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Close Knit: Using Consumption Communities to Overcome Loneliness

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Dr Brendan Richardson passed away, aged 50, in June 2018 after a brief but brave battle with cancer. He is sadly missed by his wife Catherine and beloved children, Síofra, Derbhla, Colum and Eoghan. His passing is also regretted by his friends, colleagues and students at University College Cork, especially his former PhD students including his co-author. He was an inspiring teacher, a generous and collegial researcher committed to sustainability and the betterment of the world, and a great friend. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

1. Abstract

1.1. Purpose

This paper highlights the role of consumption communities as a self-help support group to ameliorate loneliness. We suggest that the self-help element of consumption communities has been overlooked due to a focus on communities pursuing hegemonic masculinity. Instead, we focus on a female-led and -dominated consumption community.

1.2 Design/methodology/approach

A longitudinal ethnography was undertaken with the aim of understanding consumer behaviour in a 'hyper-feminine' environment. Participant observation, depth interviews and netnography were carried out over five years within the Knitting community, focusing on an Irish Stitch 'n' Bitch group.

1.3 Findings

A dimension of consumption communities has been overlooked in the extant literature; this female-led and -dominated community functions as a self-help support group used as a 'treatment' for loneliness. It also demonstrates all the characteristics of a support group.

1.4 Practical implications

This study offers a framework with which new studies of community consumption can be examined, or existing studies can be re-examined, through lenses of loneliness and self-help support groups.

Marketers have an opportunity to build supportive consumption communities that provide a safe space for support where commerce and brand-building can also occur. Groups aimed at ameliorating loneliness may wish to consider integration of the consumption community model.

1.5 Originality/value

Calls have been made for a reconceptualisation of consumption communities as current typologies seem inadequate. This paper responds with a critical examination through the lens of the self-help support group, while also taking steps toward resolving the gender imbalance in the consumption community literature. The paper explores loneliness, a previously underexamined motivator for consumption community membership.

1.6 Keywords

Consumer Identity, Consumption Communities, Self-Help, Social Support, Loneliness

2. Introduction

Loneliness is a pervasive problem in post-industrial nations. The past few years have seen a plethora of global studies which stress the growing issue of unhappiness, and in particular, loneliness in society. Examples can be seen in the US (Polack, 2018), Canada (Angus Reid Institute, 2019), Japan (DiJulio et al., 2018) and the UK (Hammond, 2018). All of these large-scale polls display similar findings – we have never been more lonely, younger demographics are lonelier (Howe, 2019) and young women are lonelier still (Office for National Statistics,

2018), although gender differences in loneliness levels have been argued in the past (Borys and Perlman, 1985). Overall, it is suggested that one in twelve people is severely impacted by loneliness (Cacioppo and Cacioppo, 2018). In addition, loneliness has a cost; "*The lonely are not just sadder; they are unhealthier and die younger*" (The Economist, 2018). All of this has led former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy to suggest that loneliness is an epidemic of the current era (McGregor, 2017; Murthy, 2017).

The drive to belong and to form relationships is fundamental and pervasive in humans (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Maslow, 2013). This need for "*lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships*" (Baumeister and Leary, 1995, p.497) is innate in humankind and is frequently expressed as Community. As traditional geographically-bound communities are in decline leading to increased social isolation (Bauman, 2013; Field, 2016; Putnam, 1995, 2001), people now choose the communities they want to be aligned to, rather than being defined and segmented more traditionally by demographic, race, class or religion (Cohen, 2013). Despite the decline of the traditional community, we still seek what Cova and Cova (2002) describe as "*quasi-archaic values: a local sense of identification, religiosity, syncretism, group narcissism and so on*" (Cova and Cova, 2002, p.4). This lack, this loneliness, has led to people searching for alternative means of achieving socialisation processes and of forming bonds. Evidence suggests that some consumption communities (Cova and Pace, 2006), also termed marketplace cultures (O Sullivan and Shankar, 2019), may serve to ameliorate loneliness (Agrawal and Ramachandran, 2017), but there is limited literature exploring how this might occur is limited.

Several theories of contemporary consumption communities have been suggested, most notably, Tribes, Subcultures of Consumption, and Brand Communities. These terms, along with Marketplace Culture and Consumption Communities as over-arching terms, have become confused and muddled in the literature as they are used interchangeably and in situations dissimilar to the original definitions. Even following the admirable attempts by Thomas et al. (2013) and Goulding et al. (2013) to clarify the variety of and distinctions between various types of community described in the literature, calls have been made for a full critical re-examination of the concept and for the establishment of a new foundational theoretical lens (O'Sullivan and Shankar, 2019).

One possible reason why some marketplace cultures and consumption communities fail to be well encapsulated by the existing typology is that the most esteemed papers in this area have overwhelmingly focused on male consumers and further, most work on gender and consumer behaviour focuses on "masculinities rather than femininities" (Maclaran, 2015, p.1734). The Harley Davidson Owner's Group (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), the Mountain Men (Belk and Costa, 1998), skydivers (Celsi et al., 1993) white water rafters (Arnould and Price, 1993) and Tough Mudders (Scott, Cayla and Cova, 2017), for example, all represent hyper-masculine pursuits, tapping into ideals of hegemonic masculinity and symbolically constructing consumer identities which are rugged, powerful and slightly dangerous. Even seminal work on female identity in consumption communities has focused on women's roles within these "hyper-masculine environments", 'rife with machismo'

(Martin et al., 2006, p. 189) or on pursuits like roller-derby which have been variously theorised as parodying or aping hegemonic masculinity (Thompson and Üstüner, 2015 and Carlson, 2010 respectively). Hence while the literature on masculinities comprehensively documents the nature of male identity and its relationship to consumption, the absence of studies in female-led and – dominated consumption communities has led to agreement that femininity is still decidedly under-theorised (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Martin, 1998; Pyke and Johnson, 2003; Schippers, 2007). This absence persists despite the growing recognition of the importance of gender and feminism in the academic discourse in marketing and consumer behaviour (Bettany et al., 2010) as we enter feminism's fourth wave (Maclaren, 2015).

One might question whether the findings from these 'hyper-masculine' contexts should be applied to female consumers and those engaged in typically feminine pursuits. Rather than consider women in 'a man's world' as in Martin et al. (2006), or those engaged in 'gender tourism' (Thompson and Holt, 2004), female and feminine consumption should be considered in a 'feminised sphere' (Jantzen et al., 2006).

Those studies which have touched on female-led and -dominated cultures offer a tantalising glimpse of how these groups might differ from the hyper-masculine. Shankar's (2006) chapter on book groups, for example, mentions not only shared sentiments and a collective bond, but also the common witticism 'a drinking group with a book problem', suggesting the consumption holds less meaning than the community. Schau and Thompson (2010) identify a need to actively negotiate liminality as a key meaning behind the Twilight brand community which is also exceptionally female. This points to the idea that these groups may function as something more than the playful (O Sullivan and Shankar, 2019), transitory (Goulding et al., 2013) meaning previously ascribed to consumption communities.

We suggest that the issues in conceptualisation of consumption communities may arise from a dual oversight, a lack of study in female and feminine spaces and a lack of attention to the fundamental human condition of loneliness. Further, loneliness itself appears to be gendered as young women report the highest degree of loneliness. Thus, our research examines the extent to which young female consumers utilise consumption activities, experiences and practices to combat loneliness. Can consumption communities potentially provide the antidote to loneliness, and if so, by what mechanisms?

The article is structured as follows. First, we review prior literature on loneliness, self-help and social support. We then present a discussion of the context of our study, a female-led and –dominated knitting community, and describe our methodology. Our findings are then presented. We detail the 'common predicament' (Jacobs and Goodman, 1989) of loneliness which led the members of an Irish Stitch 'n' Bitch to seek out companionship. We then detail how the consumption community functions as a self-help support group, in the style of Alcoholics Anonymous or Weight Watchers (Moisio and Beruchasvili 2010), to ameliorate loneliness by using the consumption group as a means of accessing social support. We illustrate how consumption practices facilitate this support. We conclude with a theoretical discussion and implications.

3. Literature Review

3.1 What is loneliness?

Positive psychologists give subjective wellbeing, life satisfaction (Van Deurzan, 2008) or even the more ephemeral "*authentic happiness*" (Seligman 2004, p. 14) as their objective. Pascal Bruckner argues we now perceive feeling happy as a duty, a duty which, in his view, breeds much discontent (Edmonds and Warburton, 2011). His belief is that happiness is by its very nature fleeting, 'a moment of grace'. Bruckner goes so far as to suggest that success '*leads to boredom and apathy the moment it is realised*' (Bruckner, 2011, p.4) and, thus, achieving happiness will, in fact, lead to unhappiness. This duty to be perpetually euphoric places a '*burden*' (Bruckner, 2011, p.2) on us, and this pressure to be happy prompts us to seek a '*therapeutic ideal*' (Bruckner, 2011, p.54) which has become an obsession with perfection (Bruckner, 2011; Edmonds and Warburton, 2011).

Both Bruckner and Madsen (2015) suggest that postmodern, fragmented society, with its lack of traditional support structures like kith and kin and religious community, leads to loneliness and unhappiness. Golpaldas (2016) suggests that traditional support structures of family and community are disintegrating into dispersed social networks with fewer strong ties despite an increasing number of weak ties. Thus, despite our increased connectivity, we feel less connected. Without the *"intensive ties which have genuine meaning"* (Moustakas, 1961), the fleeting online connections with the idealised, Instagram-ready lives of others only exacerbate prolonged, existential loneliness.

Loneliness derives not merely from a lack of companionship but from a perceived deficiency in the quantity or quality of relationships or interpersonal reality (Heinrich and Gullone, 2006). It is one's perception of, or judgement of, our interpersonal relationships as lacking which give rise to loneliness. Weiss, who produced a multi-dimensional typology of loneliness (DiTommaso and Spinner, 1997; Russell et al., 1984), similarly believed "*people experience loneliness because of perceived deficits in relational provisions which refer to companionship and emotional support provisions*" (Rosenbaum, 2006, p.65).

Weiss (1973) differentiates between the social loneliness of lacking those weak ties and the 'emotional loneliness' of lacking intimate relationships. Moustakas (1961) focuses on 'existential loneliness'. Other authors differentiate between acute loneliness and prolonged loneliness (Peplau 1985). All these distinctions amount to a consensus that we are, to use Putnam's (1995; 2001) well-known phrase, bowling alone.

3.2 Community as an antidote

As Peplau (1985, p.269) says, "*social relationships are essential to personal health and happiness..."friends are good medicine*"". Community, therefore, offers an antidote to loneliness.

Bell and Newby, as cited by Urry (1995), give three different senses of the concept of community. The first is geographic in nature, referring to the boundaries of a physical settlement, the second implies a social system, again local in nature but defined by personal connections and links between members, and the third is "*communion, a particular kind of human association implying personal ties, a sense of belonging and warmth*" (Urry, 1995, p.10). Turner (1969) and Cohen (2013) moved the conception of community beyond locality and toward meaning and identity instead. Community is symptomatic of a search for belongingness, useful to engage in identity projects, and "*an expression of communitas*" (Delanty, 2003, p. 32). Community is both cultural (the idea) and social (the practices), a symbolically constructed reality (Delanty, 2003).

Without traditional community supports, particularly in trying times, one mechanism people may turn to is the support group. Disability support groups (Finn, 1999), Weight Watchers (Moisio and Beruchashvili, 2010) and Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, can provide belongingness and serve as that 'good medicine'. These types of support groups have been widely studied as they have been found to be beneficial and empowering for participants (Høybye, Johansen and Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2005).

Support groups previously examined in the consumption literature tend to have an explicit anti-consumption orientation (as in Moisio and Beruschashvili, 2010), but literature has also shown that consumption can be used in a more positive way, in an effort to resolve feelings of lack of self-esteem and self-actualisation (Grunert, 1994; Moisio, 2007; Woodruffe, 1997; Woodruffe-Burton and Elliot, 2005), rather than merely being problematic or pathological. Thus, we consider the support group's fundamental characteristics abstracted from the lens of pathology.

3.3 Community as a source of social support

Finn (1999), in exploring a self-help support group, identifies the existence of two types of helping in a support group – '*socioemotional helping*' (Finn, 1999, p.223) and '*task helping*' (Finn, 1999, p.224). In the case of Finn's field site, online disability support groups, task helping referred to information provision around medical issues, rights, and assistance provision. Task helping can be used to describe the 'community of practice' style

information and skill transfer (Wenger, 2011), but the socioemotional helping is identified as the primary motivation for attending (Finn, 1999).

Socioemotional helping is more commonly termed social support. The benefits of social support are widely acknowledged in the literature (Nabi, Prestin and So, 2013; Taylor, 2011; Thoits, 1995). Social support offers many benefits; it *"reduces, or buffers, the adverse psychological impacts of exposure to stressful life events and ongoing life strains*" (Thoits, 1986, p.416), can be beneficial to physical and mental health during periods of lower stress, and even contributes to longevity (Taylor, 2011). Research also suggests that women provide more social support, draw more on socially supportive connections and networks during periods of high stress, and may indeed derive greater benefit from social support (Taylor, 2011; Taylor et al., 2000; Thoits, 1995). Thus, social support may be of more importance in a female-led and - dominated consumption community than in those which celebrate the hegemonic masculine.

Hirsch (1980) and Pearson (1982) present similar schema to identify the mechanisms by which social support is provided within a group setting. Utilising these schemas of social support, in conjunction with Jacobs and Goodman (1989) and Shaffer and Galinsky (1989)'s descriptors of a support group, a more complete model for the workings of a support group is proposed. Moisio and Beruchashvili (2010) also emphasise the importance of story-telling, celebration and encouragement in the Weight Watchers self-help support group process, an element which is under-represented in previous support group literature. From combining these studies, a diagram is provided to illustrate the mechanisms of social support, and thus loneliness amelioration, expected in a self-help support group type of community.

Fig 1: Characteristics Expected in a Self-help Support Group Type of Community.

Dholakia et al. (2004) discuss the benefits of consumer participation in a consumption community, although they use as an example customers of Amazon.com where one might question the interconnectedness. Even so, they show some evidence of participants overcoming loneliness through receiving social support.

We therefore apply the lens of the self-help support group to the female-led and –dominated Knitting community to examine its effectiveness in ameliorating loneliness.

4. Methodology:

4.1 Research context: Knitting and Stitch 'n' Bitch

To fill the gap in the literature around a female-led and female-dominated consumption community, and to investigate if findings from the hyper-masculine environments might be generalisable to a "feminine" context, a consumption community which is overwhelmingly female and associated with femininity was identified. The context chosen was the knitting community.

Craft presents an ideal location to study a female-dominated consumption culture. Pristash (2014, p.3) states, "*It may only be a slight overstatement to say that the history of craft is a history of femininity."* These crafts have moved in and out of fashion over time as the stereotypically 'feminine arts' have waxed and waned in acceptability (Parker, 2010; Stalp, 2015; Stalp and Conti, 2011; Turney, 2009). Needlework, in particular, became an essential part of gender performativity as well as a 'suitable' and viable means of financial support for women (Parker, 1984; 2010). The membership of Ravelry.com, the lynchpin of the global Knitting community, is estimated to be around 99.9% female and 0.1% male (Cherry, 2016). These traditionally feminine activities could be seen as performative of emphasised femininity (Schippers, 2007).

The acceptability of these feminine arts has changed with social movement. Quilting for example, which has occupied a particularly central role in the American female experience, moved from being considered the '*epitome of female patience, perseverance, good nature, and industry*' (Showalter, 1986, p.232) to being considered '*obsolete, blinded, claustrophobically and perhaps dangerously isolated from the mainstream'* (ibid, p.239). This rejection of 'women's culture' arose from a rejection of subjugation and enforced domesticity by the second-wave feminists. Embracing a traditional feminine craft, thereby rejecting the idea that "*women should view the masculine as normative, that is, as the goal to be achieved*" (Hughes, 2002, p.34), is subsequently seen as a way to openly state that one values "women's work".

Groenfeld (2010, p.259) explains that this new embrace of "women's work" was particularly due to third-wave feminist periodicals of the 90s and 00s promoting *"reclaiming and repoliticising activities traditionally associated with the domestic sphere, particularly knitting"*. Debbie Stoller, a prominent third wave feminist, PhD in Women's Studies and editor of BUST magazine, played a leading role and went on to publish the "Stitch 'n' Bitch" books, "Stitch 'n' Bitch Handbook" (2003), "Stitch 'n' Bitch Nation" (2005), "Stitch 'n' Bitch Crochet: The Happy Hooker" (2006), "Son of a Stitch 'n' Bitch" (2007) and "Stitch 'n' Bitch Superstar" (2010), and popularised the idea of a Stitch 'n' Bitch group, collectively understood to be predominantly female, 'third place' (not home or work), social spaces (Minahan and Cox, 2006).

Knitting was thus repositioned as both "*cool, as well as quiet, comforting and communal*" (Parkins, 2004, p.429) and, in addition, as a feminist, subversive pursuit. Indeed, the years just before the start of this study saw an "*explosion in the popularity of knitting*" (Wills, 2007, p.4) resulting in a 51% increase in the U.S. in women who know how to knit (Minahan and Cox, 2006). The upward trend was not exclusive to knitting. Bratisch and Brush (2011) use the term '*fabriculture*' to describe the resurgence among younger women not just in knitting, but in crochet, sewing, dressmaking, embroidery, quilting, and scrapbooking. These 'low culture' genres which had been trivialised and denigrated (Stevens et al., 2007) were thus reclaimed.

The stereotypical image of a crafting circle is of a warm, nurturing environment for women who support each other through thick and thin. This expectation of a "caring community" is reflected in the literature (Green 1998; Minahan and Cox 2006; Piercy and Cheek 2004; Prigoda and McKenzie 2007; Schofield-Tomschin and Littrell 2001) but little attention has been paid to motivations for membership of these groups. MacDonald (2010) found that many older knitters stressed the utility of knitting, the '*satisfaction of accomplishment'* (vii), reflecting Stevens et al.'s (2007) findings among female magazine readers, some of whom felt the need to jusitify their 'me time' as useful or educational. On the other hand, Turney (2018) discusses the rise of 'ditzy ephemera''s popularity with this new wave of crafters. She compares the phenomenon of magazines dedicated to this kawaii esthetic to Victorian busy-work. When the output is something "ditsy, cute, useless" (Turney, 2018, p.32), it may be harder to identify the value to the women behind this expression of women's culture.

This surge in the popularity of fabriculture may have been a fad for some but for others knitting has become central to their sense of self. While Kozinets (2001, p.68) entreats us to "avoid granting subcultural status to what are essentially American leisure activities", it is clear that for many knitters the hobby has become an integral part of their identities. The Knitting consumption community is thus ideal as a site within which to study consumption within a female-led and -dominated community.

Cova et al. (2007) discuss how a global consumption community is constituted of multiple "local sub-tribes". For this study, a local Irish sub-group is chosen as a representative sample of a wider global consumption community. The Local Stitch 'n' Bitch group is a sub-group both of the global Stitch 'n' Bitch movement and of the modern knitting consumption community. It is expected that the local sub-group will share some common meanings with the global consumption community but will also develop its own meanings and, consequently, have a specific local subculture (Cova et al., 2007). To determine which aspects of the consumption community were local and which were global Ravelry.com was studied for purposes of triangulation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Mathison, 1988). Ravelry.com fulfils multiple roles for the Knitting community offering space for both a community of practice element, including a pattern database and immediate access to knitting advice, and a social networking environment, with forum spaces for discussions on

both knitting and non-knitting topics. It also serves as an e-commerce and promotional platform for those involved in fabriculture as a business.

4.2 Data collection

In Cova and Cova (2002), the authors suggest that researching tribes should involve:

- Desk research including monitoring the media and netnography
- Semi-structured or unstructured interviews with group members singly or together
- Participant and/or non-participant observation at group events

In the case of this study, all three of these suggestions were followed. In an effort to identify Knitters, a Local Stitch 'n' Bitch in Ireland was studied. This group was founded in January 2007. Initially, members connected through Yahoo groups, then text messages and later, through Facebook.

This group overlapped and interacted with multiple other knitting and fabriculture groups in the city (including Sunday Knitting Group mentioned in this paper) and these were also explored to give a full and rounded picture of the culture. The group comprised 22 key informants, all female, whose involvement with the group coincided with the period of study (membership of the group was not static), anonymised with pseudonyms. Participant observation was undertaken at weekly Stitch 'n' Bitch meetings beginning in 2010 and concluding in 2016. Around 12 members might attend in a given week. The first author also attended events in the Knitting community, both national and international, and worked as the Marketing Manager for an independent yarn company (anonymised as Dyad Fibres).

Semi-structured in-depth interviews of over one hour duration were conducted with nine local Knitters, spinners and crocheters who identified with the Stitch 'n' Bitch movement. The interviewees showed projects that held particular meaning or importance for them, and in the case of at-home interviews, showed the first author their 'stash' (yarn) and supplies.

Ravelry.com is a knitting database and social networking site with over seven million members and since its establishment in 2007, has become and continues to be the central online organisational, social, and often, ecommerce hub for Knitters. Those seven million members contribute millions of forum posts, avatars and photographs of knitted items from tens of thousands of patterns. The sheer volume of netnographic data on the site had the potential to overwhelm. For this reason, Ravelry was used for triangulation purposes only. Once initial themes in the data were identified, appropriate search terms were selected and applied to the Ravelry forums to identify relevant posts. While this is slightly different to Kozinets' guidelines for netnography (Kozinets, 2010; 2014), the methodology is designed to be "*flexible and adaptable*" (Kozinets, 2010, p.5) and a "*blended ethnography/netnography could take many forms*" (Kozinets, 2010, p.65).

Method	Location	Details	Dates
Participant observation	Local Stitch 'n' Bitch	Ranged from full ethnographic notes/ partial notes of interesting data / no notes, full immersion – techniques chosen in advance.	2010 - 2016
Participant observation	Knit Camp U.K.	Notes taken (not full), Reviewed others' blog accounts.	09-15/08/10
Participant observation	This Is Knit Yarn Tasting	Notes made after event.	08/09/11 14/09/12
Depth Interviewing	Stitch 'n' Bitch Members	Semi Structured following McCracken's Long Interview techniques	Rachel – Pilot Interview (19/09/11) Aryanna (16/05/13) Beth (31/05/13) Jennifer (04/06/13) Danielle (11/06/13) Sarah (13/06/13) Siobhan (11/07/13) Cosima (11/12/13) Charlotte (18/07/14)
Member checks	Stitch 'n' Bitch members	Online discussions of themes arising, via group chats and private messaging	Example: Discussion re: ACR Gender paper (9/2/12)
Netnography	Ravelry.com	Searching for emergent themes in forums for triangulation.	Ongoing for the duration of the study
Close reading of media	Online and Offline	Examination of popular media's perception of the community	Ongoing for the duration of the study

Table 1: Outline of the Methods used in Data Collection

4.3 Data Analysis

The data collection and analysis were guided by an emergent design approach (Belk et al., 1989), iterating between the data and the literature. Initial literature reviews focused on

consumption community, but also craft, femininity, feminism and craftivism based on previous literature (Minahan and Cox, 2006). However, initial findings indicated that many within the community rejected these meanings. The authors found no compelling evidence of feminist activism or craftivism. As themes emerged, further iterative literature reviews were carried out around therapy, social support and self-help. The authors moved back and forth between the field and the literature as laid out in Spiggle (1994) as well as Glaser and Strauss (2009), Strauss and Corbin (1994) and Miles and Hubermann (1984).

5. Findings

The Local Stitch 'n' Bitch group displays many of the characteristics of a self-help support group as discussed by Jacobs and Goodman (1989), Levine and Sandeen (2013) and Moisio and Beruchashvili (2010). Both task helping and socioemotional helping (Finn 1999) are observed in Local Stitch 'n' Bitch. The group members provide and receive support using mechanisms described in Barrera (1986), Hirsch (1980) and Pearson (1982).

The key finding of the study is that members of the Knitting community are forming a consumption-based support/self-help group to ameliorate loneliness.

5.1 Loneliness as a motivator

The data from Local Stitch 'n' Bitch reveals that loneliness and social isolation emerge as the major reason for membership of the group.

Danielle explains *"I was missing my peer group and wanted to find people that I had something in common with"* and Rachel tells us she *"wanted to find people to connect with".*

Jennifer says

> *"I hoped that I would get some friends and some contacts. People that I could, you know, start friendship with and kind of so I wouldn't be so lonely."*

The group serves as a surrogate support system for the members, many of whom are isolated by circumstance – as young mothers and/or immigrants. Several members had come to Ireland on spouse visas and were unable to work outside the home.

Kira suggests that as 'outsiders',

> *"Ex-pats, by definition, know what it's like to be lonely."*

Other members found themselves socially isolated through changes in their lives prior to joining the group. Prior to the study Ireland's economy had been seriously damaged by the Great

Recession and many young people had emigrated. Others found themselves unemployed or underemployed and with time to fill.

> *"…basically just before I joined Stitch 'n' Bitch most of my friends had left….and I had also just broken up with someone, so I had a lot more free time and then I joined the group."* (Siobhan)

Pearson (1982; 1983) suggests that self-help groups may be needed more by populations undergoing developmental changes such as leaving college, relocating, emigrating and motherhood. The members of Stitch 'n' Bitch are using the group as an aid to overcoming 'life-disrupting problems' (Moisio and Beruchashvili, 2010). In the therapeutic support group literature this is termed the 'common predicament', problem or concern (Jacobs and Goodman, 1989).

In Stitch 'n' Bitch, we see the consumption community function as a surrogate support system, often where kith and kin are absent. Pearson (1983) and Heller and Swindle (1983) discuss the need for a "surrogate support system" where the "kith and kin" are absent or harmful. Many of these women were 'starting over' in some way (Price et.al, 2017).

The physical practice of knitting is widely agreed to have benefits (Riley et al., 2013), and Minahan and Cox (2006) identify "knitting together" as a social capital building exercise in contrast to Putnam's "bowling alone" (Putnam, 2001). However, the group experiences an amelioration of loneliness from the consumption community and consumption practices beyond what could be explained by the relaxing nature of knitting. Sarah specifically describes the group, rather than knitting itself, as her "*therapy*" saying that the group is important "*for [her] mental health"*. Danielle describes Local Stitch 'n' Bitch as "*very therapeutic*". This shared belief in the power of the group is ubiquitous in Local Stitch 'n' Bitch, and creates a strong group bond and sense of shared identity with an 'ingroup' and 'outgroup' mentality (Avery, 2012).

So, while there is no shared pathology underlying the group as in AA or Weight Watchers, the shared problem (loneliness and isolation), and the socioemotional helping provided by the group, result in a shared belief that the group is therapeutic and has great value in the members' lives as a surrogate support system. The lack of underlying pathology in the consumption community removes the potential stigma of a support group. However, the group shares many practices of the self-help support group which may explain how the consumption community serves to successfully ameliorate loneliness.

5.2 Emotional Support

The presence of emotional support (Hirsch, 1989) is strongly identifiable in the data. Danielle, for example, is very clear that she used the group as an emotional support, to help her cope with the loneliness and isolation of being a young mother in a foreign country:

> *"Just loneliness, em yeah 'cos that was what I got out of it, what I needed to get out of it when I first started going,* [Danielle starts to cry] *wow well, emotional response, because I suppose that was a particularly difficult period ...*
>
> *So yeah, that social contact for feeling less alone was something that I definitely benefited from, from the group and yeah, I don't know if I particularly contributed anything to it, but I felt .. talking to people and that's what I got from it and that's what I got from it and that's what it gave as well. Good feelings yes I attribute to that"* (Danielle).

For Danielle, having immigrated to Ireland and fallen pregnant at 19, the group represents access to a peer group and a support structure that she is missing. She begins to cry when discussing this difficult time in her life and her use of Stitch 'n' Bitch as a resource to navigate it. She goes on to say that though she is currently not attending the group due to family commitments, knowing that Stitch 'n' Bitch is ongoing gives her peace of mind, if she "*needs it*", it is there.

As discussed previously, many of the group members are without 'kith and kin' and they turn to Stitch 'n' Bitch and the relationships they build there as an emotional support system.

Amelia, a new arrival in the city, had little interest in knitting but met members of the group through an American ex-pat group and tagged along to Local Stitch 'n' Bitch. By purchasing some pink chunky yarn and a set of knitting needles, she gained access to a peer group and an emotionally supportive community. She attended every week that she lived in the city, often carrying her unchanging 'knitting project' of a few rows of plain stitch. Despite her minimal engagement with the hobby, the emotional support the community provided was accessed through a small purchase.

The acknowledgement that loneliness was a clear motivation for the participants was an unexpected finding from the study. The depth of emotional connection between the members was in stark contrast to characterisations of consumption communities or marketplace cultures as playful, transient or without obligation (Goulding et al., 2011). The other mechanisms of social support provision identified in support group literature were also apparent in the group.

5.3 Further Characteristics of Social Support

5.3.1 Reciprocal Helping and Tangible Assistance

The support system is at its most tangible in the many practices of reciprocal helping (Shaffer and Galinsky, 1989) and assistance that exist in relation to all aspects of community consumption. While at the outset Local Stitch 'n' Bitch was not officially help-intended, reciprocal helping (Shaffer and Galinsky 1989) exists within the consumption community.

Danielle, who has a low-income family, receives lots of tangible assistance to enable her to pursue her craft; Danielle then uses the yarn to make practical items for her children. These gifts may come from within Stitch 'n' Bitch or from friends and family who understand her love of knitting:

> *"Most of the yarn I have I got as gifts or maybe people clearing out some stuff and they say do you want some and I say yes sure, great you know, I'll take some of that"* (Danielle).

Yarn is often gifted between members, if it is more suitable to another member's planned pattern or, often, if the colour is felt to be more suited to another member.

When Cosima wanted to learn to spin yarn, Katja, in addition to giving her the tangible assistance required to learn a new skill by providing her with the spindles and fibre necessary for the task, also provided cognitive guidance by teaching her how to use the spindle.

Outside the knitting sphere, members of the group continued to assist each other, with Leda providing vegan-cooking lessons to Sarah, for example. On one memorable occasion, the first author provided tangible assistance to a member of the group who was being assaulted by a drunk in the pub. This story has become part of the shared repertoire of the group through storytelling and, of course, has been enhanced over time, but several interviewees mentioned it as an example of the group being there for each other:

> "[Jennifer] *really appreciated you defending her honour at that time"* (Sarah).

This ethos of caring and tangible support extends outwards into charitable acts for the wider community. In the case of Local Stitch 'n' Bitch, this has involved knitting little hats for Innocent Smoothies Age Action Ireland campaign, knitting blankets for premature babies for the a nearby maternity hospital, and wraps for deceased babies for Féileacáin, the Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Association of Ireland. The Knitters provide tangible assistance to each other in multiple ways, engaging in gift giving, financially supporting member businesses (yarn and otherwise), and assisting with childcare and other everyday tasks.

The group members also try to support the wider Knitting community, particularly through Ravelry. Aryanna states that when she has good fortune, she 'returns the favour', supporting the community that has provided enjoyment and support to her:

> *"[I] was making good money and so I said I'm going to pay for a pattern and support the .. the community* [deliberate emphasis] *cos I'd been taking free patterns for years so I'll pay for this one"* (Aryanna).

The group not only provides tangible assistance to other members of the local group, but to other members of the wider Knitting world. They also work as a group to provide support and assistance more widely in the community. Much of this tangible assistance is rooted in the desire to be supportive of fellow members and to provide proof of emotional involvement.

5.3.2 Cognitive Guidance and Social Reinforcement

Cognitive guidance is defined by Hirsch (1980) as providing information, advice or explanation, while social reinforcement is offering praise or criticism for specific actions (Hirsch, 1980; Pearson, 1983). Both elements are apparent in the Local Stitch 'n' Bitch group. The group has a socially negotiated leadership structure based on social capital derived from skill and commitment to the group. While in many cases the group engages in joint cognitive guidance and social reinforcement, Sarah occupies a particular position of authority.

Sarah is termed '*the Mammy*' of the group due to the high level of cognitive guidance (Hirsch, 1980) she provides, particularly in terms of 'task helping' (Finn, 1999). This type of task helping is reflective of community of practice behaviour (Wenger, 2011), where knowledge is passed from 'senior' members of the group to newer or less skilled members. This guidance has also led to Sarah being teasingly, but affectionately, called '*Knitler*' by Marian, one of her close friends in the group.

Beth describes the process of learning to be a 'Knitter' from other members of the group:

> *"People would be more excited about choosing projects to talking about yarn and em, learning new skills really and I know Sarah and Kira were doing these little knit-alongs where they'd be figuring out how to make a sweater kind of without a pattern from scratch"* (Beth).

Sarah is regarded as a font of knowledge and 'converts' others from what she believes to be an inferior form of knitting (on straight needles) to using circular needles. Sarah is the first to change to circular needles, then interchangeable needles. Almost all members of the group now use interchangeable needles, most commonly KnitPicks/KnitPros. Sarah herself has since moved on to Hiya Hiyas, needles which she believes to be superior as they have a swivelling join between needle and cable. She describes converting the other members to her way of thinking through *"grim determination."* Sarah uses social reinforcement (Hirsch,

1980; Pearson, 1983) to spread her ideas through the group. The members copy Sarah to affirm their group identity.

When Jennifer was in the USA, she drove over 150 miles to find a complete set of Hiya Hiyas:

> *"I saw [Sarah] and her Hiya Hiyas and I don't know I just wanted them ... I drove all over Phoenix looking for these god damn needles, sorry, and about two hundred dollars later I had them ... I probably drove a hundred and fifty miles in my Mom's car by myself with the radio and I was delighted to do it"* (Jennifer).

This 'pilgrimage' (Belk et al., 1989) demonstrates Jennifer's commitment to the group as well as reinforcing Sarah's role as maven and trendsetter. Using the right tools affirms one's identity as part of the group and underpins the sense of the group as a well-structured community offering relief from loneliness.

The community, here, is treated as a therapeutic safe space as in a support group, in which to seek advice and 'praise or criticism for specific actions' (Hirsch, 1980), however the support is facilitated by consumption practices. The high level of emotional support provided and the ability to seek this guidance result in an environment of intimacy.

5.3.3 Intimacy

Intimacy (Pearson, 1982; 1983) is by its nature a difficult support group characteristic to identify. Demonstrations of intimacy may be so subtle as to be missed by all but those who exchange them (for example touches of the hands after hugging goodbye, quiet conversations within the main group chatter, or even 'knowing' smiles). Technology was used to facilitate this at times; the first author, for example, has received messages during Local Stitch 'n' Bitch meetings via mobile phone from members who were seated at a distance that did not allow for a private conversation.

Small intimacies such as a pat on the knee or on the arm are common in the group. Knitting lends itself to such intimacies as tiny stitches are studied side by side when, for example, looking for the source of a mistake, or in the cramped pub environment where as many of the group as possible will squeeze together into a comfortable booth seating. The tactile nature of the activity promotes this physical intimacy. This adds to the sense of community and closeness, alleviates feelings of isolation and loneliness, and provides a support system for the women.

5.3.4 Socialisation External to the Group

Members of the Stitch ‘n’ Bitch group regularly socialise outside set meeting times. Hirsch (1980) and Pearson (1982; 1983) suggest that this is vital to the provision of support in a group context. Shaffer and Galinsky (1989) suggested that in self-help groups “informal member to member contacts [were] sometimes viewed as more therapeutic than the formal group meetings.” In Local Stitch ‘n’ Bitch, smaller groups or pairs meet for shopping trips, yarn related or otherwise, for coffee and meals, as well as for larger life events such as weddings or christenings. For many years, an annual potluck Thanksgiving dinner was organised by the American members of the group.

Cosima states that socialising with friends is her primary motivation for joining the group; she is “*contented*” with her knitting but wants the “*social interaction”* of the group:

> *“Well I was quite contented from the knitting side, you know, to kind of use Youtube and the internet, Ravelry, and that, but I wanted to get to know people outside of the research department so it was a kind of a way of getting to know people who weren’t in my workplace”* (Cosima).

Beth recalls earlier organised social events she enjoyed which were not specifically knitting related:

> *“One of my favourite things that we did as a group was a while ago, were the Thanksgiving dinners that we had at one of the group founder’s apartments ... it wasn’t actually based around knitting, I can’t even remember if people brought knitting...”* (Beth).

Often, meet-ups for Knitters centre on consumption experiences or SAE (Stash Acquisition Experiences) in the Knitting parlance. Group outings to national knitting events have taken place. Far from being problematic, as in AA or Weight Watchers, consumption is celebrated and shared.

The socialising element of the therapy builds a deep loyalty to the brands that facilitate the social interactions of the group. Stitch ‘n’ Bitch members are loyal to ‘their’ pub. Similarly, members of Sunday Knitting Group collaboratively created a jumper for the owner of the bar/restaurant at which they meet, at his request. Sweaters are acknowledged to be something of a labour of love in the Knitting community, due to the investment of yarn and time. This gift, therefore, has meaning for the Knitters and shows the high value they place on the business owner’s facilitation of their group’s socialisation.

5.3.5 Storytelling, Celebration and Encouragement

Storytelling is often an important part of the support group process. Narratives are how we make sense of the world around us and of ourselves; it is quite natural then that they would

therefore take a pivotal role in processing the experience of loneliness and in its amelioration. Moisio and Beruchashvili (2010) when discussing Weight Watchers mention several types of confession (confession of pathology and confession of failure) and storytelling (autotherapeutic testimonials). However, the confessional model is tied to the spiritual and religious framing of overconsumption as sin in Weight Watchers, Alcoholics Anonymous and similar programmes. Without this sin, there is no need for confession.

Storytelling and testimonials in a different form, however, are observed within the Stitch 'n' Bitch group. Cognitive guidance is sought on yarn, tools, and patterns. This guidance is often provided in the form of consumer testimonials. A shared repertoire of tales from the group's past are retold time and time again – how Sarah couldn't stand to be around wool when she was pregnant, how Charlotte only ever made squares, how quickly Jennifer took to knitting, producing expert level projects within weeks. These anecdotes are used to entertain, to reassure, and to build a sense of community. Beyond the personal, knowledge of the Knitting world is passed on. New knitters are warned of the Curse of the Boyfriend Sweater, an urban legend that states that knitting a man a sweater will result in a breakup, and they are introduced to the vital vocabulary and slang of Knitters through storytelling.

As in the world of AA and Weight Watchers, achievements are celebrated and encouragement is given for good Knitting behaviour. Knitters are asked to bring in finished objects (FOs) to show off to the group. Their hard work is praised, their identity as a Knitter is affirmed, and support is amplified by this.

5.3.6. Open-endedness

Although membership of AA or Weight Watchers may be open-ended and indeed lifelong, there is a goal in mind: dealing with pathological consumption. In the case of Local Stitch 'n' Bitch, membership is perhaps even more flexible and open-ended. Although members of the group share a common predicament, once companionship has been achieved, loneliness addressed, and emotional support attained, members can choose to leave, secure in the knowledge that the group is there if they need it, as with Danielle, or continue to attend, as with Sarah, who has been an active participant since the first meeting. When Cosima injured her wrist and was unable to knit, she still attended the group. It is clear that in this group it is '*not about the knitting*' (Sarah) but, rather, it is the support community that drives continued attendance.

Having established that this group essentially functions as a self-help support group through consumption in a different way from those previously identified in the literature, and having examined the mechanisms by which the group ameliorates loneliness in this female-led and

-dominated consumption community, the use of brands to facilitate that experience are now explored.

5.4 Consumption to Facilitate Self-Help

Stitch 'n' Bitch members use several brands to facilitate self-help and ameliorate loneliness. A selection of examples is given in the table below. These, in keeping with the entrepreneurial spirit suggested by Goulding et al. (2013) as characteristic of a neo-tribal consumption community, include brands created by members of the community itself. Support of these brands, Dyad Fibres and Prolethean Yarns, while providing tangible assistance to the founders also affirms one's commitment to the group. In the case of Dyad, a much sought-after and rare commodity in the Knitworld, association with the brand and access to the product added significant social capital to group members.

American brands such as Ravelry.com are used to demonstrate affiliation with the wider Knitworld. Purchasing the 'right' tools such as Knit Pro needles, and now Hiya Hiyas, demonstrate both financial commitment to the Knitting identity, and an acceptance of and reinforcement of Sarah's superior skills and knowledge and informal leadership.

Brand	**Mechanism of the Support Group**	**Examples**
Dyad Fibres	Tangible support, Social reinforcement	The group shops extensively from Dyad and promotes the brand through social reinforcement. In turn, some of the cachet of the brand is transferred to the group.
Prolethean Yarns	Tangible support	Alison and Cosima co-authored a pattern book with Aryanna to promote Proleathean Yarns, again in an exchange of tangible support. All parties receive additional social capital as published pattern authors as well as monetary compensation.
SnB Pub	Socialisation	The SnB pub provides a location for the Knitters to meet and becomes an integral part of the Local Stitch 'n' Bitch experience.

		When Charlotte and Kira visit, it is not enough to merely knit together, the knitting must take place in the pub.
KU Bar/restaurant	Socialisation	Members of Sunday Knitting Group display a similar loyalty to and affection for the KU Bar and Restaurant which hosts their meet-ups.
Knit Pro needles	Cognitive guidance, Social reinforcement, Story-telling	New members were gently guided to purchase these 'correct' tools to assume the Knitter identity. Their use was socially reinforced by re-tellings of Jennifer's pilgrimage across Arizona. Her determination to consume the correct brand is celebrated.
Hiya Hiya needles	Cognitive guidance, Social reinforcement	Sarah later guides members to see that, in fact, Hiya Hiyas are a superior tool and that to progress as a more serious Knitter, this brand must now be adopted. Again, this is socially reinforced consumption as more and more of the group switches over.
Knit Picks	Cognitive guidance, Social reinforcement, Celebration of consumption	Shopping from Knit Picks, a U.S. website which does not ship to Europe, was usually a joint online shopping experience relying on an intermediary located in the U.S. As shipping was free over $100, members encouraged each other to 'spend up'. The parcel would then be brought to the meeting to be opened and its contents dispersed, with consumption being celebrated.

Events such as WonderWool, Knit Camp, Yarn Tasting	Task helping, Cognitive guidance, Social reinforcement, Socialisation	Events such as Wonderwool, Knit Camp, and The Yarn Tasting, are Stash Acquisition Experiences (and potentially skill and knowledge acquisition experiences too). However, they also allow socialisation between diverse groups of knitters and facilitate the spread of knowledge from one group to another in the form of task helping (teaching new techniques and ways of being a Knitter). Members return from these events with new knowledge to share and to reinforce the other members' connection to the Knitworld.
Ravelry.com	Task helping, Tangible support, Socialisation, Cognitive guidance, Social reinforcement	Ravelry.com is a social network and therefore offers opportunities for socialisation. More than this, it offers access to tangible support, cognitive guidance and social reinforcement from the whole Knitting world.

Table 2: Examples of Brands Used to Facilitate Self-Help and the Amelioration of Loneliness

The use of these brands certainly facilitates the craft of knitting, but using the right tool also serves as a marker of the Knitters' 'in-group' status. Much in the same way that other communities might identify each other by a certain tattoo, jacket or ring, the Knitter can spot another by her insider knowledge of knitting needles. Within the Knitting community specifically, the brands serve an important role not just in affirming the Knitter identity but also in providing access to the therapeutic well-being on offer. The Hiya Hiya needles, for example, represent not just the highly skilled and discerning Knitter identity, but also the positive experience of social reinforcement. In this way, the brands come to symbolise and embody the amelioration of loneliness that the members associate with the community.

6. Discussion:

The key meaning to emerge from the data behind consumption activities in this female-led and –dominated consumption community is that members have essentially created a self-help support group through a consumption activity.

The members of this consumption community seek to ameliorate loneliness through consumer experience as in Woodruffe's (1997) work on retail therapy, but they cope with loneliness not just through purchasing but through the consumption community. This differs from consumption as previously explored in the literature in the forms of compensatory consumption (Grunert, 1994; Moisio, 2007; Woodruffe, 1997; Woodruffe-Burton and Elliot, 2005) and spiritual-therapeutic consumption (Moisio and Beruchashvili, 2010). There is no spiritual component, such as exists in spiritual- therapeutic consumption (Moisio and Beruchashvili, 2010), possibly due to the lack of an underlying pathology. Membership of AA or Weight Watchers has a goal in dealing with pathological consumption and draws on religious elements such as confession and penance to achieve this goal. The Local Stitch 'n' Bitch community is not originally help-intended, but, rather, has an explicitly pro-consumption orientation. However, it possesses many of the same characteristics as a self-help support group.

In examining the mechanisms by which a self-help support group functions from both the therapy literature (Barerra, 1986; Hirsch, 1980; Pearson, 1982; 1983) and the consumption literature (Moisio and Beruchashvili, 2010), it is apparent that many of these mechanisms are also utilised by Local Stitch 'n' Bitch. While addressing their shared predicament of loneliness, group members engage in reciprocal helping, tangible assistance, emotional support, cognitive guidance, social reinforcement, intimacy, socialisation, and story-telling, celebration, and encouragement. Thus, the consumption community functions as a self-help support group to ameliorate a common predicament of loneliness.

7. Conclusion:

Consumption communities potentially offer additional resources for people suffering from loneliness. As consumption communities are not tied to a particular affliction or addiction, they are less stigmatised than self-help support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and Weight Watchers. Nevertheless, while loneliness itself carries a stigma (Ho and O'Donohoe 2014) but joining a consumption community offers a way to repair the negative emotional state of loneliness without tarring oneself with the brush of 'a loner'. The consumption community is thus potentially more accessible and approachable than the officially help-intended group.

This finding also further illustrates issues with the existing consumption community literature. Though Goulding et al. (2011) makes an admirable effort to untangle terms which have been used interchangeably and without firm definitional boundaries in the literature, the Knitting community fails to be encapsulated by the typology established. It is neither based around a single brand (as illustrated in table 2), oppositional (as illustrated by its open-ended membership and member's willingness to attend and interact with other groups) nor transient and playful, as illustrated by the members deep emotional commitment to each other and the existence of a self-help support group. As such, it seems that O'Sullivan and Shankar's (2019) call for a critical re-examination of the foundational theoretical framework of these consumption communities is clearly supported by our findings. However, the self-help support group type of consumption community is clearly distinct from the 'play-community' type of marketplace culture. Perhaps this is because O'Sullivan and Shankar (2019) too uses as its context the familiar "hyper-masculine" (Martin et al., 2006) environments.

This study considers the meanings that reside in a female-led and -dominated consumption community without the 'outgroup' minority status (Avery, 2012) of a male-led and –dominated consumption community. Rather, the nature and meaning of consumption within a female-led and –dominated consumption community have been explored, contributing in a novel manner to the work in this field by scholars such as Harju and Huovinen (2015), Minihan and Cox (2006), Scaraboto and Fischer (2013), Schau and Thompson (2010), Shankar (2006), and Thompson and Üstüner (2015).

It is therefore proposed that the encouragement and support that women consumers give one another in all female-led, market-mediated communities or sub- communities, including roller derby (Thompson and Üstüner, 2015), motorcycle-riding (Martin et al., 2006), or the fatshionista blogosphere (Harju and Huovinen, 2015; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013), could be re-examined using the lens of the self-help support group. Similarly, Shankar's book groups (2006) and Schau and Thompson's (2010) Twilight fans could be re-examined from the viewpoint of loneliness and the amelioration of loneliness. However, further research is required to explore this possibility, particularly given the contrast this presents to findings in Carlson's (2010) work on the sport of roller derby, where community priorities seem to be centred on the activity, rather than the provision of mutual support (Carlson, 2010).

There is a further intriguing possibility presented by some of the work on loneliness (Borys and Perlman, 1985; Wiseman et al., 1995; Zasloff and Kidd, 1994) who suggest that women, potentially due to gendered socialisation, may be better able to express loneliness. This would imply that although hyper-masculine consumption communities profess to chase the hegemonic ideals of physicality, competitiveness and even rugged independence, as in the Mountain Men (Belk and Costa, 1998), underlying all of this 'play' is a drive to ameliorate loneliness.

Consumption communities generally then may provide a unique antidote to what is becoming a global problem, loneliness. Marketers have an opportunity to build supportive consumption communities that are not focused on a short-term profit goal but provide a safe space for support where commerce and brand-building can also occur (as in the style of Ravelry.com). The growing loneliness problem could, potentially, be addressed through consumption communities. In the case of Stitch 'n' Bitch, the consumption community clearly served a purpose in these women's life, relieving isolation and ameliorating loneliness.

This points not just to a marketing implication, but also to a policy implication. 'Men's Sheds', for example, are considered *"an exemplar for the promotion of men's health and well-being by health and social policy-makers"* (Wilson and Cordier, 2013, p.451). The use of the consumption community as a self-help support group by the almost entirely female membership suggests that a similar model may be required to counter isolation and loneliness in young women. Groups engaged in suicide prevention programs for example, or those charged with integration of refugees/displaced persons, may wish to consider integration of the consumption community model into their curriculum or training. Further, those brands aiming to build a consumption community, particularly if their target market is postmodern consumers, the transitory, the globalised, the nomadic (Holt and Thompson, 1996), by recognising the loneliness amelioration potential of the community, marketers may find in this model a useful tool to strengthen their consumption community strategies. The provision of a treatment for the loneliness epidemic offers an insight into why the bonds within consumption communities can have such deep meaning to their members.

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