Transitional space and new forms of value co-creation in online brand communities

Abstract

Drawing on a netnographic study and in-depth interviews within the online Greek Football Manager community, this paper explores the specific role of reality and fantasy in generating and sustaining brand value co-creation. Inspired by Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory, this study illustrates how value co-creation occurs in-between reality and fantasy and unfolds via the complex interplay of real and fantasy-oriented resources which are largely situated *in* transitional space, that is the intermediate space of experience between shared reality and individual fantasy, and is facilitated by various transitional objects. The findings further highlight that members engage in a series of voluntary work activities while navigating themselves between the everyday shared reality of the real football word and the individual fantasy of their gaming experiences. This study puts forth a novel theoretical framework of value co-creation *in* transitional space within the context of online brand communities and draws theoretical and practical implications for future research.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore the variety of ways through which the blending of reality with fantasy shape value co-creation processes in the context of online brand communities. Prior research has aimed to explore value co-creation as a multi-dimensional affair between consumers, brands, and/or members of specific groupings (Cova & Dalli, 2009; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2000; Schau et al., 2009) such as online brand communities (Cova et al., 2015; Muñiz & Schau 2005; Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder 2011). However, the current wave of digital technologies is further shaping consumer behavior and increasingly leads to the creation of technocultures (Kozinets, 2019a) which highlight the disappearance of boundaries between consumers, products, and brands (Belk, 2013). In fact, consumption seems to be increasingly located within the terrain of imagination and fantasy whilst the latter has moved from the offline realm to the online one (Belk, 2013; Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010).

Prior work highlights the need to further explore the convergence of consumer activities with digital technologies whereby both reality and fantasy are blended and its antecedents for consumption behavior and brand-related phenomena (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010; Kozinets, 2019a; Skandalis et al., 2016) such as brand value co-creation. In an online brand community setting, the significance of the intertextuality between shared reality and individual fantasy is relatively underexplored (Skandalis, *et al.*, 2016), even in the case of research contexts which encourage a constant interplay between the two such as digital gaming (Molesworth, 2009). This paper explores the diversity of ways in which value co-creation occurs *in* transitional space, that is the intermediate area of experience in-between shared reality and individual fantasy, within the context of digital gaming.

Through a netnographic study of the online Greek Football Manager (FM) digital gaming community and in-depth interviews with key members of the community, this paper illustrates how real and fantasy-oriented dimensions are enacted and come together to drive value co-creation in an online brand community context. The study draws upon psychoanalytic theory and, in particular, the work of Donald Winnicott (1953; 1971) on transitional space to further theorize the nature of value co-creation within online brand communities. For Winnicott, transitional space represents a conceptual effort to portray the intermediate area of experience, a potential space, whereby both inner reality and external shared reality interact and co-exist. The findings illustrate how value co-creation occurs via the complex integration of real and fantasy-oriented resources in an online brand community setting.

Next, a short literature review on value co-creation in online brand communities is presented, the usefulness of psychoanalytic theory and Winnicott's concept of transitional space is discussed to frame the empirical findings and present the context and methods of the study. The core thematic categories and theoretical framework are outlined and discussed in detail and a series of theoretical and practical implications are provided.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Value co-creation in online brand communities

In the last decades, marketing scholars have started to perceive brand value as a multidimensional construct which is essentially co-created by companies, consumers and other stakeholders (Cova et al., 2015). In the context of online brand communities, value co-creation concerns how brand value is co-created with consumers as members of such collective groupings (Cova & Dalli, 2009; Muñiz & O'Guinn 2000;

Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder 2011; Schau et al., 2009). Prior research illustrates how consumers as members of such communities co-create the symbolic meaning of brand consumption and contribute affective and cultural resources to brand value (Cova & Dalli, 2009). In fact, numerous streams of marketing research have focused on various aspects of value co-creation within online brand communities (*cf.* Pongsakornrungsilp and Schroeder, 2011) such as the immaterial, unpaid labor produced by consumers for the sake of brand value creation (Black & Veloutsou, 2017; Cova & Dalli 2009; Zwick et al., 2008); the various reasons for consumer participation in value co-creation (Cova et al., 2015; Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011; Skandalis et al., 2015); the range of consumption activities that form part of the value co-creation process (Muñiz & Schau, 2005; Schau et al., 2009); the potential benefits for consumers from the outcomes of value co-creation (Skandalis et al., 2015; Xie et al. 2008); and the role of consumer engagement as a microfoundation for collective value co-creation (Brodie et al., 2013; Morgan-Thomas et al., 2020; Storbacka et al., 2016), amongst others.

However, there is limited research into the specific role of and interplay between real and fantasy-oriented aspects of consumers' actions in generating and sustaining value co-creation processes in online spaces. In this paper, it is argued that '[n]ew digital spaces in particular seem to encourage more chaotic, liminoid change, but we might also recognize that in these new behaviors there is the potential for the establishment of new norms in consumer practices [...] All these in-between, transitional spaces allow for the renegotiation of consumption practice' (Molesworth & Denegri-Knott, 2007: 129-131). Prior work theorized novel forms of digital consumption as being positioned within liminal (often communal) spaces which provide a break from the mundane in consumers' everyday lives (Denegri-Knott &

Molesworth, 2010). Previous studies have predominantly dealt with the study of various forms of consumption behavior which challenge conventional marketplace structures and often lie in-between reality and fantasy and/or alternative 'perceptions' of reality (Belk & Costa, 1998; Rose & Wood, 2005; Skandalis et al., 2016). For instance, Belk and Costa (1998) conceptualise the modern mountain men consumption community as a fantasy-oriented consumption space which is essentially co-created by its members who exhibit 'a quest for self-transformation in a socially constructed alternative reality' (Belk & Costa, 1988: 236). Similarly, Rose and Wood (2005) illustrate how reality television viewers create a form of hyperauthenticity by blending real and fantasy-oriented elements and navigating in-between reality and fantasy.

Such studies have arguably signaled the need for the development of novel theorizations while recent work further highlights the need to explore the interplay between reality and fantasy and its antecedents for consumption behavior in the digital realm (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010; Kozinets, 2019a; Skandalis et al., 2016). Next, Winnicott's concept of transitional space is outlined and its relevance for the purposes of our study is discussed.

2.2 Winnicott, transitional space and digital gaming

This study adopts a psychoanalytic perspective and digs deeper into the work of the British psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1953; 1971), one of the foremost representatives of the British independent tradition of object-relations theory in psychoanalysis (Kuhn, 2013). Object-relations theory is broadly concerned with the study of 'the relationship between real, external people and internal images and residues of relations with them, and the significance of these residues for psychic functioning' (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983: 29). It is often associated with the works of Melanie

Klein, Ronald Fairbairn, Christopher Bollas and Donald Winnicott and is considered to be a modern adaptation of Freudian psychoanalytic theory. In Freudian terms, the meaning of objects implies reference to both a thing and a goal or drive for a thing. This understanding had largely influenced object-relation theorists in their interpretation of objects as entities which are not only perceived in material and physical terms but also in animate or inanimate, human or non-human terms (Woodward, 2011).

In marketing and consumer research, the usefulness of object-relations theory and, in particular, Winnicottian conceptualisations of transitional space for developing a deeper understanding of person-object relations has been previously highlighted (*cf.* Woodward, 2011). In the context of digital gaming communities, Skandalis et al. (2016) illustrate how members construct transitional consumption experiences via the constant transition between the shared reality of the real world and the individual fantasy of their gaming adventures. Hirschman et al. (2012) theorize the American garage space as a liminal space which links the house with the outside world through the symbolism of objects that are incorporated within it. Their renewed conceptualisation of liminal space is informed by Winnicott's concept of transitional space (Winnicott, 1953) and also helps to highlight the conceptual distinction between the two. Although Turner's (1969) perspective on liminal spaces and experiences and their subsequent adaptation within marketing and consumer research implies that 'during a liminal state, people's normal routines are disrupted [and] often a state of anti-structure holds, characterized by communitas, equality, anonymity, and simplicity' (Hirschman et al., 2012: 371), Winnicott's (1971) understanding of transitional spaces and experiences is firmly grounded within the everyday world of adults' cultural activities. His conceptualization allows for the development of a 'cultural psychoanalytic' understanding of the changing nature of consumption behaviour in the digital era (Lambert, 2019: 330) and helps to

further explore the blurred boundaries between offline and online, real and fantasy-oriented aspects of consumption.

Initially, Winnicott introduced the concept of transitional space to depict the intermediate area of experience wherein both inner reality and external shared reality co-inhabit (Winnicott, 1953; 1971). Drawing upon infants' early possessions and playful engagement with objects (i.e. a doll or a teddy bear) as the means to separate themselves from the mother, Winnicott argues that these possessions constitute transitional objects which enable infants to negotiate a steady transition 'from the experience of [themselves] as the center of a totally subjective world to the sense of [them] as a person among other persons' (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983: 249). Transitional objects are located in transitional space; a space in-between (shared) reality and (individual) fantasy wherein objects are creatively invested with meaning (Winnicott, 1953). However, Winnicott (1971) further suggests that transitional space is also omnipresent in adults' everyday social lives. Play and gaming in adult life occurs within this intermediate area of experience since when individuals engage in such activities, they belong neither to the world of imagination nor to the world of shared reality but rather to a transitional space of experience which lends characteristics from both worlds. In other words, transitional space is the result of the creation of a 'temporary space of cultural possibility – a fusion of person with thing, the product of which is greater than the sum of its parts and which forms the basis of future social action' (Woodward, 2011: 12).

Nowadays, a series of cultural activities which involve adult play and gaming are largely grounded within individuals' everyday lives (Crawford, 2006). Football is one of these activities leading to the emergence of numerous fan cultures which revolve around it (McDonagh, 2017). As Stone (2017: 446) notes, football is infused into the

confines of everyday life 'to such an extent that it could be seen for some people as an essential part of making the everyday possible and provides a particularly creative resource within daily life'. Football often embodies individuals' need for communal experiences, pleasure and imagination and football-related games such as FM largely become popular because of their intertextuality, that is their ability to allow gamers to use their imagination and perform the fantasy of being a real-life football manager (Crawford, 2006). Digital gaming might be understood as a mundane consumption experience which does not take place in a liminal space offering escape from everyday life but rather is situated within transitional space and the confines of everyday life (Molesworth, 2009). This situation 'allows the game to be drawn on as a resource and narrative beyond conversations relating specifically to these games and, in particular, will often cross-cut and merge with those relating to football' (Crawford, 2006: 509). Here, it is the intertextuality between the everyday shared reality of the community and the individual fantasy of the FM game that leads to the creation of meaningful consumption experiences.

Hence, it is argued that the FM game and community constitute a useful research context to explore the role of real and fantasy-oriented dimensions in shaping value co-creation in online brand communities.

3. Research Context: Online gaming communities and the FM game

This study focuses on the FM game and the FM community (www.fmgreece.gr) to draw insights for value co-creation. This online community is one of the largest fan sites for the FM game and is affiliated with Sports Interactive, the publisher of the game. It consists of more than 45,000 registered members and two million posts on themes related to the FM game. Although there are numerous official FM community sites, the

online Greek FM community was primarily selected due to the lead researcher's prior engagement and immersion with this community and its cultural context (Kozinets, 2019b). Given that the lead author's native language is Greek, this further helped to collect and analyse relevant data.

The FM community started as a fan site in 2001 and was created from players of the game with the main aims of finding people that share the same passion for the game and of voluntary releasing updates for the game's database in order to improve its representation in the Greek leagues. It exemplifies a form of communality through members' shared passions and emotions for the FM game which are associated with a neo-tribal sense of belonging, such as shared meanings, symbols, language and rituals, amongst others (Maffesoli, 1996; Cova, 1997; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2000). In the FM game, players act as real-life football managers and they can choose any football club in the world, run a league in any country and compete against other teams (Busari, 2009). Players can manage tactics, squad selection, player purchases and sales and other related issues. One of the main aims of the FM game is to lead a team to success by winning in all the competitions that the team participates and either secure a place as a manager to the same team the next year or be offered a new job to another team.

The FM game features a truly massive database of thousands of real footballers and backroom staff, each featuring hundreds of statistics and attributes carefully compiled by the company and players-researchers around the world (Sports Interactive, 2020). This enables gamers to take control of any one of thousands of teams across hundreds of football divisions worldwide (Parkin, 2015). Sports Interactive releases the latest edition of the game each year containing most of the latest changes in the football industry, from new signings and changes in the players attributes to changes in the financial situation of the football teams worldwide. Regular updates aim to offer a

realistic simulation of the football industry inside the FM game which adds to its appeal although paradoxically it is a fantasy game with 'no end' wherein wannabe football managers can create their own football universe and simulate to year 2100. As players progress in the FM game, they create a simulation of the real football world by managing various football teams across different leagues, signing players and creating new ones, winning major football trophies, and developing further their imaginative football management career. Players involved in digital games, and in this case football-based ones (McDonagh, 2017), seem to exhibit a dual shared passion for both the sport and digital gaming.

Players utilise the simulated reality (fantasy) of the FM game in order to make sense and further understand the real football world. This is further exemplified in the real football world whereby professional football managers such as former manager of Manchester United's Ole Gunnar Solksjaer have previously stated that they often use the game to improve their football management skills (Johnson, 2014). This has led to the game gaining a place in popular culture over the last years which has been evidenced in numerous ways; from the creation of books and documentaries which narrate the game's unique appeal along with its addictive nature (Macintosh, 2012) to the securing of real-life professional football management jobs from players of the FM game (Martin, 2012); to the emergence of hundreds of online brand communities worldwide.

4. Methods

Data collection

This study focuses on a 10-month netnographic investigation (Kozinets, 2019b) of the online Greek FM community and in-depth interviews with key community members. Institutional ethical approval for the research was gained before the start of

data collection and the researcher intermittently immersed himself within the FM community on a longitudinal basis across two stages, that is from 2009-2014 and 2019-2020. Such intermittent immersion took place in various times resulting in a total of a 10-month netnographic immersion which often included daily involvement within the community. In-depth interviews were conducted during the first stage of data collection (2009-2014).

Online fieldwork started with an initial period of non-intrusive 'lurking' or covert observation in the FM community (Langer & Beckmann, 2005) and, specifically within these forums which included discussion threads about the FM game (including older versions) and members' experiences. This process 'often allows ethnographers in many virtual spaces to remain 'invisible' without clear codes on how to signal to participants that they are under observation' (Robinson & Schulz, 2009: 693). 'Lurking' can be defined as cultural entrée which helps to develop in-depth understanding of the community's norms, rules and activities (Kozinets, 2019b). After this initial stage of 'lurking', the researcher identified himself as a member of the FM community. He registered and posted on one of the forums and subsequently stating his researcher identity, the aims of the research project, and invited members to be interviewed. This helped to screen out those community members who were willing to be interviewed and identify suitable ones based on their degree of involvement with the FM game and community.

At the time of the research, the forums of the community were significantly active with regular posts from members. Textual data (e.g. individual posts, discussion threads) were gathered from these publicly-accessible posts by the researcher. Given that FM community forums typically cover a lot of diverse ground, the choice of relevant posts and threads was driven by a wide spectrum of FM game-related and

football-specific stories and news discussions by various types of members, ranging from more active and committed to less engaged ones (Langer and Beckman, 2005). Since data collection occurred in different stages and distinct timeframes (e.g. 2009-2014, 2019-2020), particular attention was paid to the nature of the FM community and its brand culture. However, it is argued that no significant differences were noted over the course of netnographic data collection in relation to the purpose and scope of this study. The lead researcher was particularly interested in identifying relevant chunks of text related to the topic at hand which included in-depth, rich content (Kozinets, 2019b). This helped to rule out shorter bits of textual data which did not provide any interesting content. The entire block of netnographic data consists of 300 pages of textual data including paper notes, word-processed entries and annotated thread posts. Data collection often involved daily observation of the online community over an extended period of time and continuous, iterative searches of the entirety of the posts available. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved in terms of emergent themes, the research questions and the literature at hand (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The guidelines and recommendations for conducting trustworthy netnographic research suggested by Kozinets were followed (2019b).

As part of the overall netnographic make-up, five key FM community members were also interviewed. These members were identified by the researcher as being 'important' members of the community (Seraj, 2012) based on their 'insider' knowledge of the FM game and community. They were all known to each other virtually. Members were recruited based on the length of their community membership, their status and level of activity (e.g. number of forum posts), and years of playing the FM game. Although thirteen community members were initially identified, only five of them with whom he managed to establish an 'inner circle' (Schembri & Latimer, 2016)

of personal messaging within the FM community eventually agreed to be interviewed. The small sample of informants is acknowledged as being a potential empirical limitation of the current study and, hence, data analysis and interpretation relies more heavily on netnographic data. These five members were contacted via personal messaging within the community. All chose to be interviewed online via a direct chat programme, with interviews lasting approximately one hour and being undertaken in Greek since this is the researcher's native language. The main purpose of these interviews was to develop a more in-depth and holistic understanding of individuals' lived experiences and engagement with the FM game and community to supplement ethnographic insights (Spradley, 1979). Prior exposure to digital gaming and, in particular, the FM game helped to establish rapport with interviewees and draw upon similar experiences via conversational interviewing techniques (Blackman, 2007).

A series of grand tour questions and floating prompts were utilised to facilitate discussion (McCracken, 1988) such as 'tell me about your involvement with digital gaming', 'tell me about your participation in digital gaming communities', 'discuss your involvement in the FM community', 'tell me about your Football Manager experiences', 'what is your relationship with football'. These questions led to more specific discussions and follow-ups about their FM game and community experiences, thoughts and feelings (Belk et al., 2013). Emergent netnographic themes were also utilized to guide the discussion. The sample included five men between the ages of 18 and 30. All interviewees were either educated to degree level or studying for a university degree and had significant prior engagement with the FM game and the FM community (e.g. more than five years). The sample reflects the largely male-dominated nature of the digital gaming field and, in particular, sport-related digital gaming such as FM wherein distinct gender differences are prevalent (Crawford, 2006). Finally,

pseudonyms were utilized to ensure confidentiality and interviewees were also asked to fill out a consent form confirming their voluntary participation.

Data analysis

A constant comparative strategy was employed to analyse the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) which involved coding, categorisation and abstraction (Spiggle, 1994) to develop a holistic understanding and note similarities and/or differences across the textual data. Individual posts within discussion threads and other community forums were utilized as the primary unit of analysis related to the nature of the FM gaming experience and other football-related discussions. During the first stage of data collection (2009-2014), data were analyzed using an inductive approach which involved the identification of initial themes through a back-and-forth movement between forum data and extant literature. The researcher moved iteratively between small parts of the data, initial understandings of the whole set of textual data, and relevant literature. Initial themes were related to the nature of the gaming experience, online community interaction, and value co-creation activities within the FM community. These themes emerged from the analysis of netnographic data and were used as a guide to frame the subsequent coding and categorization of interview transcripts. These were developed, scrutinized, and further shaped over time as the researcher continuously read, re-read, coded, categorized, and abstracted the data while immersing himself with extant literature (Spiggle, 1994).

	Initial themes	**Emergent themes**	**Final themes**
Theme 1	Playing the game: The nature of the gaming experience	The impact of reality and fantasy upon the gaming experience	Transitional space and the integration of real and fantasy-oriented resources
Theme 2	Digital Gaming and Community Integration	The role of various actors in value co-creation	Transitional objects and their micro-foundational role in value co-creation
Theme 3	The company case: value co-creation activities	Value co-creation practices and activities in transitional space	Undertaking voluntary work in-between shared reality and individual fantasy

Table 1. Thematic analysis stages

During the second stage of netnographic data collection (2019-2020), emergent themes were further added and refined until the final thematic categories were crystallized. Table 1 outlines the various steps of thematic analysis, from the development of the initial themes during the first stage of the research (2009-2014) to the creation of emergent themes after the second stage of netnographic collection (2019-2020) to the final thematic categories presented in the next section. This process ultimately enabled the creation of a theoretical framework that united all themes in a holistic manner and grounded the interpretation. Data analysis involved familiarizing with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final thematic categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All participant names were changed to ensure confidentiality and interviewees gave informed consent. Given that all the data were in Greek, a back-translation process was applied. Triangulation across the community forums and the interview transcripts

was also implemented, along with extended daily observation of the community to achieve a robust interpretation.

5. Findings

The findings highlight that value co-creation occurs via the complex interplay of real and fantasy-oriented resources within the FM gaming community, which are firmly integrated *within* transitional space (Winnicott, 1953; 1971) and give rise to a series of brand-related activities. Members of the community navigate between the everyday shared reality of the real football world and the individual fantasy of their gaming experience; a process which is facilitated through various transitional objects such as the FM community, the FM game, the publisher of the game and the football industry. The value co-creation process is schematically captured in Figure 1 and discussed below.
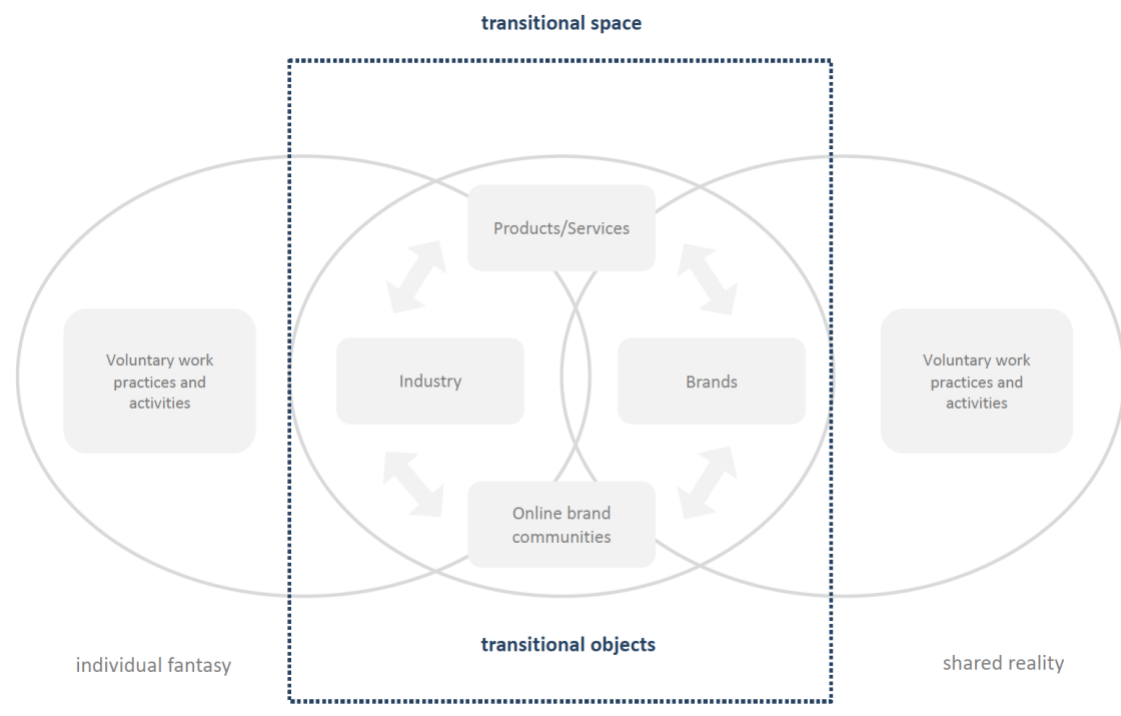

Figure 1. New forms of value co-creation in online brand communities

5.1 Transitional space and the integration of real and fantasy-oriented resources

This theme deals with the nature of the gaming experience and how the FM game and community are located into members' everyday lives via the integration of real and fantasy-oriented resources. One of the main reasons why members of the FM online community initially engaged with football management gaming is because of their prior exposure to and passion for football. A number of discussions between community members were noted which focused on highlighting the difficulty of someone playing the FM game without prior engagement with and knowledge of the real football world (e.g. leagues, teams, players, tactics, attributes, stats).

The interrelationships between football and the FM game are illustrated in Daniil's quote below:

> *"For many seasons, I employed a [football] tactic which was met with surprise by many people [...] the 3-4-3 formation. It's NOT an easy tactic. Players press so high up the pitch so they need to have a lot of stamina. In the past, I've tried using it in Championship with Swansea and in Primera [Spanish Football League] with Villareal."* (Daniil, forum)

His quote emphasizes the football-dependent nature of the FM game. By stating that he utilized a rather unusual football tactic, 'the 3-4-3 formation', Daniil underscores the significance of practical knowledge of football (Crawford, 2006) for his digital gaming experience and progression within the FM game. He further provides examples of how such a football tactic could actually be employed within the FM game, 'press so high up the pitch', 'need to have a lot of stamina', to highlight the intertextuality between football and the FM game whereby several aspects of the real football world (e.g. football tactics) are simulated within the game (Crawford, 2006).

Members of the FM community enact both real and fantasy-oriented resources as part of their engagement with and participation in the FM game.

In the FM community, the employment of real and fantasy-oriented resources is further exemplified through various storytelling activities which contribute to the co-construction of the FM brand culture (Schembri & Latimer, 2016). It was noted that members create short stories in the form of narratives to describe their in-gaming FM experiences and share them with the rest of the community in ritualistic manner (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2000). One of the interviewees, Babis, discusses the practice of storytelling within the FM community:

> *"When I write a story, it has to be a special occasion. I mean, for instance, last year I wrote a story when I won the championship with OFI [Greek football team] in my first season. I don't write a story for every game I play. It has to be something interesting and unusual".* (Babis, interview)

Babis's quote illustrates how storytelling leads to the blurring of boundaries between reality and fantasy and underscores the positioning of the FM experience *in* transitional space (Winnicott, 1971). By referring to 'special' fantasy-oriented achievements, 'when I won the championship with OFI', Babis mythologizes 'interesting' and 'unusual' in-game progression within the online community (Muniz & Schau, 2005). The simulation experienced within the FM game is turning into shared reality for a community of gamers that have developed their own rituals and special language within the FM digital gaming universe.

Storytelling activities further serve to legitimize individual gaming fantasies within a real-life context such as the FM community, as evidenced in the quote below:

"If you like my story, let me know and I will continue writing about my achievements as I've progressed a lot in the game. I just thought that I'd share my own story here with you" (Thodoris, forum)

By using phrases such as 'if you like my story' and 'I will continue writing', Thodoris's quote illustrates how storytelling can be perceived as members' efforts to gain legitimacy within the FM community through the demonstration of their in-game achievements (Leigh et al., 2006). In addition, Thodoris highlights the role that storytelling plays in bridging reality with fantasy and fostering the creation of transitional space; a space in-between (shared) reality and (individual) fantasy which is often realized through members' engagement with both the FM game and community (Winnicott, 1953). This is further demonstrated in the quote below by Christos, a forum participant:

"Juan Atanasio Dagilez, that's his full name, made his first football steps in the historic football team of Rosario [Newell's Old Boys]. He managed to represent the Argentinian national team 52 times [...] and retired when he was 36 years old in 2014. Newell's is the first team that trusts him [as a football manager], with his main advantage being that he is a die-hard fan of the team [...] So, Juan decides to start his [football management] adventure with the team of his heart. One of the main goals is to achieve a respectable league position while there are also hidden aspirations for securing a place in Copa Libertadores." (Christos, forum)

Christos's quote highlights the interdependence between reality and fantasy and signifies the 'unique appeal' of the FM game. By constructing and referring to the bio of an imaginary football manager profile, 'Juan Atanasio Dagilez', he positions his gaming experience within Winnicott's (1953) transitional space and reveals how the

FM game enables players to interact with the most imaginative aspects of digital gaming (Molesworth & Denegri-Knott, 2007) by navigating a simulated, yet realistic, football universe. Christos makes reference to the fact that the FM game provides the opportunity to an imaginary football management 'adventure' which transcends liminality (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2010) and is essentially grounded within the mundane logics and rules of the football game (McDonagh, 2017), 'achieve a respectable league position', 'securing a place in Copa Libertadores'.

The analysis of the findings suggests that the 'intertextuality between the everyday shared reality of the community and the individual fantasy of the [game]' (Skandalis et al., 2016: 1315) give rise to transitional space whereby real and fantasy-oriented resources are integrated and fuel the value co-creation process (Morgan-Thomas et al., 2020).

5.2 Transitional objects and their micro-foundational role in value co-creation

As part of members' positioning of the FM experience in-between shared reality and individual fantasy, the findings suggest that a series of actors such as the FM community, the FM game, the publisher of the game and the football industry, act as transitional objects. These actors facilitate the value co-creation process at the micro-level (Storbacka et al., 2016) and ground its placement within transitional space (Winnicott. 1971). Below, Dinos, a forum member, illustrates how both the shared reality of the football industry and the individual fantasy of his gaming experience shape his engagement with the FM game:

"It was the end of the 2018/2019 [football] season when the great Leeds [Leeds United] once again fails to secure their promotion back to the Premier League

after the 2003/2004 season [..] I'm taking charge of a team with a rich history

[..] with the aim of leading them back to glory" (Dinos, forum)

As Dinos highlights, members seem to position their initial engagement with the FM game and online community within the intermediate space of experience which sits in-between the everyday shared reality of the FM community and the real football world (Crawford, 2006), 'I'm taking charge of a team', and the individual fantasy of their gaming experience, 'with the aim of leading them back to glory'. Similarly, Giannis, another forum participant, elaborates further upon this:

"I'm not entirely certain about [football] regulations (especially at foreign

leagues) but I've observed that the referee suspends the match immediately for a

potential penalty check. Shouldn't they normally do that once the match stops

naturally and then look at this?" (Giannis, forum)

Giannis discusses the realistic simulation of the FM game in relation to football rules and their application in foreign leagues. In fact, he questions the game publisher's decision to enable referees in the game to suspend matches immediately for 'a potential penalty check' something which does not seem to be in line with official rules and regulations, thus, highlighting the interplay between the fantasy-oriented aspects of the FM game and the everyday logics of the football game (McDonagh, 2017). Below, Dimitris unpacks further such issues:

"Hello guys. I would like to ask a question; I've just bought FM 2021 [the most

recent version of the game] and experienced something really strange which

never happened to me before in previous FM editions. In the Europa League

qualification round [a major international football league], Olympiakos and Aris

[Greek football teams] were drawn to play together, and in general, this also

happened with other football teams from the same country. Is this supposed to

happen or is it a bug?" (Dimitris, forum)

In his post, Dimitris utilises his knowledge of and engagement with football, 'were drawn to play together, to evaluate gameplay and the progression of the FM game, 'is this supposed to happen or is it a bug?'. Dimitris illustrates how value co-creation does not seem to unfold only in 'purely digital spaces with no connection to offline place [whereby] the outside world is often ignored or only briefly acknowledged' (Eklund, 2015: 528) but rather is the product of interactions between various transitional objects (Winnicott, 1953) which connect the imaginative potentials of a fantasy world (gaming experience) and the actual limits of the real world (football industry). One of the interviewees, Babis, highlights the significance of the realistic nature of the FM game:

"The database is a big issue, if it wasn't so realistic, I wouldn't play the game.

This is mainly because in Championship Manager [rival Football Manager

game], there are not research teams in each country like in Football Manager,

I think" (Babis, interview)

Babis alludes to the game's database which is updated each year by Sports Interactive to praise the representation of the real football world within the game, 'if it wasn't so realistic, I wouldn't play the game'. He further refers to value co-creation activities which take place within the FM community (a point which we explore further below in our next theme), 'there are not research teams in each country', to explain why other football management games do not offer such a realistic simulation, 'Championship Manager'. For him, both the FM game and community act as transitional objects which allow for the consumption of reality and fantasy (Belk & Costa, 1998).

Next, specific activities are discussed which are grounded *in* transitional space and further crystalize brand value co-creation.

5.3 Undertaking voluntary work in-between shared reality and individual fantasy

The analysis illustrates how members participate in voluntary work activities (Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder 2011; Schau et al., 2009) which sit in-between reality and fantasy. Members act as co-producers of the game's database which is relevant not only for the FM community but also for the brand and the broader digital gaming industry (Brodie et al., 2013). Such activities entail unpaid, voluntary contributions whereby members collect, analyse and evaluate real football data within and beyond the confines of the FM community which are then utilized by Sports Interactive to release updates for the game's database and improve its representation of the real football world. Fanis's quote below is illustrative of this complex and multi-faceted value co-creation process:

> *"They deal with all the teams in Greece, even the local ones, by posting news, signings, etc. They really try hard in order to have a better representation of the Greek League and its players".* (Fanis, interview)

Fanis illustrates how members regularly engage into the collection of real-life football data about specific Greek football teams and divisions (e.g. they attend live football matches, observe and record player characteristics and attributes and even track financial information about local football teams in lower divisions) with the aim of improving the 'realistic' simulation of the football industry within the FM game. Individuals engage into value co-creation activities which sit in-between reality and fantasy and occupy Winnicott's intermediate space of experience (Winnicott, 1953;

1971), as highlighted in the following quote below by Periandros, a key community member:

"What would help us in terms of collecting real-life football data for a local team would be the following: The full name of the team, founding date, team colours, location, youth academies (if any), stadium name, stadium location, stadium size (if seated, number of seats) [...] average attendance in home matches, rival teams, relevant websites (official website, blog, Facebook group link)" (Periandros, forum)

Periandros outlines some of the detailed information required to include local Greek football teams in the FM database. By posting such guidelines on the community, he seems to encourage members to voluntarily conduct 'research' in real life for the brand in order to be able to enjoy the fruits of their voluntary, unpaid work (Cova et al., 2015) while playing the FM game.

Some members of the FM community act as working consumers (Cova & Dalli, 2009) *in* transitional space (Winnicott, 1971), that is they participate in the production of actual labour outside the FM community with the aim of improving their imaginary experiences within the FM game (Skandalis et al., 2016). These voluntary activities are further mobilised by Sports Interactive by capturing the enthusiasm of the FM community and its members who engage into various forms of unpaid labour of affective and moral overtone (Black & Veloutsou, 2017). This leads to sustained and more intensive levels of brand value creation (Morgan-Thomas et al., 2020) which, in turn, generate stronger brand loyalty. Such issues are further outlined in the quote by Dimitris, below:

"I always buy the authentic edition [of the FM game]. In fact, this year I bought it because I've seen how much time and work the guys that deal with research

in the Greek community dedicate and I thought that it was right thing to do".

(Dimitris, interview)

Dimitris refers to the members of the FM community who engage in such voluntary activities and highlights the value of their contributions for all members of the online FM community. Instead of attempting to transcend and/or reject the commodification of members' voluntary work (Zwick et al., 2008) by accessing illegal copies of the FM game, Dimitris seems to reclaim commodification when referring to the efforts of other community members. A sense of admiration and obligation towards these members is further exemplified through the various 'research titles' that they get which are attached in their avatars and showcase the intensity of their engagement to the rest of the community (Dessart et al., 2015).

For instance, a member engaging into research and unpaid work can be classified as a 'Scout'; a term borrowed from the football industry which adds cultural and symbolic meaning to their value co-creation activities. A 'Scout' is responsible for collecting real-life football data about a specific football team and feeding these data back to the FM community, as outlined below:

"I would like to be responsible for the scouting of Anagennisi Karditsas. I think that you don't have scouts for this team. I live in Karditsa, I can watch the team live and I have a good knowledge of the game and the database as I am a gamer for several years." (Giorgos, forum)

Giorgos's quote illustrates how 'research' status is recognised and sought within the community. Becoming a 'scout' gives a certain form of subcultural recognition and a different status to members (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2000). Online participation requires a type of voluntary work from members as part of their efforts to pursue the common purpose of getting satisfaction from their FM experiences. Undertaking voluntary work

adds another more affective and moral dimension to the value co-creation process (Cova et al., 2015) within the FM community for those who participate which is situated in-between reality and fantasy.

6. Discussion

This paper puts forth a new form of value co-creation *in* transitional space within the context of online brand communities. Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory (Winnicott, 1953; 1971) was of particular significance to help us theorize the nature of value co-creation within the intermediate space of experience wherein there exists a blurring of boundaries between physical and digital, offline and online modes of consumer behavior. The findings reveal the existence of a new form of value co-creation which occurs via the employment of real and fantasy-oriented resources within this digital gaming context and in the broader realm of technocultural consumption behaviour (Kozinets, 2019a). The analysis highlights that transitional space gives rise to consumption activities which further evoke consumer imagination and are grounded in-between offline and online modes of consumption, reality and fantasy, escape and everyday life. Novel forms of value co-creation processes emerge which sit in-between the shared reality of the FM community and the individual fantasy of members' gaming experiences, are facilitated through various transitional objects and lead to a series of voluntary work activities which enhance brand value co-creation.

7.1 Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the value co-creation literature in three important ways. First of all, the analysis highlights the role of transitional space (Winnicott, 1971) in fostering the process of value co-creation (Cova & Dalli, 2009; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2000; Schau et al., 2009). The findings uncover new types of value co-creation which

emerge in the FM digital gaming context which take place in-between shared reality and individual fantasy and are supported by transitional objects. Such a psychoanalytic approach enabled to explore value co-creation at the micro-level of individual actions within the FM game and online community without eluding the broader collective context within which such actions are positioned (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). The analysis further highlights specific affective and moral dimensions of voluntary work (Black & Veloutsou, 2017; Cova & Dalli 2009; Zwick et al., 2008) which, in this context, are associated with value co-creation activities sitting in-between reality and fantasy (Rose & Wood, 2005). Voluntary work seems to occur via the premise of ameliorating members' in-gaming experiences when a more realistic simulation of the real football world is achieved in the next editions of the FM game.

The significance of real and fantasy-oriented resources to the value co-creation process is also stressed. In the context of the FM community, there seems to be a recurrent relationship between 'real' and 'fantasy-oriented' activities wherein ongoing 'fantasy-oriented' ones (e.g. in-gaming experiences) create new needs for 'real' ones (e.g. storytelling). The study highlights the role of individual fantasy as a special form of virtuality for online consumer engagement and immersion with consumption activities within the confines of online brand communities (Brodie et al., 2013). This is largely achieved through a series of story-telling activities (Muniz & O' Guinn, 2000; Schembri & Latimer, 2016) which might enable individuals to bridge reality with fantasy and legitimize their consumption experiences within a specific online brand community setting (Leigh et al., 2006).

Third, this paper develops our theoretical understanding of the specific roles of different transitional objects and the interplay between them as a micro-foundation for value co-creation (Storbacka et al., 2016). It suggests that the co-creation process is

supported by a series of transitional objects which seem to work in tandem (Morgan-Thomas et al., 2020). While the brand and the associated community have been previously theorized as significant engagement objects (Dessart, 2015), the equally important role of specific product experiences (e.g. FM game) and the wider socio-cultural milieu (e.g. the football game and industry) in the value co-creation process are highlighted. This conceptualization of collective value co-creation as occurring *in* transitional space and being ultimately grounded within consumers' everyday lives moves away from prior theorizations of liminal processes and experiences previously noted in the marketing literature which foreground a break from the mundane (Belk & Costa, 1998; Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010; Rose & Wood, 2005). Members' hunger for the everyday simulation of realistic in-game fantasies drives brand value co-creation and sustains voluntary, unpaid work activities within the FM community. The intertextuality between reality and fantasy seems to be one of the most important drivers in the creation of transitional consumption experiences (Skandalis et al., 2016) which are positioned within the confines of everyday life.

Finally, this study highlights the significance of psychoanalytic approaches for the study of consumption behavior in the digital era (Belk, 2015; Lambert, 2019; Woodward, 2011). Today, we seem to function and live out a large portion of our lives into a transitional space which, in Winnicottian terms, implies a status of in-betweenness and within which various forms of contemporary brand experiences are grounded (Skandalis et al., 2016). As Belk (2015: 21) notes, 'there is a new opportunity and challenge for psychoanalytic theorizing and consumer research applications [which] arises from the digital age in which we are living'. Conceptualizing value co-creation *in* transitional space represents a conceptual attempt to account for the development of a 'cultural psychoanalytic' approach (Lambert, 2019: 330) which bears

the potential to shed light into the various modes of consciousness within which consumer fantasy and imagination emerges (Molesworth & Denegri-Knott, 2007).

7.2 Practical implications

With the increasing digitalization of consumption and the blurring of boundaries between its offline and online, physical and virtual manifestations (Belk, 2013), it becomes increasingly important to describe and understand such meshed theorizations of consumer behavior and their antecedents for value co-creation. This study suggests that contemporary experiential brand offerings should be increasingly positioned within a wider socio-cultural context and particular attention should be paid into the role of and interplay between reality and fantasy in generating and sustaining value co-creation processes within everyday life and beyond the confines of liminal experiences (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010). The analysis highlights the significance of mundane consumption experiences which do not take place in liminal spaces offering escape from everyday life but rather are situated within transitional space and the confines of everyday life (Molesworth, 2009; Skandalis *et* al., 2016). Brand managers should pay more attention to the variety of ways in which value co-creation processes enable consumers to escape everyday consciousness and enter into an imaginary state of maximally intense consumption experiences.

Outside digital gaming, it is argued that new forms of value co-creation *in* transitional space can also be found in other contexts and industries within today's increasingly digitalized consumer culture. For instance, Jones et al. (2020) illustrate how binge-watching entails a constant transition between the reality of consumers' everyday social lives and the fantasy of film narratives. Binge-watching offers consumers the chance not only to 'bring personal and social concerns with them on

their journeys' but also to 'often return to reality with learned insights and speculations to better accommodate their own lives' (Jones et al., 2018: 503).

7.3 Further research & conclusion

This study provides a useful lens by which to orchestrate and ground our interpretations of value co-creation which might be often positioned in the Winnicottian intermediate space of experience. This study highlights the rise of new forms of value co-creation which are grounded within a post-postmodern experiential framework (Canavan & McCamley, 2020; Skandalis et al., 2016) and are marked by a constant transition between offline and online modes of consumption; reality and fantasy; escape and everyday life. The further investigation of research contexts such as digital gaming might help to generate 'particularly rich yet currently underexplored insights into facets of contemporary consumer culture, and in particular the new online communities, brand publics and transitional spaces where these may be particularly manifested' (Canavan & McCamley, 2020: 229).

As we are constantly confronted with a myriad of technological advancements (Belk, 2013; Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010; Kozinets, 2019a), future studies are invited to adopt a psychoanalytic approach in order to explore further transitional space and its antecedents for value co-creation especially since this study is limited to a specific digital gaming milieu which exemplifies a significant interplay between reality and fantasy. Future research efforts should consider the investigation of alternative research contexts, such as binge watching or social media communities, which might also foreground the real and fantasy-oriented dimensions of consumer behavior in everyday life.

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