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Long-Distance Runners: How Can Differences Unite a Diverse Community of Consumers?

Growing communities can overcome conflict and fragmentation, and increase diversity, without losing their sense of collective belonging, according to a new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#).

“Consumption communities are groups of people united by a shared passion. A persistent challenge to community is continued engagement, and collective enterprises can be destabilized by differences as they grow. Our research shows how community members leverage social and economic resources to overcome differences,” write authors Tandy Chalmers Thomas (Queen's University), Linda L. Price, and Hope Jensen Schau (both University of Arizona).

The authors studied the distance running community, which has grown from a small, tight-knit, male-dominated group to a mainstream community with mass participation over the past three decades. Because runners have learned to value diversity, more companies can provide goods and services for the community. Additionally, different types of runners provide each other with social resources such as distinction, status, shared values, and a sense of belonging.

These findings are of interest to companies such as Facebook, Pinterest, and YouTube whose primary business model involves an online community, as well as major brands with associated consumption communities such as Apple, Nike, and Lululemon, or anyone interested in mobilizing social resources to incite broad participation in political campaigns and charities wishing to recruit and maintain donors and volunteers.

“Large, diverse communities experience tension because each different type of member seeks something different from the community and these desires often lead to conflict. However, this tension does not have to lead to conflict, fragmentation, and demise. On the contrary, communities are able to thrive when community members depend on each other for valued economic and social resources,” the authors conclude.

Tandy Chalmers Thomas, Linda L. Price, and Hope Jensen Schau. “When Differences Unite: Resource Dependence in Heterogeneous Consumption Communities.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: February 2013. For more information, contact Tandy Thomas (tthomas@business.queensu.ca) or visit <http://ejcr.org/>.

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