e-Voicing an Opinion on a Brand – A Research Agenda

Claire Roederer and Marc Filser

1 Online practices of consumers and cyber-experiences

"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 the Internet would generate in the manner of considering the relationship to markets and more generally speaking commercial exchanges. They emphasize 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 the one side and companies and their brands on the other.

Consumers expect greater transparency, authenticity, reactiveness, options and support by the company with regard to its responsibilities in relation to them and to society in general (Myron, 2010). Consumers strong reactions to Sony *"AllIwantforXmasispsp"* campaign in 2006 show how consumers can fiercely reject a brand that created a fake consumer blog to promote itself. Thanks to the Internet, consumers have the means to

Claire Roederer
Associate Professor of Marketing, EM Strasbourg (laboratoire HuManiS), Université de Strasbourg
✉ claire.roederer@em-strasbourg.eu

Marc Filser
Full Professor of Marketing, IAE de Dijon (laboratoire LEG-Cermab, UMR 5118), Université de Bourgogne
✉ marc.filser@u-bourgogne.fr

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. The 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). Yet, consumers are not all equal in relation to these new uses and to the potential power they wield (Kozinets, 2008).

However, the different ways in which this power available to the consumer can be expressed is to be found in new practices in the form of cyber experiences.

Cyber experiences or on-line experiences are defined as all the consumer experiences, i.e. interactions of person × object × 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 human-computer interaction, and can take place in any real physical or virtual place and concern any product or service category (Kozinets, 2002).

1.1 Categories of cyber experiences

1.1.1 Market cyber experiences (in a narrow sense)

This type of interaction covers online shopping experiences (Soopramanien, 2011), and corresponds to shopping experiences (Tauber, 1972) in conventional shops / stores selling goods and services. By cutting the storage and distribution costs, the Internet allows several companies to market products that would not be economically viable in conventional stores, thus resulting in an almost unlimited increase in offers (Anderson, 2006).

1.1.2 Market and non-market cyber experiences

In addition to the market cyber experiences described above, these include:

The search for information experience.   The search experience comes prior to the buying and consumption experience (Arnould et al, 2002). The search for information, which has become extremely intuitive through the use of engines such as Google (Battelle, 2005), 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. 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 search for information varies according to product category (e.g. search vs. experience products) (Nelson, 1970) and focuses on price and product information from various sources (websites advertising, business and retailer websites, as well as consumer generated product reviews available through online newsgroups, communities or chatrooms).

Entertainment experiences.   The 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).

Content creation experiences.   These involve the production/circulation of content in chat rooms, forums, blogs, or on a wider scale, the experience of the presence more or less active on social networks like Facebook. The experience 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). It should be noted that consumers not only generate comments but also products and services. Threadless company is a good example of consumers efforts to create designs for Tshirts sold online (Howe, 2008). Whereas Zagat guides, a world's leading provider of consumer survey-based information for restaurants and other leisure activities, offer an illustration of the power of consumer generated reviews in more than 100 countries worldwide.

1.2 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 directly linked to a phase of the decision making process involved in buying the brand.

1.2.1 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 eWOM. 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 brands (crowdsourcing) (Howe, 2008).

1.2.2 Practices directly linked to the buying process

These cyber experiences impact one or several of the phases of the decision-making process when buying. It can be considered that the tools proposed in the Internet are used by consumers for strategic purposes to optimize information on the product or even to increase their power of negotiation in relation to the company and consequently to gain control or counter balance control attributed to the company (Fig. 2).

2 Research orientation

2.1 Grid of 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 the Internet which involve the
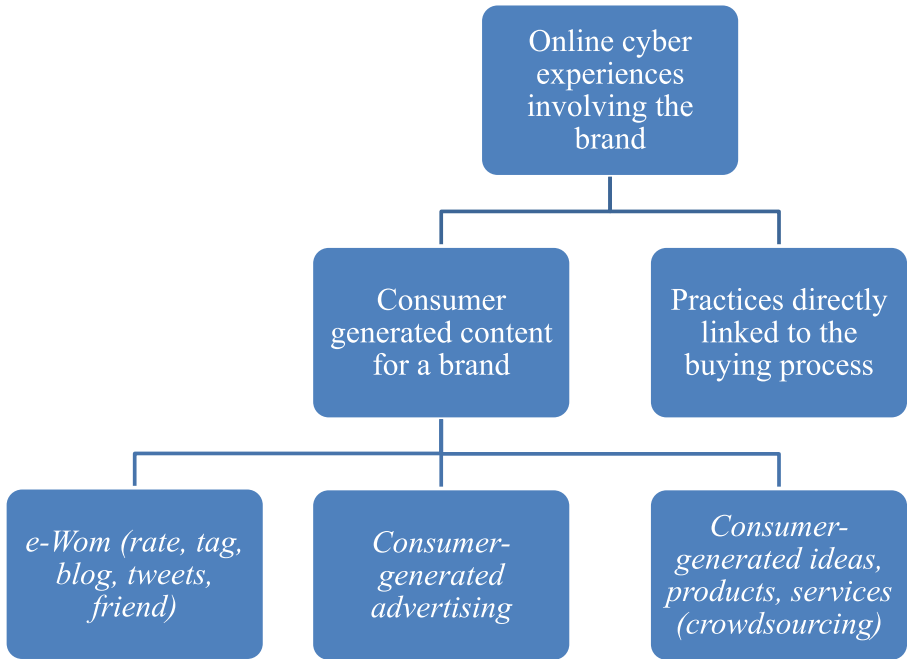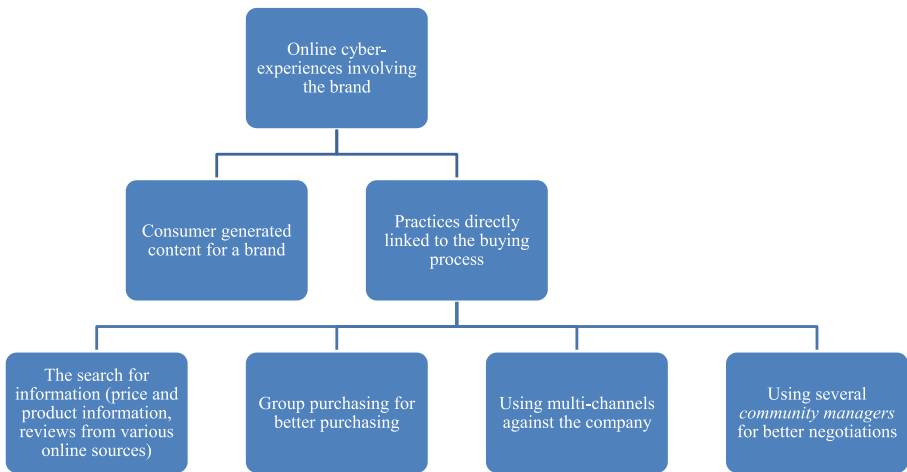
Fig. 1 Content generation for a brand

Fig. 2 Cyber-experiences affecting the buying process

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 the observed practices call into question the paradigm of brand management.

In keeping with the finding of Fournier and Avery (2011), the grid (Table 1) 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 Table 1.

Table 1 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, CGA	4. Protestation Boycott / disparagement Voice/exit

2.2 Consumer-generated content for a brand

Consumers 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 in-

formation 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.

Are consumers who generate content for a brand more likely to adopt one of the identified practices directly linked to the buying process?

What variables can best explain the adoption of practices such as content generation, or practices directly linked to the buying process?

Can the proposed categorization serve as a sound basis to develop consumer typologies?

Does consumer generated advertising (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, pop ups and other familiar communication supports are perceived as intrusive and generate negative comments, consumer generated information systematically receives a 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 relations in the marketplace.

2.3 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 (Füller et al, 2008).

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 this data with actual buying behavior, could provide useful cues to better assess links between speech and action.

2.4 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 the 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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