

B2C VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES: TYPOLOGY AND ASSOCIATED BENEFITS

An Exploratory Qualitative Study

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Abstract: Researches in Marketing tend to design any community belonging to the Website of the company as a brand community. Through a qualitative study, this article describes, interprets and classifies B2C virtual communities and thus removes the confusion between virtual brand communities and B2C virtual communities. The empirical results put also up to date three types of perceived benefits by the participants, associated to these communities. The perceived benefits seem to depend on the object of the community, on its orientation as well as on the nature of the participants' behaviours. The paper finishes with the managerial implications.

1 INTRODUCTION

Due to the fragmentation of the society, the desire to be in a community was concretized on Internet by the development of "tribes" for which the needs are collective but also individual (Sitz, 2004). Noting the increased growth of consumer's tribes on the Net on the one hand, and waiting for the same contributions as off line brand communities on the other hand, the managers granted a particular interest to virtual communities and supported their development (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Jones, 1997). Several researches were interested in communities created by companies. However, the majority approached them according to business models and models of incomes. Admittedly, such models were many for some time. However, they did not survive on the Web. Since, the new approach of companies has rather fit with a relational perspective. Indeed, the community's spirit is very resistant to promotional strategies. New forms of B2C virtual communities emerge then. Transactions and promotional strategies leave their place to mutual help and to the development of relations.

Whereas passion to the brand, related to the experiential dimension of its product, is essential for the emergence of brand communities in the real world, this dimension does not seem essential on the Web. Some managers integrate, then, communities

in their official Web sites independently of the nature of their products (with an experiential dimension or not). Thus, some consumers gather there without being passionate of their brands. This gave rise to various types of B2C virtual communities. However, in marketing literature, some researches consider any community belonging to the official web site of the company as an official virtual brand community. Indeed, this latter is defined as "a community specialized (because the brand is in its center), based on a whole of social bonds among the users and the passionate of the brand. Members share the interest to the brand and to its consumption" (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

It is then advisable to examine this social dimension in companies' web sites. The first objective of this paper would be to specify these concepts and to remove any confusion between them by proposing a typology of B2C virtual communities.

The second objective of this paper is to explore the participants' perception of B2C virtual communities. Indeed, in spite of their interest in them, the majority of managers remain hesitant to invest in virtual communities because of the disinterest of the net surfers. Moreover, the investigation of the perceived benefits of these communities brings a complementary lighting on the consumer's behaviour on the Web.

First, a review of the relevant literature on virtual communities is presented. Secondly, a state of the art on the potential reasons of the participation in virtual communities will be established. Then, the qualitative study will be detailed. It is based on some cases of B2C virtual communities. The last part of the paper discusses the theoretical and managerial implications.

2 VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

2.1 Dimensions

Initially associated to the "vicinity" (Wellman and Gulia, 1999), the term "community" indicates a group of individuals who, occupy the same physical place, show common characteristics, or share the same interests. Various definitions of virtual communities are proposed in the literature:

- people who share common interests and objectives and for which the electronic communication is the first form of interactions (Dennis, Poothri and Natarajan, 1998);
- groups of individuals who meet regularly to discuss subjects of interests with the other members (Figallo, 1998),
- socio-cultural regroupings who emerge when a sufficient number of individuals take part in public discussions by putting sufficient heart at it so that networks of human relations would be woven within the Cyberspace". (Rheingold, 1993)

Some dimensions quoted in the last definition seem to better characterize a virtual community: a group of individuals, social ties, a shared interest, a dynamic process and relations which last.

2.2 Characteristics

Several characteristics of virtual communities are quoted in the literature. However, only those which seem interesting within this framework are retained.

The place of meetings: in their definition of the virtual community, Fernback and Thompson (1995) point out the concept of place. According to them, it should be specified and symbolically underlined by a subject of interest. Thanks to the concept of place, it would be possible to distinguish companies' virtual communities from the other on line tribes such as communities created on the initiative of net surfers.

The orientation of the community: Markus (2002) distinguished between the social orientation of the

community, the professional orientation and the commercial orientation. The social orientation combines the relational orientation and the experiential orientation. The former is reflected by the construction of relationship between members. It is the base of the birth of virtual communities. It can coexist, to different degrees, with other orientations. The experiential orientation reflects the hedonic aspect of the community and translated the pleasure shared between members. This aspect characterizes particularly brand communities in the real world (McAlexander and Schouten, 1998). The professional orientation refers to the networks of experts and the collective training (Markus, 2002). Finally, the commercial or transactional orientation describes web sites of purchases and sales, and web sites of products' evaluation.

The object of the interactions: according to Newcomb (1953), the interaction is always directed to a project or to a common interest. It functions according to the model ABX, more precisely an interaction between a person A and a person B is always done in the direction of an object X. The object X can be replaced by "interest", "passion", "meets", "brand"... Thus, virtual brand communities differ from the communities of consumption (Kozinets, 1999) since the object X is the passion to the brand and not the commitment to the product.

The participants: are generally composed of the administrators, the regulators (moderators) and the users. In the case of communities created by companies, moderation generally concerns the employees of the company but can be sometimes carried out within volunteer members of the community. Participants can adopt two types of behaviours. The experiential behaviour is described as the expression of pleasure, emotions, and feelings (Hammond and alii, 1998); it is characterized by a total immersion of the individual in the environment. It results in a distortion of time and of the impression to exist known as "the telepresence". The behaviour directed towards a goal reflects the search for information and its retrieval.

A community in the web site of the brand let's think that it is about a virtual brand community as one gets along in the real world. Some confusion is then noted between B2C virtual communities and B2C virtual brand communities. Thus, managers wait for the same managerial implications as those associated to off line brand communities.

Considering the importance of this point, a question is posed: should we consider all companies' virtual communities as virtual brand communities?

In order to answer to this question, this paper aims to examine the central objects of B2C virtual communities as well as their orientations.

2.3 Reasons of Participating in Virtual Communities

Several researchers were interested in the reasons of taking part in a virtual community. Thus, they identified the motivations of the member (Hemetsberer, 2003; Hertel, Niedner and Herrmann, 2003; Krogh, Spaeth and Lakhani, 2003; Hertel, 2002; Bezroukov, 1999; Armstrong and Hagel, 1996; Maffesoli, 1988), the required benefits from participating (Butler et al., 2002) and also the perceived value (Bagozzi, Dholakia and Paro, 2003).

Although several studies were interested in the reasons of participation, it seems more relevant to me to focus on the perceived benefits by members rather than on the benefits that they seek. Indeed, the participants use the virtual communities which meet their needs the best. So, it is extremely probable that the consumer is not naturally searching for some benefits but that he discovers them during his use of the community. Consequently, perceived benefits rather than required benefits are explored in this paper.

3 QUALITATIVE STUDY

3.1 Description

The methodology is directed towards a qualitative approach. Whereas virtual communities created by net surfers are countless on the web, B2C virtual communities are more difficult to find. Newspapers, reviews, books, 'forums' and 'newsgroups' were consulted. Considering the constraint of the low number of active B2C virtual communities, 7 cases were selected (Starwars, Microsoft, Linux, Pimkie, Meilleurduchef, Orange and Doctissimo). Then, a two-step exploratory qualitative study was carried out.

First, a netnography was used (Schouten and McAlexander, 1998) in two communities (Pimkie and Microsoft), and none participating observation was used on some other communities (Orange, Starwars, Doctissimo and Meilleurduchef). In order to avoid what Sherry (1995) negatively described as "Blitzkrieg ethnography" (i.e. to limit oneself to simple visits of the website), these positions were kept for 18 months.

Secondly, semi-directing interviews were carried out with participants of three communities (Linux, MS and Pimkie). Managers of three B2C virtual communities (Microsoft, Doctissimo and Pimkie) were also interviewed. This type of method enables to approach the research's topics while maintaining intact the freedom of the respondents as well as the flexibility of the interview (Giordano, 2003). Regarding the specificity of the field studied and the little information available on the subject, the principal advantage of this method relates to the internal validity of the study and to the richness of the produced data.

The empirical saturation was reached at the end of 20 interviews. The collected data was then analysed and interpreted. The empirical results followed by a discussion are presented in the next section.

3.2 Results

The qualitative analysis distinguishes between four forms of B2C virtual communities according to their objects and to their orientations. Virtual brand communities are, then, only one form of B2C virtual communities (1), proposes a typology of the perceived benefits by the participants (2), and identifies some factors that influence benefits' perception in the B2C virtual community (3).

3.2.1 Typology of B2C Virtual Communities

According to the empirical results (*cf.* Appendix 1), the object of the interactions in the B2C virtual community is either the product of the brand, or a topic related to the activity of the company. The orientation of the community is either informational, or social (relational or experiential), or a combination of these orientations. By informational orientation, we design the interest of the community to the information's retrieval around the functionalities of the brand's products or even around subjects of interests.

A definition of B2C virtual communities is then proposed. They are: *"interactive spaces on the Net created by companies to consumers, generally in their official Web sites, and reserved to groups of Net surfers around their products, their brands and / or around sets of topics more or less related to*

Table 1: Types of B2C virtual communities.

Object Orientation	Brand's product	Themes
Social orientation	B2C virtual brand community (Starwars)	B2C virtual community of relations (Pimkie)
Informational Orientation	B2C virtual community of practice (Microsoft, Orange)	Not found in selected cases
Informational and social Orientations	B2C virtual brand community (Linux)	B2C virtual community of interests (Doctissimo, Meilleurduchef)

companies' activities. The orientation of the community can be informational, social or a combination of these two orientations"

Considering this definition, four types of B2C virtual communities are distinguished (Table1):

B2C virtual brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001): the passion to the brand is the object of the participants' interactions. Over the informational orientation of the community related to the characteristics of the brand's products (the degree of its functional dimension), the community is endowed with a social orientation related to the share of a common passion to the brand and to the use of its products. Thus, a proposition of B2C virtual community is proposed: "It is a community specialized on the Net (because the brand is in its centre), generally on the official web site of the company, based on a whole of social bonds among the users and the passionate of the brand. These members share the interest to the brand and to its consumption. The orientation of the community is essentially social, particularly experiential, but an informational orientation can also coexist with it".

B2C virtual communities of practice: the functionalities of the brand's products represent the object of the interactions. Thus, the participants come to get information and to solve their problems (Debackere and Rappa, 1994) rather than to share a common passion to the brand. The orientation of the community is functional (Orange) or even technical (Microsoft).

B2C virtual communities of interests (Hagel and Armstrong, 1997): the brand is not the object of the interactions. It can even not exist. Two cases are distinguished:

Communities of conquest: the brand is not known by the participants. Consequently, the company creates a community in its official web site around its activity. In this case, participants share their common passion to the topic rather than to the brand (ex: www.Meilleurduchef.com).

Communities of audience: participants gather around topics which interest them in the portal's web site created by the company. They form homogeneous segments of audience exposed to companies' ads. It is in this direction that Doctissimo widened its audience by buying the communities Ado.fr and Mamo.net.

B2C virtual communities of relations (Hagel and Armstrong, 1997): participants' interactions relate to general sets of themes interesting the members such as love and friendship. The community has a relational orientation. The company seeks to retain the participants in order to remain near well identified customers (Pimkie).

3.2.2 Perceived Benefits

Three types of benefits arise: (1) cognitive benefits corresponding to the resolution of problems, to the optimization of competences and to being informed about the brand, (2) emotional benefits corresponding to the setting in contact with the company and to social incomes such as the community spirit and the value's expression and (3) hedonic benefits corresponding to the design of the web site and to the exploration of the other identities (Table 2). The importance of benefits' perception arises clearly in all forms of B2C virtual communities. However, it seems that benefits' perception is different from one form to another of B2C virtual communities. Factors that seem to influence benefits perception in B2C virtual communities are presented and discussed in this section.

3.2.3 Factors Influencing Benefits' Perception

Some factors seem to influence benefits' perception in the community. Indeed, the empirical results underline that perceived benefits depend on the orientation of the community, on its object and on the behaviour of the participants. These factors are presented in this section:

Table 2: Typology of perceived benefits.

Cognitive benefits	Brand information	News and information
	Resolution of problems	Availability, access and relevance of the information, Resolution of problems Provision of technical resources Free information
	The optimization of competences	Fast Familiarisation with the central object of the community Improvement of competences and knowledge
Emotional benefits	Contacts with the company	To tie direct contacts with the company Proximity of the company when ever a problem occurs Preferential Treatment from the company
	The spirit of the group	Help and mutual support Serious of participation, Respects
	Value expression of the member	Reputation in the community Association with others
Hedonic benefits	Exploring other's identities	Discovering different identities and one's identity
	Experiential associated to the share of brand passion - associated to the web site	Pleasure related to the share of a common passion to the brand Animation, design, variety

Whereas hedonic benefits and emotional benefits are strongly evoked in the communities with social orientation (brand communities, communities of relations, and communities of interests), they miss completely in the communities of practice where the orientation is informational or even technical (Microsoft). In fact, only cognitive benefits are mentioned by the participants in these communities.

In the communities around the brand's products (of practice and in brand communities), participants seem to be more interested in benefits associated to the brand and to its products, such as cognitive benefits, benefits of setting in contact with the company and hedonic benefits associated to the share of a passion to the brand. However, in communities around sets of topics, emotional benefits corresponding to the expression of value and hedonic benefits related to the exploration of other identities are those which underline, the most, the speeches of the respondents. Besides, whereas the informational benefits about the brand are strongly evoked in communities around the brand's products, these benefits do not arise at all in respondents' speeches concerning communities around topics.

The nature of the participant's behaviour seems also to influence his perception of benefits. Indeed, those who have a behaviour directed to a goal valorise the cognitive benefits. Respondents claim

that they don't care at all about the other types of benefits. However, participants who have an experiential behaviour perceive emotional and hedonic benefits. These participants seem to be more loyal to the community than the others.

4 LIMITS AND WAYS OF RESEARCH

The proposed typology of B2C virtual communities puts forward their various forms and raises confusion with virtual brand communities. The latter are only one form of B2C virtual communities. Some brand communities have already existed in the real world. Internet is only a new interface for members' interactions (Microsoft). Other communities did not exist before (the communities OSS and Starwars). Internet was primordial for their emergence.

The empirical results underline that some brands can not make consumers emerge around them. In this case, the company stimulates the desire of its community's integration by choosing sets of topics as the object of members' interactions. A very interesting result relates to the community "Meilleurduchef". Although this brand is rather unknown by consumers, its community is rich.

Indeed, members gather there to share their passion to cooking rather than their interest to the brand. Progressively, this brand becomes known by participants and arouses their interest. Thus, virtual communities not only retain consumers in the web site of the company but can also be an efficient strategy to acquire new customers.

I tried to explore the perceived benefits in B2C virtual communities. These benefits seem to depend not only on the characteristics of the community but also on individual variables (the behaviour of the participants: experiential or directed towards a goal). It would be interesting to explore other individual variables such as “the expertise with the brand” in nearest studies.

The empirical results point out the importance of benefits in B2C virtual communities. It would be interesting to spread out the field of research by exploring the impact of these benefits on participants’ retention in the community and also on the quality of their relationships with the brand. Considering their potential influence on benefits’ perception in the community, further researches should control the orientation of the community as well as its object. The paper point out the perception of benefits related to the setting in contact with the company. This type of benefits is very interesting as it offers the opportunity to companies, especially those which begin on the market or those which want to cure their image, to build stronger relationship with their consumers.

The company can also support the experiential aspect of its community and thus enrich social presence in it. The qualitative study arises that some employees of the companies take part in the interactions in their communities. However, in all the studied communities, their participations are reduced to the administration or to the moderation. Examining the investment of the company in the community could also be an interesting way of research to explore the factors that favour participants’ relationship with the brand.

The distinction between a B2C virtual community and a virtual brand community has significant implications. Indeed, their operating is different and so, managerial strategies should be different. From an academic point of view, researchers should then examine the object of the community as well as its orientation before considering it as a virtual brand community.

A question arises: could virtual communities evolve in time from one form to another, while gaining in experiential orientation for example? An answer to this question is of a particular interest for

managers. It underlines the need for a permanent follow through their communities to control perceptions of the participants. A new question emerges: should the experiential aspect of a brand community be categorically related to the passion to the brand? In other words, can the experiential aspect corresponding to the design of the community and to the exploration of the other identities compensate the absence of an experiential dimension of the brand? If so, can a B2C virtual community of practice become a B2C virtual brand community? In the case of an evolution of the community from one form to another, it would be very interesting for researchers to examine the influence of this change on participants. This impact can result in behaviours of approach or of escape for example. This evolution of the community could be even caused by researchers within the framework of a comprehension of consumer’s behaviour.

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Appendix 1: Comparison of B2C virtual communities.

	Nature of product/service	Orientation of the community	Object of interactions	Nature of the B2C virtual community
Microsoft	Data processing products microsoft.com/france/communautes	Informational (technical)	Brand' products functionalities	Community of practice
Linux	Open Source www.ze-linux.org/forum.html	Social and informational (technical)	Passion to the brand and to the use of its products	Brand community
Doctissimo	Health service http://forum.doctissimo.fr/	Informational and relational	Specific Themes	Community of interests
Pimkie	Clothes www.moveandbe.com	Relational	Relational themes	Community of relations
Starwars	Science fiction films www.starwars.com/community	Social (relational and experiential)	passion to the brand	Brand community
Le Meilleur du chef	Household electrical for cooking www.meilleurduchef.com	Social and informational	passion to cooking	Community of interests
Orange	Phone operator www.orange.fr/bin/frame.cgi?u=http://forum.orange.fr	Informational	Information about the brand	Community of practice