Together we create value: An Netnographic study of Threadless online community

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Introduction. Keeping a continuous flow of fresh ideas from consumers has been one of the challenges for companies that use crowdsourcing in their product development processes. Research suggests online communities as a possible solution to this issue, because they can enhance consumers' social identity with the company through interactions with other consumers and thus encourage continuous participation in the crowdsourcing activities (e.g., Langner & Seidel, 2014). In this sense, consumers not only co-create products through participating in crowdsourcing but also co-create more value by participating in discussions in the online communities and fostering other consumers' enduring involvement with the company. Seraj (2012) found that through the interactions among participants in online communities, participants create three types of value: *social* (established by social ties and interactivity of the online community), *intellectual* (created by high quality and trustworthy contents shared by members) and *cultural* value (produced by the shared value and norms among members). However, it is not clear how the value enhances consumers' participation and contribution towards product co-creation. Threadless is an online apparel company that sells products designed by consumers through crowdsourcing. It has actively cultivated their communities with members who are engaged in product development process. The purpose of this current study is to investigate such value co-creation process in an online community. Specifically, this study through observation and analysis of one of the forums in Threadless, seeks to (a) identify discussion contents that create the social, intellectual, and cultural value in the community; and to (b) explore the information exchange patterns of these three types of content among the forum members.
Method. This study employed Netnography (Kozinet, 2002), which allows researchers to explore and analyze meanings and symbol systems in an online community. Threadless was selected as a focus for this study because its community consists of members of various backgrounds and participation motives, and it has the largest traffic flow among alike crowdsourcing websites (Langner & Seidel, 2014). Data were collected from Threadless' *Art & Design* forum, which is devoted to discussing and evaluating designs created by the consumers for Threadless' ongoing crowdsourcing competitions. This forum meets Netnography criteria, as it has a clear theme and a high posting rate from various participants per thread. The authors ensured proper cultural entrée by signing up as Threadless members prior to the observation and data analysis. A total of 45 discussion threads which include 74 comments were collected and were deemed to have reached data saturation. Seventy-five community members, including two staff members and 28 alumni (those who have won a competition before) participated in the discussions. Data were captured using NVivo 11 and analyzed in two cycles. Open coding and conceptual coding were both employed in the first coding cycle. Elaborative coding was

employed in the second coding cycle. The final coding yielded an inter-coder agreement of 98.32% and Cohen's Kappa coefficients ranged from .70 to 1.00 between two coders.
Results. Social value was created through social interactions that may elicit some level of reciprocity, including: seeking feedback on artwork and/or asking for votes. We also observed active social interactions when members complimented other members' artwork and engaged in casual dialogues. Intellectual value mainly emerged from tactical design advice, personal tips, and in-depth feedback on artwork. Occasionally, detailed design processes were provided in advance of requesting for feedback or trying to get attention for the artwork. Cultural value evolved from particular patterns of manner and shared value that members developed. For example, newcomers greeted and introduced themselves in their first posting and were welcomed by other members. The playful and lively atmosphere is built on humor and play of words in member interactions. Some self-governance was observed when members inquired and informed each other regarding topic appropriateness using both personal and observed experiences
Discussions and conclusions. This study confirmed value creation in online communities proposed in Seraj's three-value framework (2012) and showed that the three values created in Threadless were often interrelated to each other. First, social and cultural value often complemented one another. Newcomers embraced a particular culture in the community by introducing themselves prior to sharing their design ideas and socialize with others. Social interactions, such as complimenting on other's artwork and encouraging others to submit for competitions were often initiated by alumni. This may help form strong ties among participants and facilitate an actual online community ritual. Second, cultural value is often weaved with intellectual value as community members tend to ask for design related information or feedback on their artwork with a question about the norm in the community. Third, there was a relationship between intellectual and social value. Intellectual interactions (e.g., explaining the process of work) were often generated by members who initiated social exchanges by asking for feedback on artwork. Lastly, the interactions among the three types of value was often observed in the intellectual exchange process. For example, members showed appreciation of humor (that is, cultural value) through casual talking (social value) during the exchanges of design ideas (intellectual value). This study contributes to the literature by identifying the types of interactions that facilitate social, intellectual, and cultural value formation in an online community where members are involved in product development processes. The three types of value with subthemes may be useful for future studies using social network analysis. The findings are beneficial for practitioners who look to bolster their crowdsourcing efforts up by cultivating online communities. Specifically, experienced members can help companies facilitate social interactions that may generate further social, intellectual, and cultural value, and consequently enhance the quality of designs submitted for crowdsourcing and improve customer satisfaction.

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