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Origins and Development of Online Communities and their Role in Marketing Research

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Chapter 6

Origins and development of online communities and their role in marketing research

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INTRODUCTION

The term *community* has been used for more than a century in many disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, and education, to refer to a variety of social collectives, formed based on geography, shared interests, or institutional affiliation, among other reasons. Aligned with German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (2001) ideal type *Gemeinschaft* (community), marketing scholars have examined communities as places where consumers form relationships and develop their identity projects. Accordingly, typical definitions of community in the marketing literature refer to community members' sense of belonging, shared understandings, practices, and values in ways that differentiate members from non-members (Thomas, Price & Schau, 2013).

The capacity to build social relationships through computer-mediated communication was set from the beginning of the technological development we came to know as the Internet (Rheingold, 1993). Unsurprisingly, the movement from geographically-bound to online-dispersed community engagement was seen by many members as a natural evolution of communities – and the Internet a new medium that allowed communities to reach their full potential. The inception of the World Wide Web aided the transmutation of existing tools – bulletin boards, newsgroups and listservers – into user-friendly web pages (Preece, Maloney-Krichmar & Abras, 2003). It has also enabled a more creative and self-expressive use of available technology through blogs, funsites and eZines (Smith, 1999). The

dissemination of home personal computers cemented the online communities' status as a new sphere of social life (Rheingold, 1993). Still, engagement in online communities remained asynchronous until the turn of last century.

Online participatory interaction developed gradually once websites introduced user-generated content tools. These tools greatly supported the development of the social network sites (Blank & Reisdorf, 2012). Such sites also benefited from an emergent participatory culture that saw technology as a way to promote amateur content creation and dissemination (Jenkins, 2006). Hence, users' ability to contribute to existing content in real time forever changed the Web, which would no longer be seen 'as screenfuls of text and graphics but as a transport mechanism, the ether through which interactivity happens' (DiNucci, 1999, p. 32). This was the early start to user-created, socially-shared online experience, which forever transformed social life, including how communities form and develop.

In this chapter, we trace the development of online communities through marketing research. We also examine how online communities have transformed as their members transitioned from computers to smartphones, from the text-based interactions of bulletin boards to Facebook groups to the replicable videos at TikTok, and from individual to group socialization to algorithm-driven connection. Throughout these developments, we point to what aspects of communities have remained the same, and how those that did not, changed. We explore how the postmodern inspiration that enabled the initial transition of communities from offline to online also shaped the flexible nature of these collectives, allowing online communities to continuously develop along with technological and societal change. Finally, we acknowledge the risk in overextending the traditional concept of community beyond its original meanings. That risk is that community may become a mere metaphor, obscuring particular aspects of online collectives that could be of interest to marketing scholars and practitioners. The growing interest in the technological affordances of social media for online collectives that emerge on these platforms (Bucher & Helmond, 2017; Majchrzak et al., 2013) suggests that examining the structural differences between early forms of online communities and these latest developments can inspire researchers to engage with the community concept in ways that are, perhaps, more faithful to traditional conceptualizations, and more accurate in describing contemporary manifestations.

MARKETING RESEARCH IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Community engagement has always permeated life in society due to people's desire to connect with like-minded others to share common beliefs, interests and experiences (Bauman, 2001). Given the significance of community to understand the role of sociality in past and current societal transformations, the concept has been an extensively studied topic in several disciplines and led to the production of many influential works (see Crow, 2002). Despite little consensus about the concept of community among social scientists (Barrett, 2010), Tönnies' (2001) work fundamentally rooted the notion of community as a social group bonded by members' sense of belonging and formed through everyday interactions covering the whole range of human activities.

Traditional conceptualizations of community see physical proximity as an essential catalyst to community formation (Frankenberg, 1966) and note that group norms and organization offers structure to the community social system (Minar & Greer, 1969). It is also broadly accepted that similarity in activities and goals drives groups towards communal interests (Redfield, 1989) and that awareness of distinctiveness grounds community members' sense of belonging (Warner, 1941). Altogether, proximity, structure and interest operate under a logic of commonality that allows community creation and continuation and, ultimately, shifts our understanding of communities from mere interaction to a collective identity exercise (Amit, 2002). Marketing and consumer researchers have drawn from this multidisciplinary view of community, yet for their field, community is connected to the economic forms of production and consumption (Arvidsson et al., 2018). In the following sections, we offer a brief overview of the main phases of marketing research in online communities, as connected to a timeline of the technological and social developments of the past decades (see Figure 6.1). Through this overview, we connect studies with the thread of online communities, even though we introduce alternative conceptualizations when the authors originally did so.

INSERT FIGURE 6.1 ABOUT HERE –

Figure 6.1 Interconnected timeline of marketing research in online communities

POPULARIZATION PHASE

Consumption communities existed prior to the emergence of the Internet (e.g., Zines, fan clubs) and early definitions account for the geographical roots of local communities (e.g., Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). Although offline, geographically-based communities continued to exist, and as soon as non-military individuals had access to the Internet, they started to connect one to another online. And those connections – as rudimentary as they might have been – worked to establish ties among individuals spread around the globe. Rheingold's (1993) pioneer research on online communities unfolded the potential of computer-mediated communication capacity to build social relationships across barriers of space and time. In doing so, he presented a strong case for the acceptance of engagement in online communities as valuable on its own right (Barrett, 2010).

The proliferation of low-cost access to the Internet (Plant, 2004) and introduction of the World Wide Web in early 1990s (Wilson & Peterson, 2002) prompted the networked society (Castells, 2011) to become a fertile ground for radically new forms of socialization, knowledge development and economic activity. At this point in time, most online communities were still non-commercial, based on independent websites and developed through creative and self-expressive uses of the technology available. For example, e-Zines and early web pages took advantage of the extended audio-visual capacity brought about by the new technologies to produce independent content that was alternative to mainstream media, around which emerged multiple communities of creators (Marwick, 2013). Given the novelty of computer-mediated communication, the first studies sought to identify online community engagement distinctive features (Etzioni & Etzioni, 1997; Hagel, 1999; Norris, 2002). Hagel and Armstrong (1997) were among the first to signal the market potential of online community engagement for organizations. They identified four customer-driven processes – fantasy, relationship, interest and (commercial) transaction – based on people's underlying motivation for their online engagement. Their typology stressed that value in virtual communities derives from cooperation between consumers and marketers, becoming well-known at the time among researchers and practitioners.

In transitioning from examining offline to online communities as a research field, marketing scholars took advantage of the domestic use of the latest technological developments (i.e., PCs, user-friendly content and browsers) to produce their research, which mostly focused on understanding how consumers' experience online collectives and how these collectives affect consumption. Among marketing researchers, one of the earliest calls to reassess the use of the term 'virtual' as a qualifier for these web-based communities came from Kozinets (2002, p. 61), who noted: 'Although they are popularly called "virtual communities" (Rheingold, 1993), the term "virtual" might misleadingly imply that these communities are less "real" than physical communities […] these social groups have a "real" existence for their participants, and thus have consequential effects on many aspects of behavior, including consumer behavior'. Many typologies emerged as researchers tried to understand the purpose, structure and function of the online community (see Chapter 24 by David W. Peck in this *Handbook*). Methods were also developed to better understand these new online contexts and the cultural and behavioural dynamics in them (e.g., Hine, 2000; Kozinets, 2002), and metrics/scales started being created to account for how individuals participated or engaged with online communities (e.g., Baldus, Voorhees & Calantone, 2015), and what impact this engagement had in variables of interest to marketing scholars (e.g., Kim, Lee & Hiemstra, 2004; Langerak et al., 2003).

As online communities grew and attracted more members, so did marketing scholars' interest in them. The community perspective gained prevalence in marketing research in the late 1990s and early 2000s, to support an understanding of consumer collectives, consumer identity projects and consumer–brand relationships. Since then, communities are considered an essential structure of consumer culture for being a site for meaning creation and transfer (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), interaction, and social cohesion among consumers and marketers (McAlexander, Schouten & Koening, 2002; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

Early marketing research examining the collectives that formed between the Internet inception and the World Wide Web development touted their benefits for marketing and companies (McWilliam, 2000). At that stage, consumer researchers (as well as scholars in media and cultural studies, sociology, psychology and related fields) continued to focus on non-commercial communities (e.g., fandom and communities of interest), yet they advanced marketing research by conceptualized why and how

individuals connected online (e.g., Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Mathwick, 2002), influenced one another and to what effects (Okleshen & Grossbart, 1998) when engaging in 'many-to-many conversations' (Maclaran & Catterall, 2002) that took place in chatrooms, newsgroups, bulletin boards, listservers and websites, whereas in early studies, consumer researchers have drawn from Turner's (1969) concept of *communitas* (i.e., sense of communion) and focused on identifying intersections between community and consumption, examining, for example, how individuals feel connected to each other as they share an extraordinary consumption experience (Arnould & Price, 1993).

Participants in early-2000s online communities sought to build relationships by developing strategies to negotiate, adjust and communicate their individual identity while partaking in group ones (Schau & Gilly, 2003; Muñiz & Schau, 2005). They identified with fellow community members, and also with the brands they all connected around (Carlson, Sutten & Brown, 2008). This shows that identity remained as key/primary motivation to community engagement, even when communities were no longer geographically bound. In fact, online communities formed around brands – or brand communities – and were said to 'exhibit three traditional markers of community: shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility' (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412).

Nevertheless, the development of technology and its affordances of increased interconnectivity inevitably changed community engagement within online collectives. With the dot-com crash in 2000, many of the independently hosted online communities suddenly found themselves defunded, with the surviving ones being hosted on commercial platforms or on commercial brand websites (Marwick, 2013). As it turns out, individuals engage differently with online communities, depending on the type of platforms that hosts them – and on whether those platforms are commercially based or not (Almeida, Mazzon & Dholakia, 2008). Marketing researchers and managers saw increased importance in 'purposely selecting, initiating, managing, and controlling interactions among customers when facilitating brand communities' (Algesheimer, Dholakia & Herrmann, 2005, p. 30), and research efforts were directed towards understanding how participants were connecting to one another and to brands in ways that were value-creating for companies (e.g., Schau, Muñiz & Arnould, 2009; Thompson & Sinha, 2008).

It is important to mention that commercial activities have been present throughout the history of the online communities (Kozinets, 2020). Yet it was after the dot-com crash in 2000 that venture-backed startups gained traction in the tech industry (Marwick, 2013), paving the way for the introduction of commercializing features on what would become known as social network platforms. These platforms were much more appealing to large numbers of consumers than the rudimentary non-commercial sites to which online communities had been confined. It is undeniable that social media platforms profoundly transformed how consumers perceive and live technologically-mediated social engagement, but it does not mean that community has ended. As Kozinets puts it, 'sociality and communitas are transformed by social media but, like weeds growing from the cracks of a sidewalk, they persist' (Kozinets, 2020, p. 125).

COLLABORATION PHASE

As the number of forum, mail-list and chat-based communities dwindled, marketing researchers shifted attention to the communities that formed around blogs and other types of platform that were emerging in the early 2000s, such as photo-based Flickr, and social network Friendster (e.g., Iyengar, Han & Gupta, 2009; Sung et al., 2010). Research interest soon shifted to understanding how consumers collaborate in online communities. Several studies focused on consumer collaboration for value creation (e.g., Brabham, 2012; Cromie & Ewing, 2008; Hemetsberger & Reinhardt, 2006), particularly through the strong connections developed among their members (Cova & Cova, 2002), the practices that community members engage in (Schau, Muñiz & Arnould, 2009), and the combination of individual and contextual factors that culminate in creative collective acts (Kozinets, Hemetsberger & Schau, 2008). Aspects of how communities are formed, transform and are structured in relation to technology and its affordances received less attention during this phase (yet see Kozinets, Hemetsberger & Schau, 2008, for an exception).

In parallel to these developments, the romantic conceptualization of community started being questioned in consumer research (Thomas, Price & Schau, 2013), and alternative notions, such as those of 'tribes', 'subcultures' and networks, were applied to the online collectives taking shape on social

networks in the early 2000s. These concepts aimed at conveying the same idea of a group that is tightly-knit around a shared passion or interest, usually tied to a brand, product or consumption activity (Cova, Kozinets & Shankar, 2007), yet hinted at different ways in which such collectives can be organized. As such, online collectives continued to be considered as similar to traditional forms of sociality in that they connect individuals one to another and offer them sources of identity, meaning and status. Marketing research on early social network sites also explored a broad range of aspects ranging from interpersonal influence (e.g., Adjei, Noble & Noble, 2010) through consumer-market collaboration and its risks (e.g., Cova & White, 2010; Füller, Jawecki & Mühlbacher, 2007) to collective innovation (e.g., Kozinets, Hemetsberger & Schau, 2008). But researchers were also interested in how consumers benefited from engaging in collectives that formed on social networks (e.g., Gummerus et al., 2012). Concerns were raised that consumers were being potentially exploited through their participation in commercially-based or brand-managed online collectives (e.g., Bonsu & Darmody, 2008; Cova & Dalli, 2009). When accounting for these aspects and noticing the dynamism with which consumers shift among multiple online collectives, researchers have suggested that flexibility and instability can be characteristics of online communities (e.g., Eagar & L'Espoir Decosta, 2018).

Additional studies explored concepts other than 'community' (e.g., networks, collectives) to refer to these online collectives enabled by new technologies. For instance, when studying fashion blogs, McQuarrie, Miller and Phillips (2013) noted that, initially, a blog proceeds as if an online community was taking shape, and the blogger encourages participation among others. However, as the audience grows, the blogger behaviour changes, and the group is no longer a community-like collective. McQuarrie and coauthors' (2013) work was important in that it called researchers' attention to other types of collectives taking shape on the Internet. This research shows that consumers saw value in being members of an audience, and paved the way for other studies of online audiences and online fandom that did not rely exclusively on the community framework (e.g., Cocker & Cronin, 2017; Parmentier & Fischer, 2015).

Nevertheless, this did not imply a dismissal of understandings of online communities as tight-knit, clearly-bound equivalents to the offline collectives theorized in the past. As they held to this approach, marketing researchers were rather slow to account for the structural changes to community

brought up by the development and popularization of social network sites, which later became known as *social media*.

FRAGMENTATION PHASE

In the early years of social media, marketing researchers were eager to identify and examine online communities that formed on content platforms (e.g., Deighton & Kornfeld, 2008), virtual worlds (e.g., Scaraboto, Carter-Schneider & Kedzior, 2013), blogs (e.g., McQuarrie, Miller & Phillips, 2013) and social network sites, as platforms such as Facebook were known then (e.g., Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Some of these early social network sites were structured to embed community support functions. One such example is Orkut, one of the earliest social media platforms, that operated between 2004 and 2014, created by Orkut Büyükkökten, a Turkish software engineer, who developed it as an independent project while working at Google. Communities were central to Orkut, and were a large part of the success experienced by the network in countries such as Brazil and India. Along with Friendster (launched in 2003) and Facebook (also launched in 2004), Orkut offered the key affordance of connectivity, which allowed users to establish direct, one-on-one connections with people they already knew or wanted to know. It is important to hold on to that notion of social sites as networks to understand the early forms of online communities that emerged on these platforms, which differed largely from current platforms' affordances as channels that enable the broadcasting of information to vast global audiences.

With the expansion of the number of social network sites and platforms (henceforth social media platforms) and the increasingly blurred boundaries between online and offline life – largely facilitated by the popularization of smartphones and other personal devices connected to the Internet (Reed, 2018) – individuals are no longer members of one (or many) online community(ies), but skilfully navigated a wide system of multiple platforms and sites where they connect (and disconnect) at their own convenience. Individual identity is at the centre of such engagement, and online collectives seemingly centred around focal individuals' needs rather than the shared experiences of these collectives' members. In this scenario, new concepts were developed that addressed the more fragmented – yet widespread – nature of online groups.

Marketing scholars have labelled these online collectives *collaborative consumer networks* (Figueiredo & Scaraboto, 2016; Scaraboto, 2015), *lateral exchange markets* (Perren & Kozinets, 2018) and, in its more loosely coordinated forms, *brand publics* (Ardvisson & Caliandro, 2016). In such online collectives, participants depend on each other to access resources to achieve their goals, but their relationships are not necessarily based on developing a shared identity or having aligned values, as they would in a community.

Further, contemporary communities are multi-sited, not limited to a single platform, and often incorporate other Internet-based spaces of interaction, along with offline sites. Marketing research on social media-based communities have reflected that understanding. For example, Gannon and Prothero (2018) took a dual-platform approach to explore community of practice formation in the beauty sphere. Hollenbeck and Zinkhan (2010) examined the anti-Wal-Mart community as multiple-related and interconnected groups based on websites, advocacy groups and social media pages. Similarly, Ferreira and Scaraboto (2016) studied a community of collectors of plastic shoes that cuts across multiple websites, social network pages, social media platforms and blogs dedicated to the branded Melissa shoes (see also Scaraboto, Ferreira & Chung, 2016).

Researchers continue to examine communitarian forms that develop in more traditionally-structured online spaces, such as firm-hosted discussion boards and websites (e.g., Gruner, Homburg & Lukas, 2014; Lowe & Johnson, 2017). Increasingly, however, attention has shifted to how online platforms enable collective forms that differ – often strikingly – from online communities as theorized in the recent past. Researchers are discussing online groups as, for example, part of digital ecosystems. Here, online communities, when they exist, are interconnected with technology (e.g., platforms, devices) and other actors (e.g., brands, consumers) to produce a self-adjusting social system (Morgan-Thomas, Dessart & Veloutsou, 2020). Much recent research has also been devoted to expand on the conceptualization of online groups as audiences (McQuarrie, Miller & Phillips, 2013) to those groups connected to particularly industrious 'tribal entrepreneurs' (Mardon, Molesworth & Grigore, 2018), 'autopreneurs' (Ashman, Patterson & Brown, 2018) or 'influencers' (e.g., Bai, Zhao & Cocker, 2019; Cocker & Cronin, 2017; Delbaere, Michael & Phillips, 2021).

These studies mark the shift from online communities as traditionally understood to a type of collective marked by a new liberal mentality. The group is no longer a warm, caring circle of socialization; rather, it is an audience, a public, a network to which consumers easily connect and disconnect, depending on their needs and interests. Latest developments in social media platforms emphasize this fluidity and individual-centric mode of online collectives, as more and more platforms invite users to 'follow' rather than 'friend' one another (e.g., Mardon, Molesworth & Grigore, 2018).

Finally, and in line with these latest developments, it is important to note that the productive roles consumers have increasingly assumed blurs the boundaries between consumption and production in online communities (Cova & White, 2010). The intensified levels of engagement consumers assume in online communities has turned these individuals into more than community members, and the communities that form around them are likely populated by other similarly productive individuals, to the point that the entire social fabric these individuals inhabit consists in a meshwork of fragmented communities. As Almeida, Mazzon and Dholakia (2008) theorize, when consumers have relevant skills and expertise, entrepreneurial vision and personal commitment, they may be motivated to deepen their engagement with a brand, becoming 'seriously engaged'. As such, consumers need to find different ways to navigate the in-between space between work and play to sustain both their position in the fragmented community and the community itself.

That's not to say that traditional forms of community no longer exist, or that forums and other text-based platforms, which continue to exist online, are no longer important. As argued at the beginning of this chapter, sociality and communitas are likely to persevere despite social media's transformation (Kozinets, 2020). Besides, forums and similar forms of collectives continue to be rich sources of data for marketing scholars to examine aspects of interest (e.g., Homburg, Ehm & Artz, 2015), and the concept of community continues to be employed to make sense of online collectives (e.g., Hakala, Niemi & Kohtamäki, 2017; Lima, Irigaray & Lourenco, 2019; Suwandee, Surachartkumtonkun & Lertwannawit, 2019; Zollo et al., 2020). Importantly, consumer engagement with online communities has changed immensely through the past few decades, and marketing research has been key to uncover the multiple ways in which these engagements happen.

ISSUES WITH MARKETING RESEARCH IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Through the unfolding of the developments covered in previous sections, marketing and consumer researchers alike have noted that the conceptualization of online communities has been stretched too thin, as it is employed to account for an ever-shifting array of phenomena. While marketing scholars explored consumer uses for the new social network sites, critiques also emerged of how marketing researchers and practitioners were over-extending the concept of online communities to cover an increasingly ample range of collectives and invited researchers to reflect about the continued relevance of the concept as it continues to be applied to ever-shifting phenomena (e.g., Arvidsson et al., 2018; Moufahim, Wells & Canniford, 2018). For example, Zwick and Bradshaw (2016) argue that customer communities have turned into an effective social media marketing tool, with their potential advantages for corporations often exaggerated by practitioners and general media authors. In reality, Zwick and Bradshaw (2016) claim, social media-based online communities are rarely characterized by dense webs of interactions and relationships, as those who participate in these collectives do so sporadically, with only rare attachments to a shared space or identity. Aligned with this critique, marketing scholars have called for a more conservative employment of the community concept in referring to online collectives, particularly those globally spread networks of consumers that have emerged around social media, and where consumers do not necessarily develop strong communal bonds (Mathwick, Wiertz & de Reuter, 2008; Figueiredo & Scaraboto, 2016). We pose that the continued adoption of the community perspective limits our understanding of contemporary online collectives in at least three ways: by imposing boundaries around collectives, by treating connections among participants as relationships, and by excluding phenomena as researchers fail to account for certain patterns of behaviour among members. We discuss each of these limitations in turn.

Limiting community by setting boundaries. Seeing an online collective as a community requires that researchers delineate boundaries – even if porous – for that collective. As such, when researching online communities, most researchers focus on a single social media platform, website, set of blogs or

discussion forum and consider it the *locus* of community. However, consumers have been increasingly dispersing across social media platforms, and community members are able to navigate those multiple spaces, locating each other across these platforms (Majchrzak et al., 2013). Therefore, community-like connections are not restricted to any one platform, nor can membership to a collective be identified by mapping associations or interactions on a single platform. By limiting the boundaries of a collective to that which can be observed and treated as a community, marketing researchers may leave out a significant part of the collective that is formed and shaped by consumers who connect and interact across fragmented spaces.

Confounding interactions and relationships. Within a community, relations among members are assumed to be long-term, stable and mutually responsive – that is, they are relationships rather than simple, one-off interactions. By evoking a relationship metaphor, the community perspective may lead marketing and consumer researchers to impose structure over the multitude of often fleeting connections developed by participants in online networks. Confounding interactions and relationships may also lead researchers to overlook dynamic aspects of the connections between participants, such as the formation, strengthening or weakening, and breaking up of ties, or underestimate the role of governance structure in coordinating interactions in online collectives (Sibai et al., 2015). For example, interactions – not relationships – seem to be key in explaining how participants in collaborative networks create value through object circulation (Figueiredo & Scaraboto, 2016) or shared social practices (Schau, Muñiz & Arnould, 2009). When online collectives are inappropriately treated as communities, explanations of value co-creation may situate collaboration at the cultural, not relational level, and this leaves uncovered important structural and sociological dimensions of collective value creation. Conversely, when communities are mistakenly treated as audiences, relational threads among participants which may be core to their identity projects may be overshadowed by a focus on the connections between content creators and audiences.

Excluding phenomena. The community perspective has systematically excluded 'movement' from its analysis of dynamics in collectives. To the exception of members' entry and exit of a community, which are mostly treated as one-time, highly consequential events, not much has been written or discussed about how people move in, out, between or within collectives. There are exceptions,

such as Kozinets' (1999) analysis of how community members move from newbies to insiders as they develop more social ties within the community and the activity around which the community is centred gains more importance to them. In general, however, our understanding of online collectives as communities has implied that we view collectives as mostly static.

Another important type of movement in collectives refers to status dynamics and role shifts of members. The community perspective has produced a general understanding that participants develop expertise and reputation within communities (e.g., Füller, Jawecki & Mühlbacher, 2007; Hemetsberger & Reinhardt, 2006). As Kozinets, Hemetsberger and Schau (2008, p. 343) explain, 'eventually, communities may develop hierarchies of expertise, as we observe within many open-source and fan communities'. We know much less, however, about how some members start as consumers and through co-creation projects or communal entrepreneurship become producers or affiliate themselves with marketers. Only by relaxing the community approach are researchers starting to develop a fuller understanding of careers in online collectives, to account for the evolution of participants regarding not only their reputation in the collective, but also more specific aspects of relevance to marketing scholars, such as the development of collective members' co-creation expertise and social connections (Martineau & Arsel, 2017; Nascimento, Campos & Suarez, 2020). Reasons to create community and connect in them have changed overtime, and as researchers explore a broader range of possible community sources and paths, they can account for new and emergent phenomena.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH IN ONLINE COLLECTIVES

Members of social media-based online communities never stop, nor go somewhere to be 'in community' and engage in the social and cultural activities we, as marketing researchers, are interested in observing. They 'do community' wherever they are, with whoever happens to be available on the same site, at the same moment. Perhaps, online communities built around structured networks, such as the ones that emerge on social media platforms, can be better conceived of as 'cultural networks'. We envision that this concept would allow researchers to integrate cultural and structural approaches to

understanding online collectives, and extend researchers' capacity to explore the relations among consumers who participate in such groups. For example, the social media-based nature of recent collectives may imply flexible arrangements that generate various forms of conflict among members related to goals, processes, roles and values (Mele, 2011) that a community perspective is likely to obscure. Approaching online collectives as cultural networks would help to address most of these blind spots in our understanding of online groups. In addition to drawing from cultural understandings of community, this reframed perspective would enable marketing scholars to benefit from theoretical and conceptual development from relational sociology and network analysis, incorporating these into a richer framework to study online collectives.

Although social network theory originally emerged as a structural explanation to oppose cultural analysis (Mützel, 2009), it evolved to include cultural elements in its relational analysis. A key move in this direction was Emirbayer's (1997) identification of a movement for 'a relational sociology' that aggregated dispersed developments of network thinking that included cultural aspects. A division still exists between network research that focuses on structural aspects and treats structure and culture as autonomous realms, and research that considers networks as explicitly cultural (Fuhse, 2009). The latter is what has been referred to as 'relational sociology'. For the key role it attributes to culture in networks, relational sociology offers a good complementarity approach to the current online community perspective. As such, we offer a brief introduction to it in the next section.

Drawing from relational sociology to extend conceptual framework. Among network scholars, there is a stream of research that understands networks as 'configurations of social relations interwoven with meaning' (Fuhse, 2009, p. 51), providing for an inseparable intermingling of structural network relations and cultural processes. Researchers working from this perspective attempt to explain the 'relationships between culture and connectivity' (Pachucki & Breiger, 2010, p. 205). For these scholars, culture and structure, meanings and ties, are 'fused within a sociocultural setting' (Mützel, 2009, p. 875). Because of this intermingling, relations between units are seen as pre-eminently dynamic, as constantly unfolding processes that should be the focus of research. This point of view, which Emirbayer (1997) has labelled 'relational', places emphasis on what are the patterns of relations that

actors create in their transactions with one another. Emirbayer explains 'the very terms or units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance, and identity from the (changing) functional roles they play within that transaction. The latter, seen as a dynamic, unfolding process, becomes the primary unit of analysis rather than the constituent elements themselves. 'Things "are not assumed as independent existences present anterior to any relation, but … gain their whole being … first in and with the relations which are predicated of them. Such "things" are terms of relations, and as such can never be "given" in isolation but only in an ideal community with each other"' (Cassirer 1953, p. 36 in Emirbayer, 1997, p. 287). In fact, a growing body of recent work in relational sociology has advanced the core idea we propose here, namely, that 'networks and culture are mutually constitutive and so deserve deeper analytic consideration in light of one another' (Pachucki & Breiger, 2010, p. 209).

Relational sociology argues, therefore, against a purely structural understanding of networks. It defends that meaning is also important, as constituted by the cultural practices, symbols, expectations and schema embedded in relationships. For them, 'a social formation is human insofar as the social relations constituting it are produced by subjects who orient themselves reciprocally towards one another on the basis of a meaning that surfaces functional requirements' (Donati, 2010, p. xvi). As a consequence, 'network research has to deal with the interplay of structure and meaning' (Fuhse, 2009, p. 52). Due to its concern with meaning, relational sociology usually requires the same research approach that marketing researchers who work under the Consumer Culture tradition are familiar with, including researcher involvement with the context, and qualitative methods for data collection. What is new is the transformation of this data (or part of it) into quantitative information that is appropriate to tracing and graphing the structure of the network. In this sense, qualitative data and interpretative analyses of cultural forms and transactions or attributes of actors can be complemented with quantitative data on ties. By looking at how ties arrange in a network, the network perspective not only 'subsumes the evolution and diffusion of cultural forms in networks, but also the role structure that makes a network a social structure rather than an amorphous mass' (Fuhse, 2009, p. 67). In this sense, network culture is more complex than community culture, because it explains how different actors within the same network may hold different perspectives even when they have structurally similar positions within

the network. Moreover, actors in different positions will have different expectations, reflecting the role structure of the network.

Flexing methodological approaches. The task of observing and participating in the moving swarms of contemporary online collectives requires energy, tenacity and patience, and researchers have been reflecting about the challenge of conducting ethnographic research on these online community forms (Airoldi, 2018; Kozinets, Scaraboto & Parmentier, 2018; Reid & Duffy, 2018; see also Chapter 10 in this *Handbook*). In our own research practice, we found that following (or moving with) informants across platforms produced data in multiple formats, some of which have no equivalent in traditional ethnographic research and require new definitions (e.g., 'likes' on Facebook, albums on Pinterest, YouTube videocasts, or the brief and broken text of 'tweets'. See Scaraboto, Ferreira and Chung [2016] for insights on curatorial practices developed by consumers).

Moreover, new social media platforms emerge every day that create new challenges for researchers. Each social media platform demands a particular set of skills to create and evaluate content (making, editing and uploading videos for YouTube versus writing succinct posts for Twitter, for example). The networking etiquette and interaction features also differ between platforms, and researchers must be aware of these particular aspects in order not to put themselves, or their informants, in awkward situations. Is it better to 'friend' your informants on Facebook or to subscribe to their updates? To make matters more complex, conversations between participants and the development of collective action may happen across platforms, such as when participants answer to a 'tweet' with a comment on a website the 'tweet' links to, or when they add on Facebook their impressions of a TikTok video and those are shared forward with others via email.

Finally, in order to fully participate in cultural networks based on social media, researchers may need to disclose more personal information than they are comfortable with. Although privacy filters and account management features are increasingly allowing users to take control of who sees what in their social media profiles, managing additional research profiles or particular privacy settings only adds to the already substantial task of the social media researcher. If once netnography (Kozinets, 2020) was seen as a shortcut that would provide researchers with fast and easy access to all the data necessary to understand and explain a culture or community, this is no longer the case. As the complexity of the

social media available to consumers increases, studying online communities will be the task of research teams, who will be able to manage finding, tracking and interacting with individuals who are everywhere, all the time, making culture. Researchers working in teams can divide the task of participating in different social media platforms, or of observing and interacting with fewer informants in their online activities across platforms. Research teams can use the same social media platforms to discuss and integrate data, and international teams could work around the clock to avoid missing important data among the immense volume of short-lived content that is posted, read and shared online.

CONCLUSION

The overview offered in this chapter is non-exhaustive. Rather, it represents an entry point for researchers to explore the interconnections between technological developments, social forms and marketing topics. In revisiting the history of online communities from the lenses of marketing and consumer research, this chapter has identified the key topics that interested scholars in the field, and how these were explored. We also pointed to the main issues with applying the online community framework to shifting phenomena, covered some of the alternative conceptualizations available to scholars (e.g., audience, publics, tribes, networks) and explored one pathway to expand the conceptual framework of those researchers interested in studying online-based collectives: the notion of cultural networks. We hope this overview will inspire future research in the collective, collaborative and creative social forms that inhabit our online worlds.

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