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A ESTRUTURA SOCIAL DE UMA COMUNIDADE VIRTUAL E AS CONSEQÜÊNCIAS PARA O E-MARKETER

LA ESTRUCTURA SOCIAL DE UNA COMUNIDAD VIRTUAL Y LAS CONSECUENCIAS PARA EL E-MARKETER THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY AND THE CONSEQUENCES FOR THE E-MARKETER

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Palavras-chave:
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Palabras clave:
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Key words:
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RESUMO : Este trabalho pretende analisar a dinâmica social duma comunidade virtual de consumo e o modo como esta influencia a estratégia e a abordagem de marketing de uma empresa.

RESUMEN: Este trabajo pretende analizar la dinámica social de una comunidad virtual de consumo y cómo ella afecta la estrategia y el abordaje de marketing de una compañía.

ABSTRACT: The aim of this work is to analyse the social dynamic of a virtual community of consumption and the way in which this influences the marketing strategy and approach of a company.

1. INTRODUCTION

Virtual communities are becoming an increasingly important presence on the Internet. There are Internet host communities covering a wide range of topics (such as arts, religion, politics, diseases). Many contributions have addressed the phenomenon of online communities. These contributions can be divided into four main fields: sociology, Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), organizational studies and managerial studies. For each field, the Internet represents a challenge to their basic concepts. The sociological approach (WELMAN; 1997) focuses on the evolution of the concept of community, challenged by the Internet. From a concept of community grounded in the neighborhood and shared daily living, the concept has now been widened thanks to developments in means of transportation and communication and, more recently, the development of the Internet. CMC studies deal with the effect of new technologies on the communicative behaviors of subjects (CASSELL, 2000; CASSELL; BICKMORE, 2000). Organizational studies are traditionally interested in the boundaries of the firm. The community-based structure provides a new way of structuring the organization; it is a third form, somewhere between a closed hierarchy and the traditional externalization (SAWHNEY, PRANDELLI, 2000).

Finally, managerial and marketing studies are at the core of the phenomenon. Many virtual communities on the Web are Consumption-Based, comprised of consumers who discuss (sometimes quite heatedly) products, brands and alternative offers from firms in a given sector. In virtual communities, social ties emerge and the subjects become more interested in the other people than the product or brand itself. They establish friendships, they frequently exchange messages and suggestions and they deal with personal issues. This emergence of social ties is spontaneous and occurs almost regardless of the topic of the community.

This social dynamic, which is partially detached from the product being discussed, affects the way in which the company should address the community. The company needs to adopt a new marketing approach which is partially detached from the classical view of Kotler. A virtual community should not be seen merely as a repository of information about the consumer, or as an audience to which publicity can be directed, but first and foremost, as a social gathering with its own rules and boundaries which should not be trespassed. The firm should adopt a new marketing approach, based on an in-depth knowledge of the main actors and social ties within the community, rather than on their needs, as in traditional marketing thought. This knowledge can be gained by observing the exchanges and possibly through non-commercial participation in the community, since a classical style of market research would be ineffective. This approach is inspired by streams of thought like tribal marketing (COVA, 2003; KOZINETS, 1999).

The structure of this work is as follows. In the section that follows, a definition and typology of virtual communities are given, stressing the relevance for firms. The work then focus on the emergence of sociality within a virtual community and its main dimensions (roles and emotions). The effect of that social dynamic on the company's marketing approach is then addressed. Finally, an empirical study is presented and conclusions are drawn.

2. VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES AND THEIR RELEVANCE FOR FIRMS

Virtual communities are "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions, for long enough and with sufficient human feeling to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (RHEINGOLD; 1993, p5).

The types of virtual communities are numerous (PRANDELLI; VERONA, 2001; HAGEL, ARMSTRONG, 1997). We can distinguish shared interest communities that gather people with a common topic of interest or passion; relationship communities, where people meet to establish a social tie; communities of consumption, formed by consumers of a given product; fantasy communities, which allow subjects to play role-games or other types of entertainment; and communities of practice (WENGER; SNYDER, 2000), which unite professionals working in a given discipline in order to disseminate up-to-date information and knowledge about their job. As for the exchange of messages between participants, communities can be synchronous (where users communicate in real time through chat systems) or asynchronous (an electronic bulletin board where users can post their messages).

Communities of consumption are of particular interest to firms. They can be a forum for complaints, expressions of enthusiasm, or exchanging suggestions about the firm's offer. Virtual communities are relevant for firms, even if an enterprise has no website. A firm can receive valuable information about its product if there is some community built around it in which consumers share their opinions (MICELLI; 1997, 1998, 1999). The literature is increasingly assessing this emergence; for example, Citroën discovered unknown experiential facets of its own cars observing the community of the Citroën brand (COVA; COVA, 2002). The relevance of virtual communities for firms is shown by those companies, like Dell, that host a community within their official website. Other firms, like Love@Lycos, are purely virtual community organizers, showing that the community can be a business in itself (HAGEL; AMSTRONG, 1997). The challenge for the company is how to extract value from these Internet communities, where nothing is bought or sold and apparently only words are exchanged. It is a quite different setting from that of e-commerce, where value drivers are more visible and known (AMIIT; ZOTT, 2001).

3. SOCIAL DYNAMIC WITHIN A VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

In every virtual community, the social dimension develops and eventually takes over, leading the discussion that comes to take place between people, rather than between consumers. For both old economy companies and virtual firms, an understanding of the social dynamic within a virtual community is very important.

The fact that a social relationship can be created through a process mediated by telecommunications media has been assessed, and sociologists (WELLMAN; 2001) have updated the notion of community. In the past, community was a concept strictly related to territory, to the clan of neighborhood (TÖNNIES; 1954). Industrialization has given birth to a society in which the ties are less direct, between persons with no common ground, who are physically and cognitively distant. A sort of third wave of evolution is occurring due to the development of means of transportation and telecommunications, enabling the establishment of ties with distant subjects. The Internet represents a multiplication of the opportunities afforded by the telecommunication media. An individual can widen her social circle almost indefinitely.

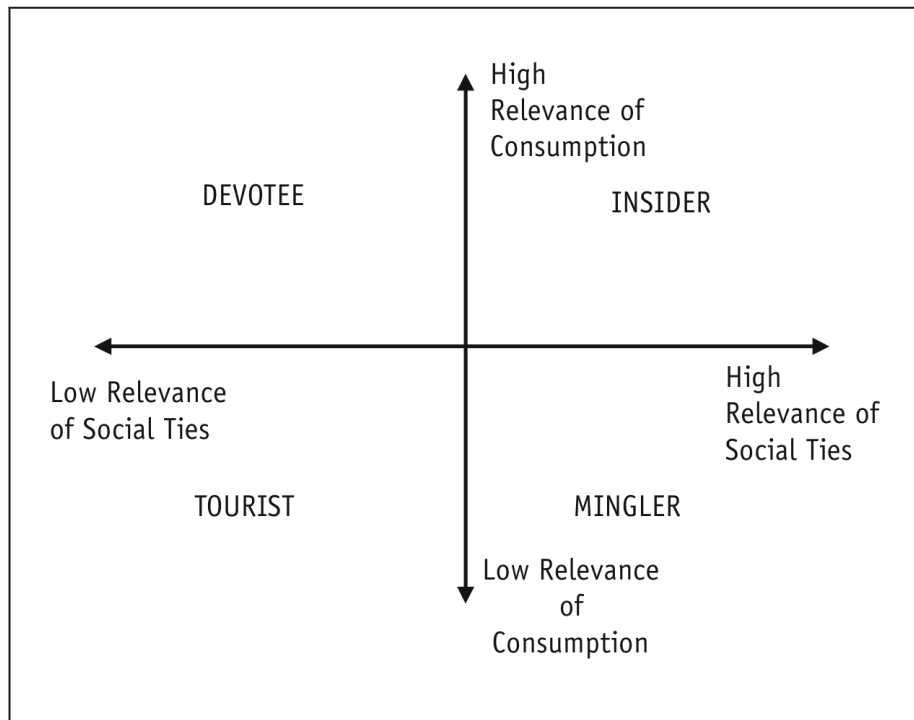
One can admit that the Internet allows for social relationships, but only in a weak form. Granovetter (1973) distinguishes between strong and weak ties. They are different in emotional intensity, reciprocity, intimacy and time spent in interactions. Strong ties have high values in these parameters. But the tie between people who meet each other in a virtual context and interact there can be quite intense and strong, similar to a real world context (WELLMAN; GULIA, 1999). Subjects can spend many hours online in virtual relationships, sharing intimate information and arousing emotional reactions. Rheingold (1993) shows many cases of people who have formed quite strong relationships, which sometimes go offline. The parents' circle of "The Well" community, for instance, was quite intensely tied and members periodically met offline for a gathering with all their family members.

Finally, Castells (2002) points out that the current virtual environment is so rich and involves the life of the subject in such a way that one can no longer speak about "virtual reality", but about "real virtuality". Others use the expression "centaur" person (WIND; MAHAJAM, 2002) whose life cannot be split into online and offline parts, but must be taken as a whole.

Kozinets (1999, 2002) suggests two main dimensions or focuses into which the population of a virtual community can be divided: the social tie and the topic of the community (see Figure 1 below). Combining the two dimensions, he divides the users of the community into: insiders (subjects that have a strong interest both in the topic of the community and in the social relationships developed there), minglers (low interest in the topic, strong interest in relationships), devotees (high interest in the topic and low interest in the social ties) and tourists (low levels for both parameters). This classification shows

that the social dimension is present and is important for a portion of the community's population.

Figure 1: Kozinets' classification of community's members



(Source: Adapted from Kozinets, 1999, p. 255)

The informational dimension of the Internet has therefore been paired by the social dimension (MICELLI; 1997, 1999). Both dimensions should be taken into account for a deep understanding of virtual communities of consumption, which are more than mere exchanges of information about a product.

We may aggregate the concept of social dynamic around two main elements that emerge within a virtual community: roles and emotions. When these two elements are detected, the social dimension is present in the community, integrating (sometimes overcoming) the mere informational function of the community.

ROLES

The traditional marketing approach (KOTLER; ARMSTRONG, 2001) pinpoints the effects that the group to which the subject belongs can exert on him or her. Within the group, one (or more) opinion leader emerges as the

subject towards whom the marketing communication must be focused in order to influence the other members of the group. If a virtual community has some form of hierarchy, a traditional approach would suggest that communication should focus on this person. Is participation in a virtual community evenly distributed among its members? If not, does a hierarchy emerge? Virtual communities show a significant tendency towards a hierarchical structure of the users (REID; 1999).

Some communities (typically the MUDs: Multi Users Dungeons, a role-playing game in virtual environments) have an administrator who has the technical ability to exert power over the other users, even "killing" (i.e. denying access to the system) a person who is disturbing the harmony of the group.¹ These are called "gods" in Internet jargon, since the administrator can do anything he likes, his munificence being the only limit to his power.

At the bottom of this hierarchical pyramid are the so-called "lurkers". These are Internet surfers who do not post messages in the group, but just read the messages posted by the active participants. Lurking is considered an infringement to "netiquette", the implicit rule of politeness of the Net.

Between these two extremes (lurkers and "gods"), lie the bulk of the participants, who can be classified according to the frequency of their postings and their centrality to the network of the group. We can distinguish casual posters and very frequent participants, who act like community hosts. Firms that promote and organize virtual communities are increasingly recognizing the importance of rewarding those participants who show a central role and active involvement in the life of the group. These rewards are usually in the form of additional functionalities for using the system or honorific titles within the group. The most involved users can attract other users, they can host discussions and they can be tutors of newly registered participants ("newbies"). They can be the real managers of the group, promoting harmonious interactions among the members. In such a complex social system (AXELROD; COHEN, 2000), an imposed manager from the firm would be of little help in creating a cooperative and friendly environment.

EMOTIONS

The presence of strong relations in a virtual community may seem at odds with the virtuality of the environment and the artificiality of the medium involved. Still, strong emotional attachments can be created through computer-mediated communication. As some game theory laboratory experiments show (DEUSTSCH; 1961), the mere awareness that there is another person at the other end of an interface (even though totally unknown but for the plays made) elicits emotions in the subject, in a similar fashion to a real meeting. Other studies (CASSEL, 2000; CASSELL; BICKMORE, 2000) show that even an artificial intelligence with an anthropomorphic aspect can create a

social-like interaction where the subject acts as though he or she were involved in a real face-to-face discussion.

The presence of roles and emotions show that the social dimension is at work within a community, in addition to the informational side. This sociality alters the way in which the company should relate to the community. The aim of the empirical section is to illustrate the social dynamic of a virtual community, employing nethnography as method of research.

4. METHODOLOGY

The comprehension of a social aggregation requires an in-depth study of rituals, people, codes of conduct and nuances of meaning expressed in the particular jargon developed within the community. The final turn of meaning of what occurs within a community leads to what Geertz (1973) defines a "thick description", that is, a rich understanding that fits well with the community studied. To achieve this, the researcher must observe, for a long enough period, the interactions among the individuals and, in some cases, should participate in the life of the community as an effective member. This is known as the ethnographical approach.

Virtual communities present new possibilities for this research method. Kozinets (1999, 2002) forms and applies the key assumptions and techniques of ethnography to virtual communities, developing the nethnography. Nethnography, like ethnography, "is based upon participation and observation in particular cultural arenas as well as acknowledgment and employment of researcher reflexivity" (KOZITINES, 2002, 3). The strength of nethnography is a "rich grounded knowledge" gained about the community studied. (GLASER; STRAUSS, 1967). That may be, at the same time, a limitation of the method since it may impair the level of generalizability of the study. Another possible limitation is the role played by the researcher's subjectivity.

An advantage of nethnography compared to ethnography is that all the analysis material is online. In offline social groups, the researcher cannot follow all the interactions, since some are beyond the scope of his or her control. However, the researcher who studies a virtual community can follow all the interactions that take place between the members, since they are available on the screen in the form of postings, chat exchanges and member profiles. The life of the community is "ife on the screen", as Turkle (1995) would posit, and therefore totally at hand for observation.

The aim of the following nethnographic study is to describe the social dynamic that occurs within a community and what benefits the company and its marketers can extract from it. This adding value should understand and respect the social side of the community. The newsgroup described below was

followed for some weeks by the author using a nethnographic approach, reading and interpreting the postings written by the members, and reaching an understanding of the roles and emotions exchanged.

5. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH: REC.AUTOS.MAKERS.FORD-EXPLORER

The object of this empirical study is the Usenet newsgroup dedicated to the automobile the Ford Explorer². It is a non-moderated group where everyone can post his or her message. It can be classified as a community of consumption. The participants of this group are, preferably, people who own a Ford Explorer, who wish to own one, or who are searching for a new car, or car enthusiasts in general. The first category, the Ford Explorer owners, form the majority of the community population.

To select the newsgroup for analysis, the requirements suggested by Kozinets (2002, p.5) were followed. The best communities for the purposes of a marketing study are those newsgroups with large aggregations that function like electronic bulletin boards. Among the possible interesting topics of the newsgroups, the choice was based on a typical consumer product: cars. Then, from among the newsgroups dealing with automobiles, the group rec.auto.makers.ford.explorer was selected, due to the fact that it had a more focused topic for discussion (a singular brand), and a higher number of postings provided by a larger number of different posters.

The newsgroup has, on average, ten threads per day. The median length of the threads is 3 messages. It is a quite lively and populated group, though not overwhelmingly large. It can be compared to a manageable village, rather than a large, scattered city.

Typically, the message poster describes, to the other members of the group, a technical problem that he or she has encountered using his Ford Explorer, asking for comments, hints and suggestions. The following excerpt from a long post encapsulates the spirit of this group. It was written by a subject asking for suggestions on how to prepare his Explorer prior to a long trip: "I just look to this group for guidance, since I know of NO ONE around here (except the dealership) who can give me a down-to-earth answers on questions like this (and you can't even trust the dealership too often!)". The group can provide detailed suggestions that even the manufacturer or its dealer may not be able to provide.

The group's sense of purpose is felt by the members. Any commercial proposal, even one made by a private individual, is considered an invasion of the group's territory. For instance, when a poster tries to sell a hauling system by advertising it within the newsgroup, he receives this fierce rebuttal: "Hey [...]! We aren't buying, so quit spamming usenet! Try selling it on ebay or in

the newspaper". The sale of a spare part for the Explorer may, however, be considered appropriate to the purpose of the group. Nevertheless, the general atmosphere of the group is not about selling goods, but about sharing technical ideas about the use of the Explorer and sharing emotions related to that make of automobile.

The group shows a clear boundary between "us" and "them". A first time-poster customarily identifies himself by indicating the year of manufacture of his Explorer and its mileage. This is like a signature, a way of gaining the legitimacy to write to the group. The members of the group have limited time to read the others' postings and write an answer, according to the attention economy that prevails on the Internet.³ Thus, a subject must be well acquainted with the other participants in order to attract their attention and he must have a good reason to solicit this attention from the group. A first-time poster is not likely to receive any attention at all, unless he has a particularly interesting question to pose. On the other hand, a well-known poster can post off topic messages and originate a thread of positive reactions from his peers.

The sense of community is an obstacle to one-to-one discussions. The discussion must involve all the readers. When a poster asks for a message to be sent to his private e-mail address, he receives this comment: "Sorry, I don't do e-mail [...] there are many others who may benefit from public discussion of the issue at hand".

The messages exchanged are rather technical in nature, but frequently make personal detours. A sense of *camaraderie* among those passionate about cars, engines and related topics easily emerges. This social relationship that forms alongside the technical aspects is coherent with the evolution of Internet usage, from an informational dimension (the exchange of data and information about a topic) to a social one, where the other person is more important than the topic being shared between the subjects.

The social and emotional aspect is even more important than the mere exchange of information and hints relating to the Explorer. When a user attacks, using bad language, one of the most appreciated posters of the group - we shall call the latter JW - a frequent comment is: "But if he [the attacker] doesn't change his attitude first, no one will want to help. Oh well!". The social niceties must precede the technical exchange. Only those who did well and who show themselves to be well connected to the other members have the right to access the group's knowledge. The above-mentioned thread was one of the longest in the group and did not focus on technical details, but on the infringement of the social tie and its sanction. While a simple technical matter can be resolved in a few messages, a social breakdown involves more users and many interventions are called for in support of the attacked person.

Some thread shows disenchanted former owners of Ford's product, who post sarcastic comments on the brand. At the other end of the spectrum are the devoted fans of the American automotive tradition. From their perspective,

purchasing an American car is a way of supporting the national economy. As one of the supporters of the Explorer clearly states: "If you don't like Explorers, don't post to this group".

Thus, the group has two main lines of us/them and relative contrast: the conflict between the group and the "trolls" (users who post in a group under the pretense that they are interested in the topic, but whose sole intention to create chaos within the community), who are seen as extemporaneous outsiders attempting to disrupt the harmony of the discussion; and the contrast within the community between supporters of the Explorer and American automobile brands on one hand, and the critics of American manufacturers and the Explorer on the other. These contrasts also go beyond the strict technical matter to which the newsgroup is apparently devoted.

In relation to roles, the above mentioned JW is a very active, competent and well-liked member of the community, a sort of host.⁴ The appreciation that JW has gained is clearly stated by another participant when JW suffers the above-mentioned attack by a molesting user: "clearly, and to everyones credit, the number of people jumping to [JW]'s defense is very reassuring, and he's earned it [...] I'm in several repair sites, and I come here first [...] cause I know he's up there". Another user, defending JW, affirms: "you just insulted the most selfless helpful person in this group!" Again: "With all due respect, [JW] is one of the most respected and knowledgeable posters in this group. He was trying to help you, like he does a lot of people in this group. You owe him a BIG apology!". The group goes as far as to bring a legal action against the molester. That strong defense of JW shows that he has the role of a symbol within the community, in addition to his role as expert in mechanics and engines. The user T is at the other end of the spectrum: JW is the expert, while T is the subject who constantly poses questions to the group. His character is that of a curious person.

The two user roles may be characterized as thread initiators (T) and thread followers (JW). In order to be the first type, the subject must have the legitimacy to pose questions as seen above, while the follower should have enough competence to answer the questions. As stated before in the theoretical section. We would expect that the mere receiver of suggestions would not remain long in a community, when pressurized to contribute something to it.

Emotions and roles are present and visible within the community studied. The social dimension is prevalent in many threads in which no technical information is exchanged. The community as a whole is a cohesive group with its own rules of entry and discussion.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The existence of such a virtual community can be exploited by the Ford Motor Company, but in a way that is not dictated by the traditional marketing

approach. The informational content of that group is rich, but the social dimension also needs to be recognized.

As for the informational side, Ford can easily monitor the activity of the newsgroup and it can benefit from this observation. One kind of knowledge is required to build a car, and a different kind to use it. Paradoxically, the user may discover more aspects about the product than than the producer itself, due to his day-by-day usage. The client may be inexperienced in engineering, but may be able to spot any little flaw in his "beloved" car. How could Ford, launching into the market a new type of car, predict tiny details of its product like the interdependence between the wheel diameter and the speedometer? When thousands of subjects drive the car, the probability that at least one of them will notice this little fact arises, and a discussion thread in the community can be originated. Many minor issues cannot be addressed to the manufacturer or its dealers. The community seems the best environment for receiving suitable suggestions.

Not only can the community pinpoint the pros and cons of a product, it can also be seen as a source of suggestions for new ones. An example of the valuable hints derived from a monitoring of the life of the community can once again be seen in the automobile industry. Enthusiasts of the 2CV automobile - produced by the French company Citroën (COVA; COVA, 2001) - has contributed to the development of the retro design fad that is appearing in the car industry and other sectors. Pushing this phenomenon to its consequences, the virtual community can be a new frontier for the prosumer concept envisioned by service marketing, in which the consumer is a co-provider of the services enjoyed. The virtual communities (paired with flexible production systems) can extend this concept to manufacturing sectors other than the services sector, giving the clients the power to define the features of the future product. The potential of such a system of producing and disseminating information is notoriously exploited by Linux, the main competitor of Microsoft Windows in the Operating System sector. Linux is not produced by a central software house, but is created by the voluntary contributions of many programmers. In very complex products like a computer operating system, the knowledge developed by one single source is not enough.

The community may be the perfect segment for Ford, since the "true believers" of its brand gather to discuss, sometimes with the "enemies" of the brand. A classical marketing approach would suggest a need to consider Communicating with such a valuable segment. A more modern marketing perspective does not think of the community as a segment, but as a group whose social code does not allow external, foreigner intervention. And that leads to the social dimension of the group. Understandably, Ford does not enter the community examined with its own postings. There is no trace of advertising, even in indirect or covert forms. Ford could directly address some of the issues raised by the community members, dissipating doubts about a spare part or

specifying the technical characteristics of the engine where this would be helpful. But Ford does not do that. This would be considered by the group as an invasion and the level of emotionality of the group could be a block to any commercial invasion. Indeed, the community is not about the Ford Explorer, but about a lifestyle revolving around engines, many Sundays spent fixing that annoying sound of the car when one turns left, devotion to tidy toolboxes and garages dedicated to car-repair. It is about shared emotions. This lifestyle sometimes emerges more clearly in opinions about topics related not to Ford or engines, but to politics or family. In this context, any commercial intervention, however respectful, would be inappropriate since it would be interpreted as purely informational. Moreover, an organization, by default, cannot conduct a lifestyle in the same way as a real person, thus it cannot share it with other. The social dynamic within the community acts as a barrier to foreigners.

Ford plays no role in the community, since a role can be developed only through many postings and long-standing, personal familiarity with the group. JW, the most respected member has produced something like 970 messages.

Virtual communities challenge the traditional marketing approach, pushing it towards new perspectives:

- The old marketing approach was to push the product to the market, trying to persuade potential buyers. This was the case with the well-known black-painted Ford T: a type of car that was supposed to meet the needs of everyone. Then marketing developed, asking customers and prospective customers about their desires and preferences. Virtual communities represent a third type of marketing: the customers show the firm features of the product that the manufacturer itself was unable to spot. We could say that marketing has undergone three phases: pushing, asking and listening. Unobtrusive forms of market research, like the focus group method, were already known by marketing scholars and practitioners as the best way to give the customer a voice. The observation of a virtual community, when correctly conducted, is an enhancement of that marketing philosophy.

- In the classical view, the customer is seen as single entity who must be satisfied, even through one-to-one relationships (PEPPERS; ROGERS; 1993). The virtual community shows that the client is certainly a single entity, but is embedded in a group to which he or she belongs. Many needs are group-related, like the need to be appreciated for one's own contribution to the discussion and the desire to be known as a competent participant in the life of the community.

- Segmentation is a keyword for any marketing strategy. But the virtual community is not a segment in a traditional sense. The subjects that gather together in the group may have quite different backgrounds, psychographic profiles, ages or political views. Nevertheless, they share a common passion. It is not easy to draw the boundaries of such a group, since mere possession of the product may indicate an owner, but not necessarily a person who is passionate about the product. It is the

group that establishes who belongs to it and who may or may not post to it.

- The social dynamics of the community does not easily allow for foreign invasions, such as publicity or market research questions. A company cannot have a personal role and its intervention would not be considered emotionally meaningful. The role within the community is achieved through daily personal exchanges, and not through merely being the manufacturer of the brand discussed. Moreover, it is the personal side that takes over in the discussion, often moving far beyond the topic of the community. This is at odds with traditional market research, where the respondent is kept focused on the argument of the questionnaire. The virtual community is similar to a focus group without a moderator. Thus, it is very rich in insights, but no control can be exerted over the subjects.

These aspects of virtual communities represent a new challenge for marketers and firms. The study suggests that the active and direct approach suggested by Hagel and Armstrong (1997) may be not very effective. A group cannot be easily created by a company and it is not possible to manage a group of customers in the traditional sense.

The main limitation of the study illustrated is the idiosyncrasies of many netnographic reports, where the structure drawn from a community relates mainly to that community and can only be generalized with some difficulty and caveats. Nevertheless, the dynamics described are common to any other virtual community. All that changes is the level of involvement, the 'heat' of the discussion and the number of posters and postings. The basic rules for dealing with a community remain. The methodology chosen suggests a need for further studies on other virtual communities, in order to compare results and overcome any possible idiosyncrasies within the group selected or arising from researcher subjectivity. Netnography can also be paired with other methods, such as social network analysis, and further insights can be drawn from a content analysis of the messages exchanged.

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NOTAS EXPLICATIVAS

¹The case of LambdaMOO is well-known. LambdaMOO is a MUD group devoted to people who have experienced violence in their life and seek support by discussing it with others. On one occasion, a molester entered the group, insulting the other participants and even using software features that allowed him to practice virtual violence over the others. The administrator of the group finally "killed" the illicit person.

²The group is named "rec.auto.makers.ford.explorer". The name follows the rules of the Usenet newgroups: "rec" stands for recreational, the category which includes all topics dedicated to recreation and free time; the other parts of the group's name refer to the car industry, specifically to Ford and its brand the Explorer.

³See Goldhaber's contribution at website: http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue2_4/goldhaber/

⁴Even though the Net assures anonymity and even though the messages posted on a newsgroup are publicly available, the name has been disguised in order to comply in excess with the code of ethics suggested by Kozinets