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The consumers' community between the real and the virtual space

Abstract

Since the spread of the Internet among almost every class of consumers, the computer mediation has increased opportunities for the participation of social groups. This participation can be related to interrelation among consumers and between consumers and corporations. On one side some consumers use the web as a way to assert their social power, creating virtual communities inside which some of the real world relationships are replicated. On the other side, the enterprises use the same tool to understand these consumers, using the collected information to improve their marketing practices. On this regard, the most useful communities are those created around powerful brands, that provide an imaginary world rich in symbols and meaningful for the consumers. The aim of the paper is to understand the relationship between consumers' involvement in brand communities and their actual consumption patterns. How can the virtual activities be translated to the real world? On the contrary, which are the most common real practices among consumers, that can be shared with other communities members?

1. Introduction

The idea of community is a very ancient one: human beings need to build communities as soon as they live together in a social environment. Historically communities have been challenged by the coming of modernity. *Gesellschaft* is opposed to *Gemeinschaft* (Tonnies, 1887). In the same way the modern, mechanical, individualistic and rationally-oriented society is opposed to the rural, familiar and emotionally-involving community. Thus the modern society is characterized by an individualism that does not allow the idea of mutual sharing implied in the pristine communities. But the modernity is also characterized by the emerging of a consumer culture and by the industrialized production. When commodities began to be replaced by branded goods, thanks to the mass production, the consumers began to buy products that could help them defining their identity (Douglas, Isherwood, 1979; Belk, 1988). Through the first half of the twentieth century branded goods asserted themselves with the help of advertising. Advertising became necessary for their existence in an always more competitive market. The brand itself became progressively more meaningful, to such extent that in the post-modern society the value of a brand (the brand equity) represents one of the most important financial asset for a firm and one of the most important value-generator for the consumers (Aaker, 2002).

Furthermore, in the emerging consumer culture the meaning of communities began to shift from the relational bonds typical of a geographically defined community to the common bonds of branded products usage that relates people scattered around the world. Besides, thanks to the development of mass media, the branded products began to transcend their national boundaries and to attract the interest of consumers all over the western societies. One of the consequences of this development is the fact that in the post-modern society it is possible to delineate new forms of aggregations of consumers sharing interests, rituals and values centered around a specific brand. These new brand communities are "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of

social relationships among admirers of a brand. It is specialized because at its center is a branded good or service.”(Munitz, O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412). Such communities are developed either from consumers in a spontaneous way or from specific activities of consumer-goods companies that have understood the potential of community as a tool for marketing communications. They can be off or on-line, even if the new communication technologies have increased significantly the ability to join geographically dispersed individuals that share common interests and passions.

Brand communities are a way through which the post modern consumer expresses himself. The post-modern consumer has been described as unpredictable and unreliable, prone to buy products and to use service that guarantee a perfect quality and communicate, in the meantime, a symbolic value (Fabris, 2003). He decides on a moment-by-moment basis which is the most important one. Following the mood of the time, his consumption patterns may include purchases at the hard discount, as well as shopping at the flagships stores of his preferred brands. Every significant object contributes in building the identity of the individual following the criterion of a certain suitability and “in postmodern universe where eclecticism and the confusion of values reign, everything can be taken and assembled to the free choice of the individual” (Cova, 1991, p. 305).

2. Virtual community and brand community

If in the post-modernity the idea of community regained a meaningful role, with the diffusion of the Internet, the phenomenon of virtual communities became a discussed topic.

In itself the cyberspace has a strong social dimension: from e-mailing, to chatting, to playing in a MOO, to posting in a forum. Every activity entails an interaction between users. When these activities start from a common interest and foster regular exchanges between individuals, they generate a virtual community.

Three are the typical characteristics that identify a community, either real or virtual: the first seems to be the feeling of connection among the community’s members that divide them with the non members (consciousness of kind Gusfield, 1978), who have a different way of thinking. The presence of shared rituals and traditions is the second characteristic; they are useful in order to keep alive the community’s collective history and culture. The third indicator of the existence of a community is the idea of a moral responsibility toward the community as a whole and toward their members (Muniz, O’Guinn, 2001). If the community is in a dangerous situation, the sense of responsibility enables collective actions (in a consumption community the members defend the brand against accuses coming from non consumers). Virtual communities are based on the necessity of creating relationships (Rheingold, 1993), on shared interest (Armstrong, Hagel, 1998) or can be built around a brand (Muniz, O’Guinn, 2001).

To understand the phenomenon of brand community it could be useful to consider the communal dimension of consumption underlined by the researches hypothesizing the idea of the existence of a new tribalism (Maffesoli, 1998). The use of the word tribe suggests the re-emergence of ancient values as “a local sense of identification, religiosity, syncretism, group narcissism” (Cova, 1997, p. 300). These new tribes do not have a defined spatial locations and sometimes use the web to form virtual communities avoiding the necessity of a face-to-face encounter. The members of these new tribes share emotions, life styles, values and consumption practices in a ritualised way that is similar to secular religion, partially substituting the loss of a religion in the orthodox sense. They recover some of the traditional values, shared among the members of the ancient tribes, like sociality and mutual sharing. These latter are the same values that have become partially meaningless with the coming of the modern society. The new tribalism, thanks to the World Wide Web - that has changed the interaction among consumers and between consumers and companies - has found a way of expression through virtual communities. Kozinets (1999) uses the term of e-tribe to define virtual communities. Particularly, he analyses the virtual communities of consumption: “a specific subgroup of virtual communities that explicitly center upon consumption-related interest” (p. 254).

Inside these communities consumption knowledge develops alongside social relationship. The more the consumer is involved with the product, the more he is interested in the community, and, consequently, social involvement with other members of the community grows. Along these two dimensions, Kozinets underlines the existence of four different types of members. The first one encompasses the *tourists*, not specially interested in relational bonds nor in the consumption activity. The second includes the *minglers*, devoted more to social bonds than to consumption related activities. The third is constituted by the *devotees*, strongly interested in consumption related activities, but less involved by the relational aspects of the community. The last group is called the *insiders*. It collects those who are deeply involved in the consumption activities and have strong social ties. Devotees and insider are the most important from a marketing oriented point of view. They represent the advocate consumers prone to group themselves around a brand and to contribute actively to the enrichment of the meaning of the brand itself. In fact, the shift from a one-to-many model of communication, that implied a communication's flow starting from the company towards the consumers, to a many-to-many mediated communications model (Hoffman. Novak, 1997), allows the interactions between consumers and between the consumer and the medium. Both companies and consumers contribute to the content of the medium that is always changing, due to the new experiences and information enriching it.

3. Brand community for consumers or by consumers?

Many marketing managers have understood how a strong brand community can support the brand image and the corporate identity (McWilliam, 2001); thus many corporate web sites are encouraging the building of a community providing discussion lists, bulletin boards or even allowing a real and autonomous brand community whose analysis can reveal important information about the identity of the consumers, their desires, their needs, and their expectations. When a company creates a community, it is nurturing the development of new relationships with its customers and it is enabling consumers to communicate among them.

However, most of the attempts to encourage communities are motivated from the desire to promote the communication between the corporation and its customers, in a relational one-to-one way. But the most successful communities, like the one fostered by the Harley Owners Group, a famous case history in this field, encourage the dynamic among consumers according to a many-to-many model of communication.

Inside these brand communities created by the firm, the brand can be an absolute protagonist, around whom all the discourses generated by the consumers are centred. It is the case of a very well-known community: My Nutella.com. Studied repeatedly by Cova and Pace (2005, 2006) this community, born in 2003, demonstrates the farsightedness of the Ferrero's managers that decided to open an authorized community, after some years of struggles, even on a legal basis, with the promoters of unauthorized websites like Nutella Fans, Nutellamaniacs, or Nutell@Chat Club. "With its my Nutella The Community site, the brand is "taking a step backwards", i.e. leaving the spotlight to consumers who can thereby become the real protagonists and architects [...]. This site is intended as an agora where everyone can congregate, a meeting place for all those who identify with the product's values" (Cova, Pace, 2006, p. 1096). The community hosts a photo gallery and personal diaries offering a free space for those who are united in the name of the product. The authors highlight that Ferrero left the consumer free to fill the space of the community with their contribution, without any particular form of control. This kind of community created for consumer seems to be the most diffused: the same model is shared by brands of very different product sectors like Trudi (toys), Badedas (toiletries), La Fornarina (fashion), Aprilia (motorcycles).

Different is the form of another well know community: donneonline.it. Here the role of the brand (market leader in the sector of sanitary napkins) is only to support and to sponsor a virtual space of relationship between women. The brand has not the power to gather passionate consumers, but hosts and fosters the relationship among them (Mortara, Sinisi, 2005). In the different sections of

the community the female consumers share projects and experiences without any kind of control from the firm. The brand encourages the communication through tools like diaries, forum, on-line games, but features also sections about fashion, gossip and actuality. The community is not about the brand; nevertheless the added value for the firm is to present the brand as a sort of facilitator, an unobtrusive presence, trustful and free from commercial links. At the same time, the brand is not so deeply associated with the products (sanitary napkins) and becomes a sort of a girl friend with whom it is possible to speak freely.

The communities created spontaneously by consumers for consumers are perhaps more interesting for the marketing managers. They exist without any kind of support from firms, neither financial nor technological. Ducati, e.g., is such a powerful icon that there are consumers that have spontaneously formed their community around that brand.

Only the very meaningful and legitimate brands have the power to urge consumers to build a community. A legitimate brand (Semprini, 1996) is in the market for a long period spanning many years. It has built around itself a world rich on symbols: Saab, Macintosh, Mini, and Nutella represent paradigmatic cases.

Inside these spontaneous aggregations, consumers discuss about the brand, relate their experiences with the brand, and tell stories about the brand (Muniz, O'Guinn, 2001) and there could be even negative remarks.

There are many examples of communities created from consumers. The MINI2 community has been opened in 2001 (the same year of production of the new Mini, a brand of the BMW group) by two young men sharing a passion for the world of Mini. "Fuel for your MINI obsession" is the claim on the homepage of the community that defines precisely the scope of the contents of the community: like the fuel for the motor, the community energises and expands the world of values built around the brand (Mortara, Sinisi, 2005). In this community, like in all the brand community created by consumers, emerges the tribal approach to the consumption: products and services are chosen on behalf of their symbolic value more than for their use value.

A brand community might become a threat to the firm; i.e. if one of the members of the community has a negative remark this will spread, very swiftly, among all the others associates. It is possible to find communities that are against a brand, or that encourage to boycott a brand or a product: see Nike, but also Nestlé.

4. On- line and off-line practices

There are different levels of participations in the community's activities that depend, obviously, from the sophistication of the community. For instance, users' groups that are based on shared use, mostly of technology, can be considered a sort of undeveloped communities. Born in the '50s they have a tradition in the business to business market, in many sectors as finance, health care, banking. These groups are mostly used to share experiences, solve problems, and discuss about various related topics. Users' groups can be formed spontaneously by buyers, or started from the vendor, and provide various services like periodic meetings, public lectures, a newsletter and even social events. In the last decades, thanks to the web, most of them offer a site and therefore a virtual participation and technical support given through the net. Some of these communities, like Java Users Group, maintain a geographical link and numerous off-line activities. One of these is the itinerant road show through some Italian cities to promote the Java technology (<http://www.javaday.it/>).

Some researches have highlighted that it is only the participation to an event (a brand fest, or meeting) that can truly relate the customer to the brand. The role of the brand management, organizing the event, is often critical in facilitating ritual storytelling from the members or in establishing rituals and assessing traditions that foster the feeling of connections and belonging (McAlexander et al, 2002). Often, given the peculiarity of the product, strong relational bonds with the brand depend actually on real experiences with the brand itself. Driving a Jeep on a peculiar rough road, as an activity organized during a meeting of Jeep owner, can really be determinant in building passion

toward the brand. The occasion, restricted in space and time, to meet people and to really experience the product, offers a rich social circumstance for communications that reinforces the bond typical of a brand community and lets virtual ties become real ties.

The power of the community is so strong that – like in the case of the Apple Newton, a precursor of current palmtop - can outlive the abandon from the firm. The Newton Community represents an exemplary case history that underlines the strength of the bonds between product and consumer.

Apple retired the Newton in 1998 from the market, after 5 years of commercialisation, due to the introduction in the market of more competitive products. Nevertheless the Newton users did not discard their Apple Newton and, thanks to the existence of the community, developed free software to maintain the product up to date with the progresses in the category (compatibility with new devices, possibility to use wireless connection and so on). They are now alone in the sustaining of the brand. The Newton has become so precious for the users that Muniz and Schau (2005) recollect a sort of religiosity in the relationship between product and consumer. Their netnographic research (Kozinets, 2002) highlights a sort of cult for the Newton fostered through tales of mythical survival after crashes, miraculous recovery of data and phenomenal brief recharging time (Muniz, Schau, 2005, pp. 741-742). Obviously this kind of after death cult would be impossible to promote without the aggregation power of the Internet and its capability of overcome spatial boundaries.

Given the specificity of the product sector or of the brand, some communities encourage physical meeting (like Harley-Davidson and Saab), others rely more on the Internet (Macintosh).

5. Conclusions

In the post-modern society, characterized from the coexistence of different kind of consumers and different kind of consumer behaviours, many authors have outlined the existence of a new form of community. The brand communities, or brand tribes (Cova, Pace, 2006), define any group of people that possess a common interest in a specific brand and create a parallel social universe (subculture) rife with its own myths, values, rituals, vocabulary and hierarchy. Being a part of a tribe helps the consumer to redefine the value of objects and services that become symbols for the new rituals and a way to redefine relationships among the members.

These peculiar communities are created by passionate consumer or by the corporations that use them as a new and efficacious instrument to relate consumers and brand. In a very aggressive market, where the traditional communications tools alone are unable to define a really competitive advantage for a brand, experiences related to the ownership and consumption of the product can become a powerful mean of differentiation. When a firm encourages the development of a brand community, it knows that can rely upon a very faithful group of consumers. The consumers become real advocates that spread the values of the brand across others communities. They defend the products even if they have some defects. Finally, they are really loyal, since they “are emotionally invested in the welfare of the company and desire to contribute to its success” (McAlexander et al, 2002, p. 51).

The increased use of the Internet in almost every class of consumers has improved and facilitated the relationships between members of a community that now rely on off-line and on-line activity to support their passion. Some researches highlight the fact that Internet users have a better opinion of firms that create virtual communities to facilitate the communication between the consumer and the company) even if they would not pay for the privilege to participate (Evans et. al., 2001).

The corporations that believe in developing communities, believe in developing marketing strategies around products or services that can link the consumers together following the idea of a tribal marketing (Maffesoli, 1998, Cova B. and Cova V., 2002). They have their advantages and can satisfy many of the requirements of relationship marketing (Gronröos 1994): monitoring accurately the community they know minutely their member, with their interests, passions and enthusiasms.

Obviously there are some caveat: i) customers can find the firm activity a bit intrusive and overwhelming, ii) the rules of relationship marketing can be perceived as an attempt of invasion of

the private sphere and iii) the participation to brand events can be perceived as too expensive in term of time and money.

But the main danger in relying too much on brand communities as a marketing tool lies in the obvious and almost tautological fact that they are communities or even “tribes”. And tribes can be - as the colonial powers of the past learned very soon at their own expenses – powerful allies, but also powerful enemies and made more so by knowing very well their (former) friends. Therefore, once a brand community is established it should be observed with care, but, as much as it is possible, it should be respected and not tampered with. As a marketing tool, brand communities should have a mostly passive role: they are and should be considered a kind of hearing aid, an amplifier of the reactions of the brand followers. They can be useful in developing brand strategies, in innovating the product, and in producing new ideas.

A corollary of what I have just said is that, almost by definition, brand communities are deeply conservatives. They are built around existing images and values. Their myths and rites are celebrations of a perceived and reinforced reality based on “now”. Their reactions to new products, brand extensions, changes of image and/or target, etc. is very useful in decision making. Nevertheless, the good manager should always remember that the members of the community are usually only a small fraction of the consumers of the products marketed under the brand name. Even something that the more loyal and faithful follower cannot and should not accept since they consider it a “blasphemy” can well be in the long run the best decision for the brand and the firm that owns it.

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