Chapter 7

Building the Force: Enacting Fan Brand Community Through the Star Wars BB-8 Droid Builders Club

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the Star Wars fan community who creates screen accurate BB-8 replicas is explored in depth. Builders undertake the creation of characters through emergent technology such as 3-D printing. The members work together to create these replica characters and immerse completely in the process of the character’s formation. We studied online fan community forums and social media groups where participants engage with and support one another as they build full-sized Star Wars characters. Second, this chapter applies the BB-8 builder community to an established framework for brand community, which is extended to include the passionate and committed communities formed by fans around entertainment franchises. Brand (or franchise) characteristics are related to community characteristics, which are then in turn related to fan brand community. Finally, conclusions for the academy and practitioners are discussed based on the examination of this community in relation to the theoretical framework.

INTRODUCTION

The creation of a customer-led brand community has been called the “holy grail” of marketing as consumers immerse themselves in the brand and form a self-regulating community to support their chosen brand (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). By definition, a brand community exists when consumers join together and share consumption experiences online and in person outside of the purview of the parent company (Cova, 1997; Dholakia & Herrmann, 2005). Harley Davidson is often held as the
classic example of a brand with a powerful brand fan community, as is the Jeep brand, yet this phenom-
enon exists across many product categories. Fans of The X-Files, a television show that ran from 1993
to 2002 and again in 2016, was another popular brand with a strong brand community (Kozinets, 1997).
Members of the fan community engaged heavily with the brand, including creating a name for themselves
(X-Philes), suggesting the creation of RPG (role-playing games), and finding ways to incorporate the
themes and mythologies from the show into their own lives (Kozinets, 1997). Shortly after the release
of the New Volkswagen Beetle in 1998, fans and critics alike turned to the Internet to discuss the merits
and shortfalls of the new car (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003). Similar activities were also seen fol-
lowing the release of Star Wars: The Phantom Menace (Brown et al., 2003) where fans gathered online
and analyzed the new movie in great detail, often comparing the newer film to the originals in the series
in an attempt to “decode George Lucas’s cosmology” (Brown et al., 2003).

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter consists of two principal areas of focus. First, the Star Wars fan community focused on
creating screen accurate BB-8 replicas is explored in depth. This discussion includes insights from the
online fan community forums and social media groups where participants engage with and support one
another as they build full-sized Star Wars character. Builders undertake the creation of the character
through emergent technology such as 3-D printing. Members work together to create these character
replicas and immerse themselves completely in the process of the character’s formation. This participa-
tion involves the commitment for many to purchase 3-D printers and learn how to use them to design
and build the character for participation. This chapter also includes insights gathered from the annual
official fan convention, Star Wars Celebration, where members meet in the real world and honor the
franchise. The complexity of the tasks and the commitment required are described in detail. Second,
this chapter applies the BB-8 builder community to an established framework for brand community
(Humphrey Jr., Laverie, & Rinaldo, 2016), which is extended to include the passionate and committed
communities formed by fans around entertainment franchises. Brand (or franchise) characteristics are
related to community characteristics, which are, in turn, related to fan brand community. This type of
self-organized community are arguably the most vocal and motivated ambassadors for an entertainment
brand. Finally, conclusions for the academy and practitioners (namely franchise stewards) are provided
based on the examination of this community in relation to the theoretical framework. The overall objec-
tive of these three chapter components is to apply this existing framework to a nascent fan brand com-
munity and provide a vibrant, real-world example of how franchise creators and stewards can coexist
with fan communities that replicate screen accurate artifacts as part of a self-formed and self-regulated
online and offline community.

Issues, Controversies, Problems

This article is relevant to the following issues and controversies that entertainment brand franchise own-
ers may have with self-organized fan groups and fans replicating what is seen on screen (and owned as
intellectual property by the franchise owners):
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