today brand management is that companies can lose part of their control over a brand, replaced by a consumer tribe trying to re-appropriate it. For Wipperfurth (2005), a "brand hijack" occurs when a consumer takes a brand away from its marketing professionals to enhance its evolution. He distinguishes two ways in which tribes usurp control over a brand:

- (1) Serendipitous hijack which is the act of consumers seizing control of a brand's ideology, use and persona. It is most often practiced by brand fanatics within subcultures, and is largely unanticipated by (and independent of) the brand's marketing department.
- (2) Co-created hijack, which is the act of inviting subcultures to co-create a brand's ideology, use and persona, and pave the road for adoption by the mainstream.

The most frequent example today is the serendipitous hijack. Here, the brand is re-appropriated by one or several consumer tribes, and the firm that owns the brand wants to take advantage of this. Examples include Harley-Davidson with bikers (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) or Apple with Macintosh devotees (Belk and Tumbat, 2005). Furthermore, this brand hijack phenomenon is even more accentuated when the interactions with the brand tribe take place online (Kozinets, 2002; O'Guinn and Muniz, 2005). Recent research has highlighted the many problems a company can have when interacting with this type of hard-to-control collective actor whom the Net has spontaneously helped to emerge and bolster (Broderick and al., 2003; McWilliam, 2000). Online consumers would appear to be more active, participative, resistant, militant, playful, social and communitarian than ever before (Kozinets, 1999). They want to become influential participants in the construction of experiences (Firat and Shultz, 1997). As a consequence, companies no longer drive communication with these empowered customers; instead, they just provide a forum for exchanging shared interests (McWilliam, 2000). They are the customers who wield the power (Newell, 2003). The shared passion of certain consumers for a cult brand translates, via various collective learning systems, into expertise and competencies, thereby imbuing online tribes with increasing amounts of production and marketing legitimacy (O'Guinn and Muniz, 2005). The presence of tribes of impassioned, united and expert fans has led to a re-balancing of power in company-consumer relations. Examples abound in modern marketing literature: Ducati, Harley-Davidson, Mercedes, Mini, Saab, Star Trek, Star Wars, etc. Passionate and geeky Star Wars enthusiasts are so loyal to the brand that they literally make and exchange their own Star Wars movies, using digital camcorders and laptop computers. Rather than try to fight these brand devotees, Lucasfilm, the official owner of Star Wars, acts as an enabler on their behalf by distributing online "reference", Star Wars sounds and visual effects that devotees can insert into their DIY fan films.

At the same time, all of the aforementioned brands come from a very specific category, since they are brands that operate on niche markets and require consumers to make major investments in time or money (Default 1). This raises the question as to whether brand community management might be an option for brands mainly offering convenience products to be sold through large retail outlets. Examples include Snapple,

Red Bull, Chupa Chups or Coca Cola, whose consumers do not need to make any major (unitary) financial efforts (Default 1). In these cases, and even though we still speak of serendipitous hijack-based brand communities or tribes when dealing with cult or iconic brands of this sort (Holt, 2004), it appears nevertheless that their members are much less united; relatively unaware of the fact that they constitute a distinct group; marked by their limited interactions and infrequent and somewhat unstructured rituals, etc. In a word, it appears that communities of this sort are too diffuse to develop the resources that will allow them to regain parity with the company. This is the case even when the interactions occur online. If we focus, for example, on the site that Coca Cola opened in France to develop its brand community, what is noteworthy (Cordelier and Turcin, 2005, p. 52) is that, “the site does not allow for the creation of new relationships; any expression here is unilateral and internet users pass each other by without ever being able to interact with one another”. Hence, our study’s attempt to answer the following question: is there some way that convenience product companies can help brand communities to exist, to develop a structure and thereby be empowered, particularly using the internet as a starting point? In which case, the company could respond to the programme outlined by Firat and Dholakia (2004, p. 27):

... marketing would re-emerge as the empowering “tool” of the post-consumer (and) would tend to re-establish democracy in a form that is viable – based on the constitution of post-consumer communities or tribes (Figure 1).

Research method

Since the purpose of our research is to improve collective customer empowerment theory in relation with convenience products, we chose to analyse a kind of advanced case:

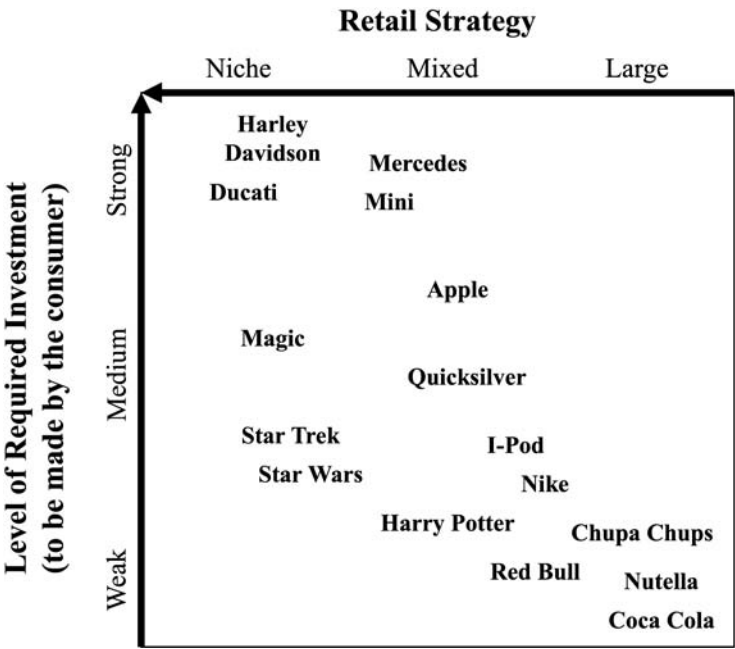


Figure 1.
A typology of brand
communities

the Ferrero group's experience with its *my Nutella The Community* web site that opened in early 2004, as well as Nutella Italian community members' reaction to the site. This institutional initiative by a major food business group attested to its ambition to maintain a very low level of control over its web site and over brand community exchanges, this being one way of responding to the major challenge constituted by consumer empowerment. The best way of accounting for a case as specific as this one (Dubois and Gadde, 2002) is to compile highly heterogeneous data that simultaneously refer to:

- Ferrero, its strategy for its Nutella brand in Italy, the implementation of this strategy and an evaluation of its results.
- The Nutella brand, its background and place in Italian society, its myth and cult, the symbols and specific language created around this brand.
- The *my Nutella The Community* web site, its overall structure, different sections and visitors.
- Nutella consumers, their behaviour on-site and reactions on- and off-site.

Towards this end, the authors have compiled the necessary data using multiple data collection techniques:

- Off-line interview with two members of Ferrero's management team, its internet and Multimedia Manager in charge of the *my Nutella The Community* project, and the Director for Ferrero Italy Communication;
- an online and off-line compilation of all information on Ferrero's lawsuits against non-official sites using the Nutella name;
- an off-line compilation of economic and sociological studies published on Nutella's role in Italian society (Padovani, 1999, 2004; Proto, 2005);
- repeated online browsing of the *my Nutella The Community* web site;
- non-participant online observation of the *my Nutella The Community* web site for a month, tracking inter-participant exchanges in this site's relevant sections;
- online compilation of ca. 100 texts introducing participants via personal pages;
- online compilation of more than 200 pictures posted by participants in the web site's different sections; and
- off-line discussions with Nutella consumers at a *Nutella Party* to talk about the *my Nutella The Community* web site.

Online ethnography, or netnography, was the core method adopted to explore the online Nutella community. Netnography is usually defined (Kozinets, 2002) as a written account resulting from fieldwork studying the cultures and communities that emerge from online, computer mediated, or internet-based communications, where both the fieldwork and the textual account are methodologically informed by the traditions and techniques of cultural anthropology. As suggested by Kozinets (2002), netnographic research requires an immersive combination of participation and observation. In this respect, our study differs to average netnographic research due to our not having been participant members of the *my Nutella* community. What we have developed is a sort of non-participant netnography. We focused our attention on

the contents of the personal pages that 1,490 (930 females and 560 males) Nutella fans have developed and which can be accessed on the *my Nutella The Community* web site. Our data compilations are mainly grounded in the collecting of the text(s) that each participant has posted on his/her opening page. Our approach is congruent, however, with the one followed by Kozinets (2002) because we do incorporate virtual communities' textual nature, something we can study without directly participating in members' interactions. The same applies to the iconographic dimension of the *my Nutella The Community* site's contents, i.e. to the photos (2,318 pictures) that members posted and which we partially collected: photography "describes a form of writing" (Batchen, 1998, p. 277) through which the subject draws and integrates her profile better than any word.

The "merger of horizons" that Thompson (1997, p. 441) recommends for interpreting texts and photos was made possible because the two researchers followed an approach wherein they would try to familiarise themselves with the Nutella community, thereby reducing the gap between the text and the text's interpretative framework. This also made it possible to re-situate consumers' narratives in their cultural and experiential contexts. Thus, part of the data collection effort involved observing the activities carried out on the web site and understanding the community's specific language, idiosyncrasies and existing hierarchy. Even as the Nutella community's online activities were being scrutinised, observations were also being conducted in the off-line environment to increase the findings' reliability and to explore this phenomenon from a different perspective, thus ensuring that the data provided sufficient conceptual depth (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994). Face-to-face interviews lasting between fifteen to thirty minutes apiece were carried out on an informal basis during the observation of community events such as "Nutella Parties". These kinds of get-togethers still abound, notably in Italy where they are organised by groups of all ages and types and range from village festivals to school parties or private dances with DJ's. "Nutella Parties" are similar to the "brand fest" concept developed by McAlexander and Schouten (1998), being occasions when one celebrates a brand, encouraging the development of brand loyalty. Unlike Harley-Davidson's "brand fests" (McAlexander and Schouten, 1998), which are relatively co-structured by the product's fan groups working together with its manufacturer, "Nutella Parties" are generally based on entirely autonomous consumer initiatives. Findings from the study's off-line elements were used to support and substantiate the consistency of the online findings.

Our collection, analysis and interpretation of data progressed in an iterative and interrelated manner between the two environments until such point as we had full confidence in the phenomenon's interpretation (Broderick *et al.*, 2003). Overall, data analysis was conducted in line with Spiggle's (1994) recommended principles for analysing and interpreting qualitative data. To start out, all texts and photos' contents were categorised (Demazière and Dubar, 2004). As for the texts, an intertextual contents analysis has been carried out using thematic tools that try to ascertain consumers' attitudes towards the Ferrero group, Nutella brand and "my Nutella The Community" site. Specifically, in regards to the Nutella brand, we isolated the five major thematic families that structure this subculture: the Madeleine effect; a reassuring friend; a pot of pleasure; something for your party; and the Nutella myth. We did the same thing with the photos, given their dual (iconic and indexical) nature (Fetveit, 1999). Ostensibly, a picture is an illustration, a symbol of reality. It comments

on reality but goes far beyond this. At the same time, a photo is strictly connected to a real object. In other words, it exists as evidence for a reality that it will not deform. It is a mere sensitive surface touched by light - but it can be used for other purposes to add symbolic meaning.

The “my Nutella The Community” case

The question is whether a company like Ferrero stands to gain by trying to take a community approach in Italy. This is because Nutella holds 90 per cent of the cream spread market and can be found in 14 million Italian households! Indeed, for Ferrero’s Italian managers, this tribal branding approach should make it possible, over time, to bolster the Nutella myth (the tribe’s existence attests to the brand symbolic value); track spontaneous but weak signals from the most proactive fringe of brand loyalists; pursue a dialogue with the tribe, enabling an instantaneous activation of feedback from the brand’s marketing people (reactions and responses); develop an increasingly operational support system to initiate off-line actions like events and local initiatives; develop new forms of business; and counter the attacks of sharply discounted products like store brands.

Is Nutella a “she”? Clearly the answer is yes, since the product was given a female name at birth, the root of the word being reminiscent of the nut trees lining the Langa hills and the feminine suffix “ella” having been added to achieve a softening effect. Nutella was born early on a cold and rainy 20 April 1964 at Alba in Italy’s Piedmont region. First launched as an Italian product, it would soon set out to conquer the world. Nutella accounts for 15 per cent of all sales by the Ferrero group, which also manufactures the Kinder product range and has a total of 16,000 employees, 15 sites and 28 companies across the world. In Italy and in France, annual per capita consumption of Nutella reaches 800 grams. This exceeds 1 kilo in certain other countries (Plate 1).

Nutella’s name, already featured in countless dictionaries, has turned into the stuff of dreams for grown-ups and kids alike, having long surpassed its merely nutritional and energy-related value to enter the hedonistic and emotive spheres of personal well-being. The product has become a metaphor for desire, softness, sin and idle transgression, sometimes followed by immediate doubt and a sense of guilt. Over the years, it has developed into the object of a transversal, generational, social and political food cult. Myths always revolve around a ritual, hence the emergence of veritable fan clubs and above all of Nutella Parties and other group gatherings. Nutella has become such a phenomenon that numerous volumes have been written about its past, with recipes, consumption tips, fan news, etc. Entire books have been written containing Nutella-based recipes, and the product often features in French, Italian and German films - one example being Gigi Padovani’s commemoration of its 40th birthday in a book called “Nutella – a mito italiano”, which ends up with a series of interviews with stars and other celebrities who love Nutella and talk about it as if it were an antidepressant, or advise others on how to use it in original recipes. These diehards include the actress Monica Belluci, Alberto Tomba (a Ski Champion), Silvio Berlusconi, Francesco Totti (Captain of the Italian National Football Team and AS Roma), Juliette Binoche, Julia Roberts and Michael Schumacher. In other words, Nutella is a brand that has been “hijacked” on numerous occasions, as per Wipperfurth’s (2005) understanding of this concept.

The Ferrero group entertained highly conflictual relations with the internet at first, suing, for instance, any sites that would use Nutella’s name, logo or other signs without



Plate 1.
Nutella consumer with
1 kilo jar

receiving prior permission. This even affected fan sites like *Nutella Fans*, one that by late 1999 had turned into a centre for virtual meetings of Nutellamaniacs. Ferrero forced the site to change its name. The same occurred with the Nutell@ Chat Club two years later, and with “nutellamania.com” as well. Yet none of these forced site closures, albeit bitter, led to anti-Ferrero diatribes, as witnessed by a few entries in *Nutella Fans* from the year 2000.

Life is hard for Nutella fans: they organised a site but were forced to close it following a letter from the manufacturer who prohibited any use of the name of this famous chocolate spread. Some undaunted fans rebuilt the site elsewhere but this hasn't been updated for several months now. I'm sure you can see the seriousness of the situation. The cause seems a worthy one to us, which is why we are keeping you informed about these pages of recipes, messages and souvenirs. Now, at the dawn of a new millenium, everything has worked out fine – but if tomorrow you were to run into a “Url not found”, please take a little time to think about (and sympathise with) all those

people who have burnt themselves out trying to publicise the mythical spread's virtues and merits" (<http://members.tripod.com/~NutellaFans/indexi.html>).

Ferrero recently (by the year 2003) appeared to change its stance towards the internet, trying to become more open to the opportunities it offers. Starting with the principle that Nutella is the epitome of a congenial product, as proven by the Nutella Parties list, Ferrero recently decided to encourage the emergence of a community of Nutella fans, albeit only in Italy for the moment. Hence, the idea of the *my Nutella The Community* site (www.mynutella.com) marrying Nutella and the internet, the perfect technology for manifesting social spontaneity or individual networking[1]. According to Ferrero's Italian managers, this site is an ambitious project whose birth translates a complete reversal in usual brand-consumer relations. With its *my Nutella The Community* site, the brand is "taking a step backwards", i.e. leaving the spotlight to consumers who can thereby become the real protagonists and architects of said relationship. This site is intended as an agora where everyone can congregate, a meeting place for all those who identify with the product's values. Note that these values go far beyond the brand's unique and specific characteristics, and touch upon the many different aspects that make up social living. The site is an open construction area that will evolve and take shape depending on what participants do with it.

Fans can create their own pages on the my Nutella The Community site, starting with a personal "Thoughts on Nutella" blurb; a short text on Nutella (specifically to recount their first experience with it); their vision of the brand; and any other relevant thoughts. Here, are a few examples of statements made by hard-core fans:

Nutella is something essential in my life. When I feel down, Nutella brings me back up. Only Nutella gives me this feeling... It would have been awful if they had never invented it!!

She's always been there to reassure and help me without asking for anything in return. She's made me so very happy, and I've never had any fights or disagreed with here. She's my oldest friend. Thank you for being there, NUTELLA!!!

Nutella is the only "person" who is always there to celebrate a happy event or console me if I'm down.

Nutella... where would the world be without Nutella! I promise you that without this wonderfully soft and delicious spread, I wouldn't know what to do. For a small spoonful of Nutella, I'd be willing to give up on pasta, wouldn't you? What would you do for Nutella?

For me nothing compares to the feeling I get when I stick my finger into a giant jar of Nutella, really, these are great and exciting sensations you only get with this jar of nut spread (Plate 2).

In these personal pages, members can also publish a diary narrating life with (or without) Nutella and discussing any other hobbies. Other members comment publicly in guest books, or privately by e-mail. At present, (in mid-2005), most guestbooks are empty, and it is difficult to assess the magnitude of these private comments, but Ferrero estimates that the site receives about one million daily visitors, who look at it without necessarily interacting with anyone. Furthermore, everyone can upload their favourite photos to the Nutella Live section, notably any taken during the course of the world-famous Nutella Parties or those taken during more personal occasions like weddings (with cakes made out of Nutella!) or couples' simulated food orgies. When a picture is posted on the site, everyone can see the picture of everyone else; each picture



Plate 2.
Nutella consumer
consoling herself with a
Nutella break

is virtually always under the scrutiny of others, creating a stable identity over the web, without the control of the subject (once the photo is posted online) (Plate 3).

Another site section is dedicated to Nutella fans online clubs (75). Some fans form online fan clubs without corresponding off-line. Most such clubs are virtual congregations, sorts of sub-groups within the brand tribe. This section also contains a directory for all Nutella fan clubs in Italy. There is also a Nutella Art & Collection section with a large number of collection pots, plus a MyBacheca (Billboard) section that is the official guide for all of Nutella's derivative products (gadgets, books, films and others). In other words, the site offers Nutella fans numerous options for communicating with other consumers who feel the same passion. Ferrero's only involvement is through brief information bulletins (Nutella News), and more saliently through game spurring on-site consumer creativity like "nutellaro of the month" or photo competitions covering themes like "Che Mondo sarebbe senza Nutella!" ("What would the world be like without Nutella?"), featuring an up-to-date photo album airing

Plate 3.
Couple simulating a
Nutella “orgy”



the work of anyone taking part in the event. Competitions of this sort are announced and promoted off-line by Ferrero in an effort to get new ‘nutellari’ to register online. Lastly, note that Ferrero’s policy is to prohibit the publication of any indecent material on-site. Fans are all asked to read site regulations and to comply with them when adding to their personal pages. An e-mail address is specifically provided for anyone who might discover any abusive postings. In terms of regulations, there is also a stipulation that the site may not be reproduced, be it partially or in full, since it is protected by copyright. The effect is to make Ferrero the owner of all the material that fans produce on their pages!

In short, analysis of my Nutella The Community shows that behind Ferrero’ actions in creating this community-oriented web site, a limited number (ca. 1,500) of the brand’s hardcore fans have been producing subcultural components capable of sustaining its cult. These consumers are enabled by Ferrero to (re)shape the meaning of the brand they love. This consumer made production is not a jointly run process, i.e. the fruit of on-site exchanges between consumers. Instead, it revolves around a batch of individual creations whose exhibition is facilitated by Ferrero and seen by thousands of visitors daily. Similar to what Lucasfilm did for Star Wars fanatics, Ferrero enables Nutella fans to live their passion. It is in this sense that consumer empowerment has occurred. Conversely, Ferrero does not encourage exchange and community-oriented creations, remaining relatively distant from any form of communal empowerment.

Interpretation and case discussion

The texts and photos found on *my Nutella The Community* web site translate a very lively passion for Nutella. Most of the photos displayed on “Nutella Live” are spontaneous pictures of people trying to depict a moment of intensity, basically attesting to shared emotions at Nutella Parties. As Ferrero had hoped for, in this way the web site helps to sustain the Nutella cult and myth by showing that, in Italy at least, these are not marketing inventions but sociological realities – real situations with “real people” taking “real pictures” of their “real lives” with Nutella, thereby attributing a relatively specific meaning to Nutella and to their experience with this product. Everyone is free to use it to express and portray their relationship with Nutella. What we are close to here are the types of relationships that fans might entertain with their favourite stars, i.e. the apparent face-to-face interaction that can occur between media characters and their audience (Horton and Wohl, 1956). Ferrero thus seems to have attained two of its objectives: the first being to make room on-site for consumer fans (a step backwards) who, by occupying this space, develop it; the second being to leverage the legitimacy acquired by the Nutella tribe’s on-site existence to affirm the value of the brand connection (Cova and Cova, 2002).

The minimalist approach harks back to (and even enhances) the latest proposals coming out of post-modern marketing literature (Brown, 2004). Ferrero is one of the main actors in Italy’s advertising sector, with brands ranging from Kinder to Nutella, and it is happy to leave *my Nutella The Community* as a field unploughed by marketing, suggesting no actions, communications or contents, just a framework for fans’ benefit. The site is an oasis for the appropriation (and even more so, for the online re-appropriation) of the brand, at both the individual (fan) and collective (fan club) level. The same has applied for years off-line with the Nutella Parties. Ferrero created a certain meaning for its brand through advertising. This meaning was then renegotiated and retranslated in complete freedom at Nutella Parties and on *my Nutella The Community*. As regards its tumultuous past on the Net, Ferrero ostensibly understands that it made mistakes and has now adopted a low profile, pursuing what can be called a sort of “Mr Beanisation” (Badot and Cova, 2003) approach. This helps the company to mollify any institutional defiance that fans would otherwise feel towards it as an industrial group. Instead of doing the same thing twice, what we have here is a two-stage marketing process, with a highly “Kotlerian” mass marketing being followed by a very “Brownian” mini marketing (Brown, 2004). Mass marketing hinders the attribution of meaning. Within the confines of these restrictions, brand hijacking (Wipperfurth, 2005) can be tolerated (and even stimulated) in the interstitial virgin territories of the brand’s meaning. Values like family or nostalgia are defined by Ferrero in a way that is extraneous to the brand tribe. Furthermore, they are personally or collectively experienced, updated and rewritten by brand tribe members at Nutella Parties (off-line virgin territory) or on the *my Nutella The Community* web site (online virgin territory). Mass marketing is there to build the docks of the river through which the brand’s meaning is “channelled”, bobbing along currents whose direction has been dictated by the brand tribe. This marriage, which assumes the form of a decoupling between mass marketing and mini marketing, is an element that should be able to improve the theory and practice of tribal branding. The integration of mass and mini marketing is coherent with food consumption. Consuming food is both an expression of the culture of the social milieu to which one pertains and an expression of individual personality. The first mode

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of expression comes from the Bourdieu's approach (Wright *et al.*, 2001) that sees food tastes as a way for the individual to be defined inside the rules of a cultural capital (intended as the canons accepted in a society). The second aspect, food used to show one's personal lifestyle, is closer to the postmodern approach: the subject unites together different tastes and reinterpretation of tastes to build her own individuality (Wright *et al.*, 2001). In *my Nutella The Community*, social clichés and personal creative reinterpretation mingle together.

It remains that this two-story marketing structure functions because consumers have not only found a virgin territory they can conquer but also because there are important things for them to do here. Indeed, Ferrero has organised the *my Nutella The Community* web site in such a way as to facilitate consumers' "self-exposure" (Cauquelin, 2003), hence the personal marketing of each and every one of them. Ferrero has relied on each individual's existential need for recognition, based on the notion that "I exist if I am seen, i.e. *Essere est percerpi*, a dictum put forward by Georges Berkeley, England's renowned Philosopher of immateriality" (Cauquelin, 2003, p. 72). To achieve this, individuals seek out possibilities of intimate anonymity or of exposed intimacy – an intimacy laid open on web sites that are not accessible to any passer-by but only to those who display the same symptoms as the individual in question. Furthermore, this intimacy does not necessarily lead to interactions and exchanges. This same idea of favouring a protected presentation of self can be found in Apple's actions on behalf of iPodists (Kapferer, 2005), with people being offered a way of displaying their essence through the playlists (iMix) they upload onto the iPod web site, rather than by conversing with other members via a chatroom or forum format. Ferrero's web site follows this approach by highlighting the post-modern consumer's characteristic trait, (Cova and Cova, 2002), to wit, the seemingly paradoxical behaviour that causes him/her to seek the company of other persons without necessarily interacting with them. Like Starbucks coffee shop patrons (Thompson and Arsel, 2004) or iPod users (Kapferer, 2005), "nutellari" try to end their isolation and connect to other people without having to pay for this (Casalegno, 2005). In short, the brand community that Ferrero has consolidated and generated on its *my Nutella The Community* web site seems to have assembled a host of anonymous extraverts who decide to display intimate details about themselves because they want to be heard and have the sense that they exist, without necessarily being forced to converse or interact with anyone else. As such, this site does not entirely satisfy Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) predefined canons for a brand community: although members are marginally aware that they constitute a distinct group ("nutellari") and despite the materialisation of symbols and traditions, it is doubtful that any moral obligation of mutual assistance exists. What is noteworthy in Ferrero's approach is that it really does understand this phenomenon, having opted to facilitate individuals' exhibition of their para-social relationships instead of helping members to create real social relationships. In other words, the crux here is the fact that Ferrero has not offered online chatrooms or forums to facilitate interactions, encounters and dialogue amongst consumers (McWilliam, 2000), choosing instead to provide a sort of platform for "personal pages" or blogs where action is more important than interaction and where consumers can produce the sub-cultural components that will make up their imaginary community.

Like Snapple in the USA (Holt, 2004) or La Vache Qui Rit in France (Kapferer, 2005), in Italy Nutella is a cult brand about which certain consumers feel very passionate.

Empowering such consumers does not mean helping them to escape the marketplace (Kozinets, 2002) or freeing them from enslavement to a company's product. It is more a matter of giving them greater control over their relationship with their beloved brand (Fournier, 1998; Deighton, 2002; Holt, 2004). In the case of iconic brands, this is an identity-building kind of relationship. Consumers have to be empowered in their lives, and not just because of their consumption. The issue for them is not to resist a brand but to appropriate it so that they may exist. As Deighton (2002, p. 52) coined for the Snapple case, "Marketers offer brand ideas to the market, but those ideas are accepted, adopted, and made over afresh as part of the lives of those who use them". Derived from the Nutella example, and considering neighbouring cases like Snapple but also iPod, we can come up with a few paths based on the principle of customer empowerment. These can be used to develop convenience product-oriented brand communities:

- the production of sub-cultural components is more important for the brand than is the existence of an actual community;
- the community is more imagined than real, and relationships here are more para-social than social;
- a platform type web site filled with personal pages or blogs is a good solution for this type of community;
- this web site does not materialise through member interactions and encounters but by letting members put themselves on display and seeing how they are perceived by their peers;
- this web site is a sort of virgin territory in the fields of marketing and sales (no advertising, no sales) inasmuch as it is open to input from members;
- this is a web site where producer marketing is replaced by a marketing driven by a consumer who is putting him/herself on display and exhibiting the signs and symbols that consummate the brand's role in his/her real life; and
- the company's role here is to facilitate this on-site self-exhibition by remaining as non-intrusive as possible.

Conclusions

Of course, online web sites like iPod communities or *my Nutella The Community* by Nutella do not exhaust all of these brands' community management possibilities. Other means, like brand stores or off-line events, are much more focused on people's real experiences and therefore serve to reinforce community-oriented management. Nevertheless, online web sites of this kind open interesting doors for anyone who wants to develop a brand community centring on the convenience products being sold in our mass markets: a mixture of proxy marketing and participants' personal marketing to the detriment of all tribal marketing systems that attempt to facilitate interactions and encounters amongst participants, or else traditional marketing, which highlights the product itself. Faced with the kinds of rules conveyed by the paradigmatic examples of Harley Davidson or Ducati, both of which have developed real communities, cases of this kind focus on the ability of a firm working in the mass consumer markets to develop communities that may be imaginary but which still remain capable of producing a set of sub-cultural elements to help sustain a brand's cult, thereby enriching the daily experiences of its most impassioned fans. On these

communal sites, consumers can shape the meaning of the brand they love, making the relationship more relevant for themselves.

Beyond the convenience products issues, *my Nutella The Community* allows to draw a model of communal customer empowerment. Metaphorically, we can offer the following cartography of the Nutella brand's territory:

- The civilised territory of mass communication where Ferrero develops the meaning with which it wishes to imbue the Nutella brand. In this way Ferrero exerts its power upon the brand and the consumer.
- The virgin territory of the "my Nutella The Community" web site, a forum for fans of this brand who can get together to redefine its meaning in their own way. This virgin territory is conceded by Ferrero as a reversal of the power in the relationship.

Globally, we can argue that the success of web sites like *my Nutella The Community* is based on an inversion between marketing the producer and its brand and marketing the consumer (and the brand once again, since it is omnipresent on the web site). This has nothing to do with a "laissez-faire" type of marketing approach. Instead, this organisational strategy involves a highly fine-tuned brand management that acknowledges the brand tribes' (counter)-powers and reserves on their behalf a virtual space where this power can express itself. Towards this end, the web site being built has to be diametrically opposed to one that acts as a store window for the firm and its competencies. On web sites of this sort, it is the consumer who is showing off, and the whole site has to be built in a way that facilitates this self-exposure. This is the key to the step backwards announced by Ferrero – brand management that highlights the brand's fans instead of its manufacturers.

Note

1. Above and beyond its *my Nutella The Community* site, Nutella is omnipresent on the web, its name appearing on 173,000 Google and 176,000 Yahoo sites worldwide, whether as a small reference, a recipe, an element in a poem, a memory or a love letter.

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Further reading

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