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e-Voicing an opinion on a brand

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First part : online practices of consumers

"Markets are conversations". With this first suggestion and the 94 others that followed, the authors of the Cluetrain manifesto (Levine et al., 2000) highlighted in 1999, the fundamental changes that the advent of Internet would generate in the manner of considering the relationship to markets and more generally speaking commercial exchanges. They portend in particular, the progressive replacement of traditional mass-marketing tools by the generalisation of a new means of communication characterised by novel forms of conversation between consumers on one side and companies and their brands on the other.

Consumers expect greater transparency, authenticity, reactivity, options and support by the company with regard to its responsibilities in relation to them and to society in general (Myron, 2010). Thanks to Internet, consumers have the means to be treated not as mere numbers, but as individuals to be heard. In other words, thanks to information technologies, they can enjoy new forms of power/control.

Internet is, in fact, considered as an empowerment tool both in the field of consumer behaviour and in information systems, to the extent that it allows consumers to interact with the rest of the world at different levels (personal, dyad, group, community) (Amichai Hamburger, 2008).

A good illustration of this phenomenon among others: if a consumer has an unpleasant experience with a brand, he is able to divulge this information no longer simply to his next door neighbor, but to numerous friends world-wide as well as those listening to him on social networks, with the possibility of even providing visual and audio traces.

Consumers are not all equal in relation to these new uses of Internet and to the potential power they wield. Computer savviness, the consumer's representation of technology (Kozinets, 2008), along with the cultural capital, where age certainly affects the use that

he can make of this potential source of power and consequently his degree/level of empowerment.

However, the different ways in which this power available to the consumer can be expressed is to be found in new practices under the form of cyber-experiences, that we have defined in the following paragraph. The conceptual framework of the experience enables us to grasp the large variety (of practices) that the consumer has access to and can implement in cyber-space.

Definition of cyber-experiences.

Cyber experiences or on-line experiences can be defined as all the consumer experiences, i.e. interactions of persons x object x situation (Punj and Stewart, 1983) which generate significance for the persons experiencing them (Filser, 2002; 2008), whether such interactions are market or non-market related. Cyber experiences presuppose an individual-screen interaction, irrespective of the screen size (desk computer or portable, smartphone or tablets of the Ipad type) and can take place in any real physical place and concern any product or service category (Kozinets, 2002).

Different categories of cyber-experiences

Internet must not always be considered as the reproduction/simulation of the real world, but rather as an alternative environment accessible via a computer and which is both from a company's point of view :

- a distribution channel for goods and services
- an advertising medium

and from the consumer's point of view, essentially :

- a potential source of unlimited information,
- a consumption area
- an area to voice one's opinion

One can distinguish : (1) strictly market cyber experiences ; (2) both market and non-market cyber experiences.

(1) Strictly market experiences

This type of interaction covers online shopping experiences (Soopramanien, 2011), and correspond to shopping experiences (Tauber, 1972) in conventional shops/stores selling goods and services. By cutting the storage and distribution costs, Internet allows several companies to market products that would not be economically viable to propose in conventional stores, thus resulting in an almost unlimited increase in offer (Anderson, 2006), as illustrated by the long tail theory, and transforming this distribution channel into a vast borderless supermarket from the consumer's point of view. Ranging from purchases on Amazon.com to hotel room reservations on Booking.com and downloading music from Itunes, these cyber experiences correspond to a real market exchange and not free of charge. In most cases, they involve both the consumer and the company, but Internet has also promoted CtoC sales with online auction sites such as eBay (Peters and Bodkin, 2007).

(2) Market and non-market cyber experiences

These include :

-the search for information experience that comes prior to the buying and consumption experience (Arnould, Price et al., 2002).

The search for information, which has become extremely intuitive through the use of engines such as Google, is one of the activities most shared by web users. We could even maintain that the search for information is the starting point of any cyber-experience.

By relating the history of Google in his book, *The Search*, Battelle (2005), considers that the process of seeking information constitutes a major cultural change transforming the manner of contemplating market exchange. Information search on the Web has, in fact,

strong implications as regards the manner of consumption and indeed constitutes a novel source of power/control available to the consumer.

Clemons (2008) believes that the information the web user is likely to obtain with just a few clicks, affects his behaviour and consequently, all the variables in a classic marketing mix : the price becomes what the consumer is willing to pay, advertising is increasingly determined by what the consumers have to say about the product online (online user-generated content) and product design corresponds to the most strongly expressed consumers' preferences (crowdsourcing) (Clemons, 2008) in order to fill the gaps in the existing market offer.

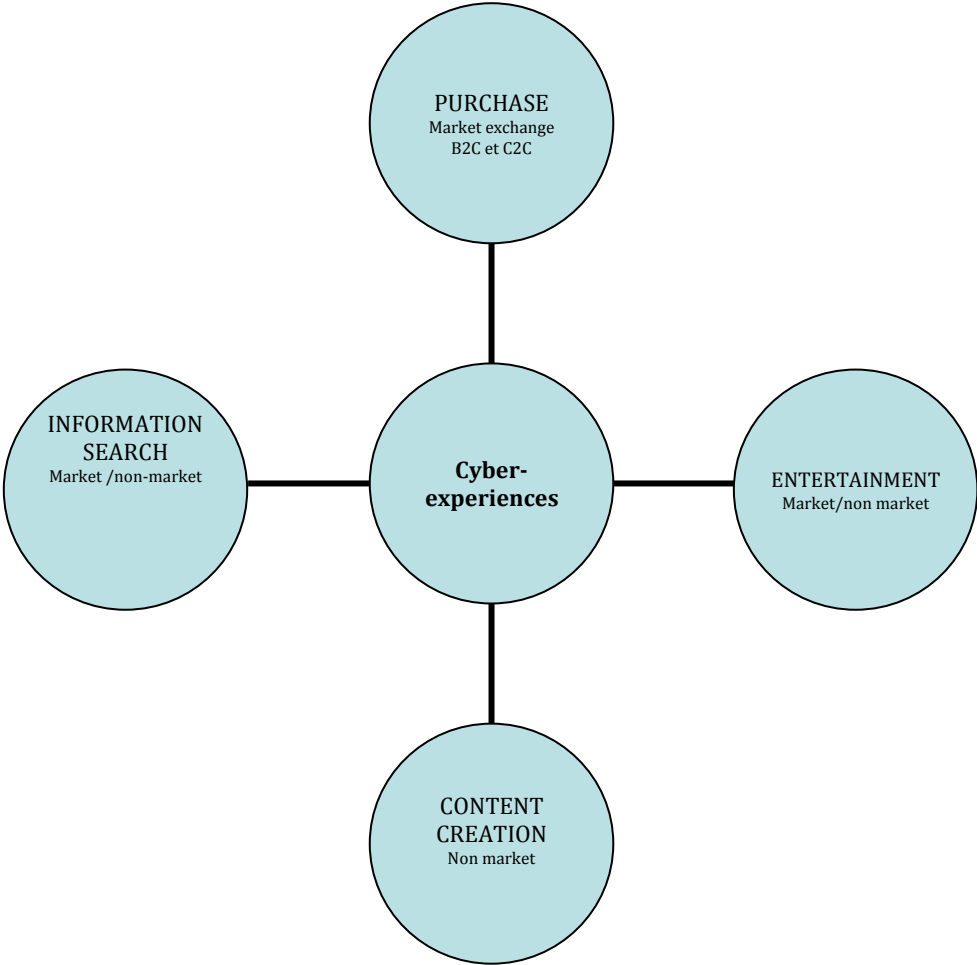
- **entertainment experiences** : Internet could be considered as a source of entertainment, with unspecified borders, in which the web user can enjoy an infinite number of recreational and/or instructive experiences. Addis (2005) refers to this type of experience as edutainment experiences, a contraction of education and entertainment. These experiences, whether or not free of charge, cover a range of games, reading, podcasts accessible via Internet, and constitute a polymorphous offer that is almost unlimited and regularly updated. To this effect, it is worth noting the practices of numerous students who no longer watch television, but the same programmes, series (American) –through podcasts on their computers.

- **content creation experiences.** We use this term to designate all the interactions person x object x situations (Punj and Stewart, 1983) involving the production/circulation of content in chat rooms, forums, blogs, or on a wider scale, the presence more or less active on social networks like Facebook. The experiences of “voicing an opinion” and the resulting discourse could relate to any consumer/brand interaction (having taken place on the Internet or in real life), whether real or fictional. These comprise experiences resulting in the production of a consumer generated content (Fournier and Brunel, 2008).

The main objectives of identified cyber experiences are represented on Figure 1. It can be stated that the search for information could be entertaining just as entertainment

could be an enriching process/experience and a source of information. The categories bring to light the main objectives sought.

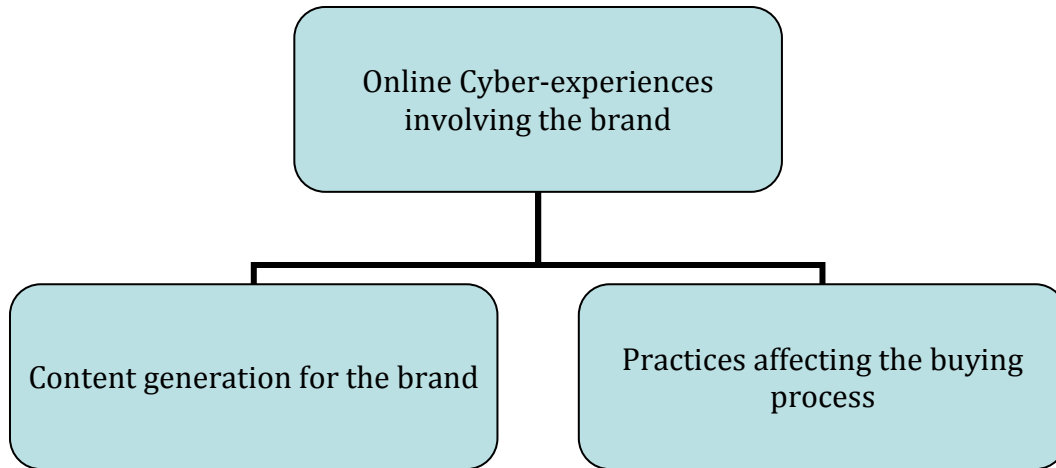
Figure 1 Cyber experiences classified according to main objective sought



Cyber-experiences involving brands

If we focus on cyber-experiences involving brands, two major categories of practices can be distinguished : (1) practices implying consumer generated content as regards the brand ; (2) practices that affect a phase of the decision making process involved in buying the brand (Figure 2).

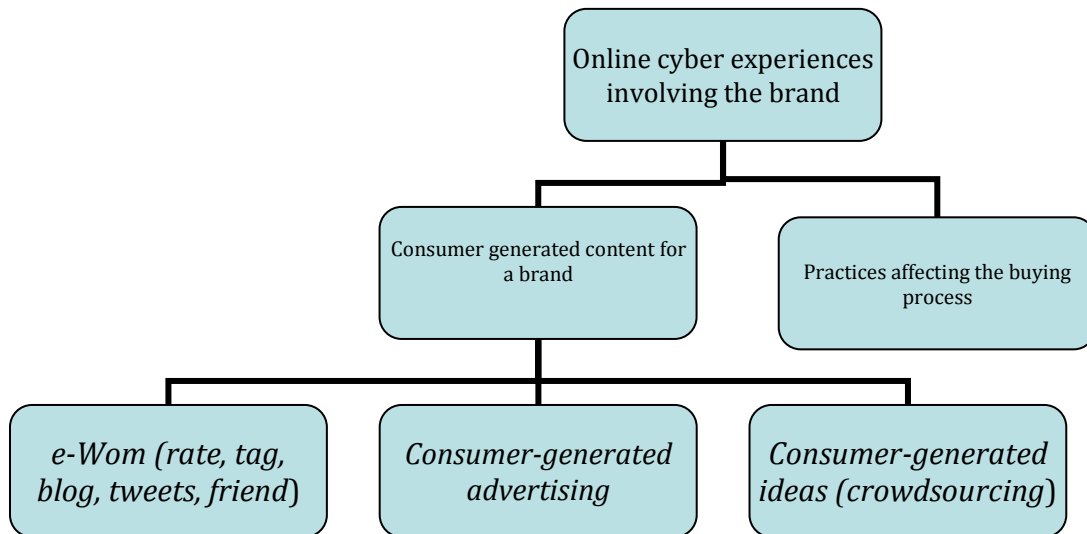
Figure 2 : Cyber-experience categories involving the brand



1. Content generation for a brand

Consumer generated content for a brand can take different forms. The content could be a commentary, a recommendation, a rate, tag, comment, blog, tweet, friend (Hardey, 2011) with the purpose of providing information to others which then becomes e-Wom. But the content generated for the brand could go as far as the creation of an advertisement referred to as consumer generated advertising) (Campbell et al., 2011), the brand parody (Fournier and Avery, 2011) or the generation of ideas for the brand called crowdsourcing.

Figure 3 Cyber-experiences including consumer generated content for a brand



e-Wom and comments on a brand

Its form

This communication can take several forms (essentially textual, but also visual and audio (images, videos, etc...)), different intensities and different degrees of sophistication.

Its circulation

The online release of such discourse implies their accessibility to a potentially high number of consumers, a geographical de-compartmentalisation and the immediacy of this accessibility to the message. The individual can communicate on different levels: personal (consumer -> company ; dyadic (consumer a -> consumer b) ; in groups (consumer a -> a consumer group) ; in a community (Füller et al., 2009).

These different levels of communication correspond to different virtual areas (social networks like Facebook, forums, blogs, virtual communities or online communities. Kozinets (2002) distinguishes five types of online communities: (1) the boards (also called newsgroups, usegroups or usenet groups), organized around a specific product or a service ; (2) independent web pages or web rings (thematic links of the Web pages) ; (3) thematic mailing

lists ; (4) the MUD or multiuser dungeons ; (5) chatrooms. MUD and chatrooms are less oriented to the market (Kozinets, 2002).

Its trace

Furthermore, the discourse put online, whatsoever its form (textual, visual...) can remain for an indefinite period (even permanent) on the Internet, and is materialized by a written/visual trace which continues to exist. Examples of compromising photos on Facebook that continue to be circulated endlessly, even if they do not necessarily concern a brand, illustrate this point.

Theorisation of e-WOM/e-Word of Mouse

Consumer to consumer communication is meant to have a strong impact on consumers' buying behavior. Longtime understood as face to face communication, online communication from the consumer has taken multiple forms with the development of Internet (Gupta and Harris, 2010) and one can talk about e-Word of Mouth as Word of mouse, since this high tech version of ancestral word to mouth communication is now taken over by the computer mouse. From a fugitive oral form we now have a written and visual form that lasts and can be transmitted effortlessly. Kozinets et al. (2010) identify three phases in the evolution of models theorizing WOM : (1) the model of organic inter-consumer influence (2) the model of linear influence ; (3) the model of joint generation via a network. WOM was theorized as early as the forties of the last century as an influential model among consumers. Kozinets et al. (2010) qualify this first model as organic to the extent that it functions without intervention from marketers. Thereafter, marketing theoreticians and practitioners recognized the importance of being able to identify influential consumers in the WOM process to attempt to associate opinion leaders, referred to as the linear influence model. Lastly, to the advantage of the development of Internet, marketers became interested in another manner of steering WOM. This new manner of operating puts emphasis on the consumer networks, online groups and communities.

Incorporation of the e-WOM phenomenon by companies

Among the different forms of voicing opinions by consumers on the Internet, the customer reviews used as sales pitch is undoubtedly the most frequent. Most multi-brand distribution sites presently have a mechanism enabling them to take into account customer reviews in one way or the other. By way of example, ASICS has chosen Bazaarvoice to incorporate customers' opinions on its 30 sites across Europe and on Facebook. The brand can henceforth control this type of content generated by users and integrate it in all aspects of its business, from product design to marketing (source : Kovacs e-marketing portal, 22/03/2011).

Customer opinion can be received in different areas. The fan pages on Facebook constitute an area that is increasingly sought by brands. With over 600 million active members and an interface translated into over 70 languages, Facebook has become a powerful communication tool with the public, partners, customers and potential employees. (<http://www.esens.unige.ch/> consulted 20/4/2011). Vanksen has just published a white paper on the phenomenon of "fan pages" on Facebook. According to this source, among the brands having the greatest number of fans on Facebook are Ferrero, Mars and Apple. The most represented sectors are the agribusiness, fashion and internet. Mars, the second most present brand on Facebook, has a community manager providing input for the fan page, contrary to Ferrero, for which the pages exist in an "organic" way that is with fan generated input.

The fact that a person is a fan does not mean that he is an actual user of the brand, nor that he is perfectly satisfied with it. Being a fan is sometimes the required entrance ticket to be able to express an opinion on the brand. The fan pages present potential risks for the brand image because of their viral aspect and easy referencing.

Opinion/Review control by other customers

Customer opinions and reviews can be regulated in different ways on the Internet. Thus sites such as *Ciao* (<http://www.ciao.fr/>) group together customer comments, which are monitored and rated by other consumers.

« Ciao is an online community with several million members who give their critical opinions and rate millions of products and services for other consumers. It is available free of cost to consumers on European markets in the local language and offers both non-biased customer opinions and price comparisons on a daily basis, thus making Ciao the most detailed source of "shopping intelligence" on the web. Proof of Ciao's success : more than 38 million

consumers visit the site each month, making it one of main online shopping portals of Europe.
» (source : *Ciao site : A propos de Ciao*, consulted on 23/3/2011).

It is thus evident that voicing of opinions and comments by customers is subject to some form of regulation on the internet.

Professionalization of voicing opinions on the internet

Certain consumer bloggers have turned this practice, initially non-professional, into a profession. We can find such examples in blogs dedicated to fashion (Kretz, 2010). In this example, voicing of an opinion on the internet has turned professional and fully recognized as such by brands.

This type of professionalized opinion giving is part of WOMM strategies and adopts specific forms of expression. Kozinets *et al.* (2010) identifies 4 types of expression underlying brand related reviews, given by established bloggers: *evaluation, explanation, embracing, endorsement.*

Consumer-generated advertising

Internet and less onerous software or even *open source*, enables consumers to produce not only comment but also videos posted on sites such as *YouTube*. The use of videos is one of the main activities of web users (Campbell *et al.*, 2011). These activities could be considered as part of corporate strategies as in the case of participatory advertising. The example of the *Doritos* brand and the advertisements for *Superbowl* created by web users, that of the *Nespresso* film *The Capsule*, of which the end part has been written by web users illustrate this point. The consumer is invited to generate communication for a brand, but the overall advertising is monitored by the company.

There exist videos on brands over which the company has less control, often of a satiric nature (Fournier *et Avery*, 2011).

Consumer-generated ideas

Furthermore, the web user could also be involved in the development process of a new product through the use of tool kits on the web (Fuchs *et al.*, 2011). The consumer's participation in developing a new product corresponds to a change in MAP (Manufacturer

Active Paradigm) to CAP (*Consumer Active Paradigm*) (Rohrbeck et al., 2010), which reveals a major transformation in the consumer’s traditional role.

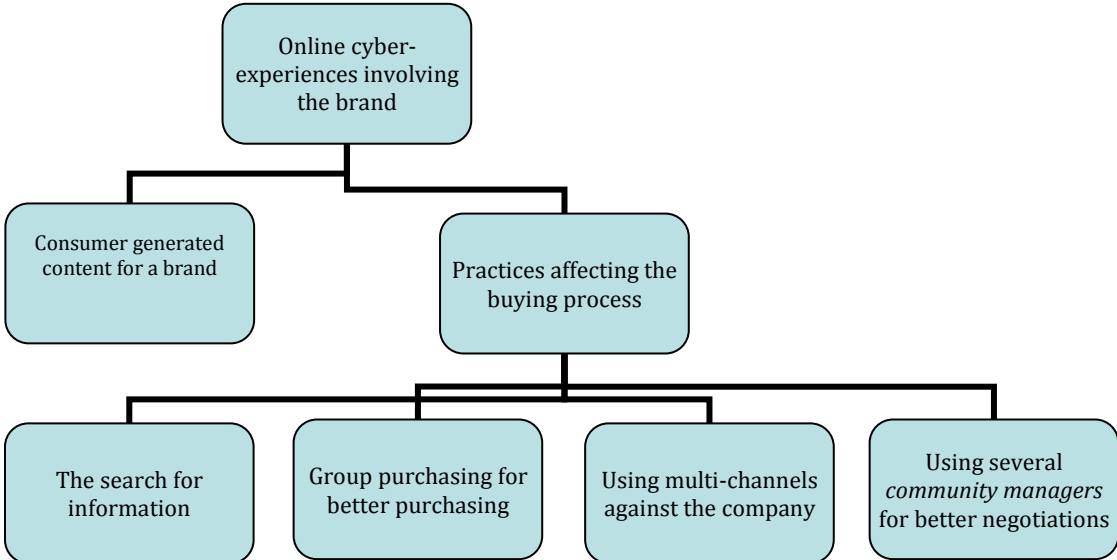
Crowdsourcing

Likewise, *crowdsourcing* for a brand consists in seeking the opinions of web users for its products, values or an element of its communication. The outcry following the recent change in the GAP logo is an example of this mechanism of crowdsourcing. The company appealed web users by seeking their ideas for the logo (Fournier and Avery, 2011).

2. Practices affecting the buying process

These cyber experiences impact one or the other phases of the decision-making process when buying. It can be considered that the tools proposed by Internet are used by consumers for strategic purposes to optimize information on the product or even increase their power of negotiation in relation to the company and consequently to gain control or counter balance control attributed to the company.

Figure 4: Cyber-experiences affecting the buying process



The search for information

Consumers are not merely content to search for information, but also attach importance to selecting their sources. As revealed by a recent survey conducted by *Lightspeed Research* (WPP group), social networks that are very popular as a means of communication, do not, however, succeed in attracting online buyers in search for an opinion on a product. Most French web users prefer (72%) to resort to search engines, market sites such as *Amazon* (56%) or consumer associations (36%). The English prefer market sites (72%) followed by search engines (70%), whereas Germans primarily consult search engines (76%) and consumer associations (65%). We can thus see that consumers not only seek information, but prioritize their sources of information and that certain cultural differences do emerge in these efforts to optimise purchases.

Collective buying power

The group buying sites (for eg. *discounteam.com*) offer to negotiate attractive prices or enable web users to form groups on the site forum to negotiate prices independently for a group purchase of a same product.

Collective purchasing could have a cultural dimension if one considers this booming phenomenon in China (*tuangou*) (Wang et Zhao, 2009 ; Areddy, 2006). In keeping with this same principle of grouping of potential buyers using forums on Internet, the Chinese version of Team Purchase, continues with a face to face encounter in the store where consumer groups meet to lower prices and sometimes quite aggressively. (Wang and Zhao, 2009 ; Areddy, 2006). The consumers turn to Internet to gain power in numbers thus increasing their negotiation possibilities with the company. We are far from the poetic *flash mob* and this clearly reveals the use of collective buying power to negotiate prices or terms of sale.

Using multi-channels against the company

Comparing prices and shopping across channels on the web by users has become increasingly common for greater bargaining power against companies. Thus web users implement a strategy called «*click then mortar then click* », which after an active search for information on the web, consists in going to the store to negotiate prices and then threatening to buy online if the negotiation is unsuccessful.

Using several community managers to negotiate

Other strategies concern web users who identify several *community managers* in charge of one same brand and negotiate with each of them by resorting to a form of competition among companies and community managers, thus fragmenting the e-marketing strategy in place.

Consider the following verbatim : *"I was disappointed with a purchase. After placing several calls to the hotline, and getting no response, I placed very negative comments on the Facebook page of the brand. Three minutes later, the community manager got in touch with me, and my problem was immediately solved"*. This example illuminates the opportunistic component of consumer e-voicing : the goal is not so much to inform other consumers than exerting pressure on the brand. And motives for such expressions on the net are not rooted in a radical criticism of the consumption society, but rather on strictly utilitarian motives...

After a rapid overview of cyber-experiences steered by the consumer in relation to the brand, we will study the category of cyber-experiences involving the production of a discourse.

Second part: Research orientation

1. Analysis grid of the reasons and forms of voicing an opinion online

Fournier and Avery (2011) speak of *Open Source Branding* in relation to the observable mechanisms/practices on Internet which involve the web user and the brand. After having identified four themes underlying these practices (*the age of social collective, the age of transparency, the age of criticism, the age of parody*) and three lines of corporate behavior in response (*The path of least resistance, Playing their game, Leveraging Web 2.0 interconnectedness*), Fournier and Avery contend that observed practices call into question the paradigm of *branding management*.

In keeping with the finding of Fournier and Avery (2011), the grid (Figure 5) explores the elements potentially underlying the online opinion statements of consumers regarding a brand/company. This grid is structured around the context of voicing an opinion by characterizing it in relation to an element triggering the opinion statement (transaction vs. non transaction) on the one hand and characterizing the context by taking into account the consumer's orientation (cooperative/conflictual). It results in four quadrants which we will analyze.

Among the different research themes of interest to us, we will focus on those suggested by Fournier and Brunel (2008), corresponding to quadrants 1 and 2 of figure 5.

Figure 5: Grid for structuring forms of online opinion statements

| | | Consumer orientation in relation to the brand | |
|--|------------------------------|--|---|
| | | Cooperative | Conflictual |
| Context of consumer voicing an opinion | Linked to a transaction | 1. Communication of information Recommendation Product review | 3. Claim using competition / opportunism |
| | Independent of a transaction | 2. Tribal belonging / fan club Recommendation Online communities, fan pages, consumer generated advertising | 4. Protestation Boycott / disparagement Voice/exit |

2. Consumer-generated branded content

Nature and effectiveness of consumer-generated branded content (Fournier and Brunel, 2008). Consumer as ‘translators’ and ‘co-creators’ of meaning: is this new role a source of value? Market surveys show the high level of acceptance by consumers of information provided in the internet by other customers, and research has highlighted the role actually played by this kind of information in the consumer decision process. If the benefits of consumer generated information to other consumers are well documented, less attention has been devoted to the benefits that a consumer can find in this process of information generation. A reference to the opinion leadership literature is a first track of investigation, even though the e-opinion leader may capture significantly different forms of recognition in the internet, when compared with the "classical" forms of opinion leadership in a "real world" social circle.

Does CGA present a fundamentally different advertising paradigm or does it operate to persuade in the same way as company-sponsored advertising? The same market surveys signal a potential gap between the credibility of company sponsored information, and consumer generated information in the internet. Whereas banners, popups and other familiar communication supports are perceived as intrusive and generate negative comments, consumer generated information receives a systematically more positive assessment. How will these contrasted effects impact the role of different sources in the consumer decision

process ? Will consumer generated content become a new source of consumer empowerment, and lead to a significant shift in the balance of power in the marketplace ? Or will the brands be able to keep control over those new means of expression ? These questions are decisive in order to better understand the future shape of the relations in the marketplace.

3. Active internet user behavior pattern overtime

There is a strong need to investigate the link between consumer expression on the web and consumer behavior. For example, are very “loud” consumers more loyal to the brand over time than less active customers ? The extreme case of the brand tribe has been analyzed by European and north American field works, and exemplifies a very intense link between voice and action. But it is dubious to consider that every consumer posting information on the web is a passionate member of the brand community.

A parallel may be drawn with the results of research exploring the link between satisfaction / dissatisfaction and brand loyalty. Some dissatisfied consumers may become very loyal buyers of the brand if the motives of their dissatisfaction have been solved by the brand. Do such traits operate on the web ? Maybe a dissatisfied consumer will post information on a forum, get involved in an intense exchange of information with other customers, and revise his former negative attitude toward the brand, leading perhaps to the diffusion of more positive information later.

Using longitudinal data on e-voicing, and linking them with actual buying behavior, could provide useful cues to better assess links between speech and action.

What variables explain the tendency to voicing an opinion on internet

4.Firms ‘ stances in reaction to internet users voices

Finally, this research should address a managerial question : how should a company take into account a typology of internet users based on "voicing styles" ? Should this variable be measured (and how ?) and integrated in consumer databases ? The recognition of the critical role of consumer involvement in information processing has led brands to radically contrasted persuasive strategies when they address low or high involvement segments. Should voicing styles be taken into account in the same way ? And how effective (and efficient) are different answer strategies ?

To conclude, we would like to stress the radical change that is occurring in the marketplace due to the development of consumer expression in the internet. Theoretical analyses of this behavior might be located along a continuum. On one hand, e-voicing is reflecting a massive rejection of the consumption society, and a sign of some kind of consumer revolution of the "reclaim the streets" style. Such forms of expressions probably exist. But on the other hand, e-voicing may reflect a basic need of the contemporary consumer to get in touch with other people, and to be considered for some kind of expertise he is detaining. And between those extremes, we could imagine a large variety of motives, some basically utilitarian and opportunistic, some more altruistic in essence, reflecting an authentic willingness to share the knowledge and the experience with others.

This research project should rely on a large variety of theoretical frames, from an individualistic psychological frame, to broader schemes derived from the Consumer Culture Theory. And before empirical measures are developed to attempt consumer typologies, a massive qualitative exploratory research should be led to give more substance to the research propositions formulated in this paper.

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