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► **To cite this version:**

Laurent Busca, Laurent Bertrandias. The Many-Faced Consumer: Practices and Consequences of Social Media Government. Association for Consumer Research Conference, Oct 2016, Berlin, Germany. hal-04791597

**HAL Id: hal-04791597**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04791597v1>**

Submitted on 19 Nov 2024

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# **THE MANY-FACED CONSUMER: PRACTICES AND CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL MEDIA GOVERNMENT**

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Abstract: Marketing routines are seldom studied in the marketing management literature. Previous research outlined the role of routinized consumer practices in market change. Can routinized marketing practices also play a role in market change? Using a foucauldian framework, we study Social Media Management practices on social media platforms. We find three fundamental practices (framing, optimizing and channeling) which create and manage three populations: a conversation made of words, a community made of individuals and specific influencers. These practices have side-effects impacting the marketer herself but also fostering a continuous market change through what we call a derivation effect. We outline the role of representations and technology in the process linking the circle of practices and market change, and stress the role of service providers in this process.

Key-words: Social media management; Representations; routines; practices; software technology; service providers

## INTRODUCTION

Routinized marketing practices are clearly not a great concern for marketing researchers (Skålén and Hackley 2011). Routines are indeed usually perceived as factors of reproduction of practices, allowing a limited space for change. Yet routines have been found able to foster organizational flexibility and change (Feldman 2000; Pentland and Rueter 1994). We already know that routinized consumer practices can lead to market evolution (Dolbec and Fischer 2015). Could a routinized marketing practice also influence market change?

Several studies already looked at what is called the “marketing governmentality” (Cova and Cova 2009) and expose the way marketing discourse create representations of consumers and marketers. Beyond marketing discourse, the marketing practice itself should be able to influence the reality of markets (Kjellberg and Helgesson 2006). According to Foucauldian theory (Foucault 1975), this representational activity is part of the government activity, and end up turning what is represented into how it is represented: government models reality by creating its own population. Research about this “performative” capacity of the marketing government has yet been restricted to the effect it has on consumers only, not on the market as a whole. The Social Media Management practice is one of the most salient marketing government practices. The scope of this activity is wide and includes different marketing activities (communication, customer relationship management, analytics; see the SocialFresh Community Management Report 2012), and is more and more routinized; as a result, it can shed light on marketing routines in a broader sense. We therefore investigate empirically the Social Media Management practice to answer two questions: how do marketing practices create and reinforce representations of consumers? What are the consequences of these practices on market evolution?

We performed extensive netnographical work on a community of Social Media Managers (SMMs) and extended our data collection to three other sources (interviews, professional blogs and books and software providers blogs and websites). We used a framework based of the concept of governmentality (Foucault 2004b). In the first part of our results, we find and describe the three fundamental government practices and the three representations they create. In the second part, we expose how they create side-effects, resulting in problems for SMMs. On a theoretical level, we describe the system of marketing practices which governs consumers. We outline the creation and reinforcement of representations of the consumer, and show how they differ from traditional governmentalities. We finally explain the consequences of these practices, and show how behaviors considered “bad” by SMMs do not constitute resistant behaviors in a foucauldian sense. On a managerial level, we show how these practices can malfunction and result in problems for the brand.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: GOVERNMENTALITY AND REPRESENTATION

Considering marketing as government is not pejorative: power is both a repressive and a productive force (Foucault 1975). In the same way, marketing tries to repress unwanted behaviors and foster wanted behaviors (buying, advocating for the brand and so on). Thus, we aim at exploring the specific governmentality of social media management. Governmentality is a specific mode of government (Foucault 2004b). It implies a governor and a governed population tied together by power relationships (they both exert power on one another). This power is exerted through a dispositive, a heterogeneous network of practices, discourses, knowledge and objects; this dispositive has a strategic intention, an organizing principle. We

use four analytical units adapted from existing literature (Dean 1999; Foucault 1984, 2004b; Skålén, Fellesson, and Fougère 2006): ontology, deontology, ascetics and teleology. Ontology is what the objects are: what the marketer is, what the consumer is, etc. Deontology is what the object should be: an ideal-type of the object. Ascetics refer to the concrete practices enacted to achieve the ontology-deontology transformation. Teleology is the “greater goal”, the strategic intention pursued by this governmentality. Three types of governmentality were originally discovered (Foucault 2004b): pastoral (a herd which must become good by following a shepherd who must be a virtuous example in order to grant salvation), disciplinary (a collection of individuals acted upon continuously to optimize them according to a norm in order to achieve the eternity of State) and securitary (punctual intervention on a specific subgroup of the entire population to orientate the whole population). These three governmentalities are not exclusive but can be combined in any empirical situation (Foucault 2004a). Importantly, teleology goes beyond the specific objectives of the SMMt job. While SMMs may aim at improving brand awareness or consumer engagement, teleology is not something a SMM can define. The SMM is only a part of the dispositive whose teleology is studied.

In marketing, two streams of research are of interest for us. First, several “governmentality” studies were interested in how marketing discourses form and govern their consumers and employees (Cova and Cova 2009; Skålén et al. 2006; Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody 2008). Second, some studies were interested in how marketing create markets (Humphreys 2010a; Kjellberg and Helgesson 2006). These studies have two main limitations: they are either theoretical or discourse-based, and may therefore misrepresent the practices actually enacted (Miller 2002). The few studies empirically interested in practices were focused only on a market level; we aim at extending these results at a consumer level, while focusing on the market-level-related consequences.

## **DATA AND METHOD**

Our investigation of social media management practices led us to conduct netnographical work (Kozinets 2002) on a community of SMMs. The ForumMyCM community on Facebook gathers more than 8000 SMMs who interact on a daily basis (7-8 posts per day / 20-25 comments per day). They talk about their practice, exchange blog articles about Social Media Management (SMMt), debate about social media strategies and sometimes fight about them. We have been participating in this community since 2012, reading the exchanges on a daily basis and taking field notes. This led us to collect additional material. We conducted 10 interviews with SMMs (Mduration = 50 min) working in different industries and with different employment contracts (freelance, in a communication agency or brand employee). We also collected two types of additional sources: professional literature (13 blogs and 3 books among the most cited by the community, and 12 reports about SMMt) and 11 software providers’ blogs and institutional websites. We looked at software providers because they provide all the analytical tools used daily by SMMs. Their metrics participate in creating representations. These providers are Hootsuite, Sentiment, Lithium, Over-Graph, trackur, Agorapulse, Viralheat, Cision, Mention, nukesuite and SA.

We followed a theory-led thematic analysis (Caborn 2007), based on our analytical units (ontology, deontology, ascetics, teleology). We followed an abductive process in order to reconstruct the logic of social media management, to understand how they see their consumers and govern them. We “tested” our findings while performing the analysis. To do that, we personally responded to some questions asked by some members to the community:

if our response was supported by other members, it indicated our findings were robust. While we rely on textual data for the analysis, the long-term observation and the field notes allow us to consider that our textual data fit with the actual practices.

## THE SOCIAL MEDIA GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

The SMMt practice is composed of three fundamental practices: framing, defining categories and their nature; channeling, moving entities from one category to another; optimizing, acting on these categories to influence relevant variables. These three practices are interrelated: framing defines also the relationships between categories for the channeling part and the relevant variables for the optimizing part; channeling entities can help optimizing the target category, and optimizing a category can create channeling effects.

The framing operation in our case defines three categories: conversation, made of words (“*[Professional Literature] what is said about the brand on the internet*”), community, made of individuals (“*[Professional Literature] active member ... key-members and some contributors ... and numerous visitors*”), and influencers, specific individuals (“*[Professional literature] bloggers which will be ideal information relays*”). Conversation, while its exact size is unknown, is seen as eternally active: whatever the brand does, it will happen. Community is of finite size and is “mortal”: SMMs have to animate it so it remains active. While composed of individuals, it is always treated and measured at an aggregated level. Influencers are individuals who were “extracted” from the aggregated mass because of a remarkable behavior, and are treated individually. Framing occurs through practices of knowing: SMMs use procedures to know what they manage which create different categories.

Software providers provide analytical tools and metrics which help in this process. Each entity has its specific metrics: size and valence of conversation (as provided for example by Hootsuite, a widely used monitoring software), size and activity of community (through metrics like the number of fans/followers and the engagement score, the two most interesting metrics for companies according to the French Community Managers Survey 2015 by *blogdumoderateur.fr*). Influencers can be detected by using scoring applications (Klout, PeerIndex), but SMMs rarely use these applications. They find influencers by mixing their twitter metrics (number of fans, engagement score) with qualitative insights (“*[Interview] after a while you spot signatures, some signatures call your attention more than others*”).

The optimizing operation can target one or several entities at once. Optimizing conversation is referred as the task of e-reputation management (part of our SMMs’ activity). It aims at increasing the two relevant variables of conversation (size and valence) through two different actions: producing more positive conversation and suppressing negative conversation: “*[Professional Literature] If you can’t make negative content deleted ... create produce valuable content well indexed in Google Search*”. Optimizing community often includes optimizing conversation, and tries to increase the size and activity of the community: “*[Professional Literature] We also know what is a failure: no contributors, no conversation, no reaction to topics*”. The main action to achieve this goal is the production and diffusion of content (“*[Interview] propose them original content which will make them react*”) sometimes including a call-to-action, the organization of contests when members are asked to create and post content. User generated content plays a great role in optimizing as it creates spontaneous activity: “*[Interview] Ideally, we want the members to make the community live by themselves*”. Optimizing influencers aims at creating a positive and durable relationship between the influencer and the brand leading to a production of more positive and relevant

information: “[Professional literature] it is better to take the time to create a durable relationship with opinion relays considered as influential”. Influencers are used as a relay to optimize conversation and sometimes community (when influencers are members of the community): the KPIs of an influence campaign are “[Professional literature] evolution of the sentiment of a community, evolution of the number of positive mentions”.

The channeling operation both reinforces and benefits from the optimizing operation. Optimizing the size of the community usually requires channeling consumers from the “outside”, where they are unknown producers of conversation, to the “inside”, where they convert in individuals whose behavior is added in the aggregated measures of the community (conversation to community channeling). SMMs can recruit through “[Professional literature] content, ambassadors or contests”. Channeling and optimizing are closely related: the production of conversation by SMMs (optimizing conversation) and a good relationship with an influencer (optimizing influencers) attract new community members (conversation to community channeling). Reciprocally, the optimization of community activity allows the emergence of these Super-Users (channeling from community to influencers) and the content produced by the optimization of the community activity can attract new members (channeling from conversation to community).

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

These government practices create representations of consumers that help managing them. Knowing an object and exerting power on it are interrelated practices (Foucault 1975): SMMs take actions according to what they know, and what they know results from the actions they take. Doing so, the SMMt practice produces and reproduces its social order (Schatzki 1996). But this reproduction is the ideal situation: sometimes, problems happen. We find two main problems usually voiced by SMMs: the tensions they experience and the apparition of unexpected and problematic categories beyond conversation, community and influencers.

SMMs are subject to a human-machine tension: “[Netnography] How can the SMM place the cursor? The idea is not to standardize all the SMM either”. This tension emerges from the diversity of the entities they manage. On one hand, they must deal with a huge amount of quantitative data, with aggregated populations of words and individuals: doing so, they adopt formalized processes of publication and monitoring. On the other hand, they manage one-to-one relationships with specific humans: they use qualitative insights and have to humanize the way they act. SMMs are also subject to conflicts of loyalty: “[Interviews] The SMM is not the voice of his master / I can interact [with the community] as a guy and not as a SMM, I participate in the community dynamics”. Some SMMs behave as distinct entities: they work for the brand but are also attached to the community. When humanizing their interaction, SMMs they take over the brand’s actions. As a result, some SMMs advocate a dilution of the SMM’s personality into the brand’s personality “[Professional literature] His person and the brand must merge so we can feel that it’s the brand who is talking”.

Some practices can also result in the creation of new categories of population; we call that the derivation effect. For example, optimizing the size of the community, considering the size as a valuable metric led to the apparition of companies selling fake fans. These fake fans now represent a category of their own, distinct from the community. In the same way, organizing contests on social media led to the apparition of a new category: professional participants, who participate in every social media contest without having particular ties with the brand. Both fake fans and professional participants are categories SMMs consider prejudicial, but

their practices contribute in creating them: consumers' agency can counteract SMMs' strategies even though this agency fits into the social media governmentality. Derivation effect originates in the difference between the SMM's mission and the dispositive's teleology. The derived categories are part of the dispositive: they fit perfectly in the already existing power relationships. Fake fans do increase the metrics, and in doing so optimize the size of the community; but SMMs do not want them as they consider them "fake".

Service providers play a major role in the derivation effect, as they are the ones who inscribe the properties of the populations in "material" software. The inscription of representations in software turns this software in an actor able to influence the SMMs (Latour 1991). Because most of consumer behaviors on Social Media are not directly observable, SMMs rely on technical tools to make this behavior visible: therefore, the way technical tools translate reality into figures and metrics orientates the perceptions of SMMs. As observation is grounded into the technical tools, the representation of the tools becomes confounded with reality. As a result, SMMs actions will have an impact on reality but rely on a misrepresentation of reality by the technical tools available.

This misrepresentation of reality is acknowledged by practitioners: their actions do not have the intended consequences. Therefore, new services providers can emerge, proposing new tools in order to modify the representations, create new categories, while claiming to solve the problems of SMMs. These new service providers frame the populations in another way, then the circle of practices starts again, and the derivation effect occurs, leading to the apparition of new service providers in order to take into account the newly created categories.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

There is a strong interrelationship between the Social Media Management practice, the service providers and the technological tools. Creating, using and acknowledging the weaknesses of a technical tool lead to the creation and modification of representations of the managed populations. This representational activity has two main effects on market change: first, it creates new service providers, who constitute a market by themselves. Second, it modifies the practices of SMMs, and this modification has an impact on consumer behaviors on Social Media. This modification of behaviors can also lead to market change, as new firms can profit from these modifications: advertising agencies can reroute their funds to other social networks; consultancy firms can use these new behaviors to sell new ideas to managers; new marketing professions can emerge from the need to manager a specific population. While hardly predictable, the impact on market change of a routine practice can be huge.

First, we contribute to the marketing-as-practice research stream (Skálén and Hackley 2011) by outlining the importance of studying marketing routines. As most studies on market evolutions have yet focused more on situations of conflict (Giesler 2008, 2012) or exceptional marketing practices such as Megamarketing (Humphreys 2010a, 2010b), we present marketing routines as a major driver of market change.

More specifically, we contribute to marketing governmentality studies by outlining the fundamental role of representations in SMMt and its impact on market change. The circle of practices (framing, channeling, optimizing) has two functions: on one hand, it stabilizes representations and allows marketing actions; on the other hand, the derivation effect allows the evolution of the system of representations. As a result, similarly to organizational path

dependence, the circle of practices orientates market evolution in what may be called a “continuous change” (Feldman 2000). The derivation effect may be a fundamental mechanism in market evolution, and future research should investigate it more closely.

We extend the study of the figures of the consumer (Cova and Cova 2009). While previous research outlined the discursive aspects of the representational activity, we point at its material aspects: the architecture of software carries representational features (Orlikowski 1992) and therefore influences marketing governmentality. Service providers are therefore important actors in market structuration, as the tools they provide participate in fixing consumer representations. Future research should build on previous market devices studies (Callon, Millo, and Muniesa 2007; Zwick and Cayla 2011) to deepen our understanding of the role of business service providers in consumer markets evolution and to add material features to the discursive aspects of marketplace power structures (Thompson 2004).

At a managerial level, we show how these practices of government can result in problems for the brand: organizational problems with the conflict of loyalties for the SMM but also consumer problems with the derivation effect. The SMMt practice creates its own problems, which means brands should look at them as more endogenous than expected. This opens new areas of research about what brands consider as consumer misbehavior or resistance, reinterpreting the concept of norm (Amine and Gicquel 2011) and exploring the impact of marketing practices on norms. As we saw, some behaviors can be labeled “misbehavior” while not being resistant behaviors according to Foucauldian theory. Scholars may consider the distance between discourse-induced norms (what is said to be good) and practice-induced norms (what behaviors are fostered by a specific governmentality) in order to deepen our understanding of consumer misbehavior and resistance.

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