PILED HIGHER AND DEEPER:
INSIGHTS INTO *"THE PHD COMICS"* AS A CO-CREATIVE
CONSUMPTION EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

The *Piled Higher and Deeper* comic strips appeal to a very distinct brand community that is narrowly defined by common shared experiences as postgraduate researchers. This netnographic study explores whether and to what extent members of *Piled Higher and Deeper* brand community are getting actively involved in co-creation activities.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

When Jorge Cham published his *"Piled Higher and Deeper – The Life (or the Lack Thereof) in Academia"* series in the fall of 1997, nobody could have foreseen that these newspaper- and web-based comic strips would eventually become a worldwide popular phenomenon (Choe 2011). Commonly known as *"The PhD Comics"*, they follow the lives of postgraduate research students and the different issues they constantly face at their US university from a humorous perspective (Fine and De Soucey 2005; Koziski 1984). These include their complicated student-supervisor relationships, the problematics of scientific research, the demands of teaching and marking assignments, the lack of a private/social life, the perils of procrastination and *'the endless search for free food'* (Cham 2002). While Jorge Cham initially conceived the PhD Comics as a form of *'therapy'*, by which he could exercise his own frustrations, anxieties and other demons while working towards a PhD in mechanical engineering at Stanford University (Choe 2011), they have enjoyed a growing popularity among postgraduates and young academics around the world who experience similar issues as the characters (Lawson 2011). While the official Facebook site counts 124,000 members (https://www.facebook.com/piledhigheranddeeper?rf=110860725605522), the official website (http://phdcomics.com) attracts approximately 7 million visitors every year (Choe 2011) and serves as a retail outlet for *Piled Higher and Deeper* merchandise, such as the five comic book editions, mugs, T-shirts and the DVD of the film adaptation *"Piled Higher and Deeper – The PhD Movie"* (2011). Written and produced by Jorge Cham himself, the film (http://www.phdmovie.com) features an amateur cast and crew of postgraduate students at CalTech and has seen 'sold-out' screenings on university campuses worldwide (Lawson 2011). Furthermore, the PhD Comics also provide humorous information videos, in which one of the main characters discusses important topics like theory development or open access publishing that are relevant to postgraduate researchers.

While consumer researchers paid limited attention to comics back in the 1980s (Belk 1987, 1989; Kassarjian 1983; Spiggle 1986), these early studies only looked at what values, and especially materialist values, Sunday comics and underground comix would be promoting to readers. But as Cusack et al. (2003) indicated, academic and popular discourse have for most of the time tended to stigmatise fans, including comic readers, as a bunch of gullible, alienated and socially awkward geeks (Browne 1997; Hills 2002). In contrast, what makes the PhD Comics a particularly interesting field of study for consumer researchers is that, due to their unique set of narratives, characters and settings, they appeal to a very distinct brand community that is not bound by geography, nationality, ethnicity or class, but still narrowly defined by common shared experiences of life as postgraduate researchers. In other words, the experiences of the characters in the individual comic strips and their recent film adaptation seem to represent comedic or tragic intertextual reflections of the audience's own experiences in their real lives (Hirschman 2000; Wohlfeil and Whelan 2008). The question, therefore, is what meaning(s) do the PhD Comics have for its readers in their everyday lives as postgraduate researchers or young academics? Moreover, to what extent and how are members of the *Piled Higher and Deeper* brand community getting actively involved in acts of co-creation? To explore these questions, this study is taking the following methodological approach: First, we conducted a textual analysis of the official website(s) and the official social media platforms on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube regarding the narrative content development of PhD Comics and the interactive communication between the makers and their audiences. Following the principal ideas of open innovation theory (Chesbrough 2003), influences or contributions made by audience members to character introductions and developments, topics and merchandising were scrutinised. Secondly, a netnography (Kozinets 1998) is currently in progress, whereby both researchers engage in participant observation

within the *Piled Higher and Deeper* brand community on their different social media platforms.

Preliminary findings from the textual analysis already reveal some interesting insights that warrant further investigation. Unlike traditional comics that are driven by the hero's conflict with the villain as his binary opposite, the PhD Comics feature a group of PhD students as anti-heroes who struggle with the faceless *'way-of-doing-things'* that is at the heart of academia – instead of a concrete villain. Due to the required insider knowledge, the audience of the PhD Comics consists primarily of current and recent PhD students. Interestingly, despite being set within the concrete context of the US graduate school system, the PhD Comics offer in terms of their essence and the addressed issues of life in academia a universal appeal that transgresses the different national postgraduate system. Another interesting finding is that, even though the vast majority of members on the social media platforms don't participate beyond subscribing to the page and leaving the occasional *'Love it!'* post, there is nonetheless growing evidence of co-creation at different levels of the PhD Comics brand development. While the nameless (anti-)hero of the comic strips is an alter ego of Jorge Cham himself and his personal experiences, the other main characters Cecilia, Mike, Tajel and the faculty members were initially modelled on fellow graduate students and faculty members and their shared experiences (Cham 2002). In the following years, especially since Cham's graduation, the PhD Comics saw not only its main characters evolving just like the real people they are based on, but also the introduction of new characters and plot lines. As a form of user-driven innovation (Jeppesen and Frederiksen 2006; von Hippel 2005), these were requested by readers to represent the experiences of PhD students from other disciplines or the suffering spouses of procrastinating postgraduates. On a higher level of co-creation, brand community members volunteered to provide the subtitles in their native language for

the film adaptation's international screenings (http://www.facebook.com/pages/The-PHD-Movie/212606438778958). First signs of crowd-sourcing (Brabham 2008) are also visible. The next phase of this research will explore in more detail the nature of these co-creation activities, the motivation of those more devoted brand community members and the value that makers and consumers of the PhD Comics derive from their co-creations (Amit and Zott 2001).

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