



Influence of virtual communities in purchasing decisions: The participants' perspective



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ABSTRACT

This study intended to fill some gaps in knowledge about virtual communities and their influence on consumers' purchasing decisions. A Brazilian Orkut community, whose central theme is preparing for wedding ceremonies, was investigated to reveal relationships among members and group influences on purchasing decisions. Twenty-one interviews were conducted by telephone. Results unveil a basic code of conduct, suggesting that the community can also act as a normative reference group, with strong identification among participants. Although the central interest – the wedding ceremony and party – could be considered as episodic, many members actively stay in the community after being married, just to help others. Group leaders seemed to be active participants, those with more experience with products related to the group's interests, or those perceived as having refined tastes. There was evidence that purchasing intentions and behavior can be altered as a result of interactions among members.

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1. Introduction

Reference groups' influence in consumer decision processes has been a focus of research for decades (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955).

However, the understanding of social networks in academic studies and marketing practice has been limited (Van den Bulte & Wuyts, 2007) and only recently have virtual communities attracted greater attention from academics (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002; Chan & Li, 2010; Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004; Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010; Porter, Donthu, & Baker, 2012; Wang, Ting, & Wu, 2012; Wu, Chen, & Chung, 2010).

Investigating this form of interaction among consumers seems to be important, since virtual communities are relevant sources of information when consumers make purchasing decisions.

Communication on the Internet empowers consumers, overcoming temporal and geographical limitations, thus enabling the development of groups based upon common interests, many of which are related to purchases. Commentaries available in an online community can be read by numerous members, and, as they are perceived as coming from peers without any commercial interests, may influence purchasing decisions (Kozinets, 1999).

This exploratory study intends to fill two gaps in the literature about virtual social communities. It offers a perspective regarding virtual communities and their effect on participation and purchasing decisions of Brazilian consumers, an online population with more

than 73 million individuals, of which 87% regularly visit some form of online community (social networks, blogs, chat rooms, forums) (IBOPE Nielsen Online, 2010).

Considering Hofstede's cultural dimensions, Latin American countries score higher in uncertainty avoidance and lower in masculinity (two dimensions that may influence buying decisions) than English-speaking cultures (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010), where the majority of studies on virtual communities influence on consumers' purchasing decisions have been conducted. The results herein may shed more light on the information search phase of consumer purchasing processes and the use of the Internet for rapport building in L.A. countries.

This article also stands out in that it incorporates contributions from previous studies dedicated to developing “typologies of virtual communities” and “community participant typologies”. Even so, this study's very specific object of analysis is distinct from others, since it focuses on a community that is not built around a “relatively stable” interest (photography, cooking, and pets). The community chosen (“Casar é Fácil” – Marriage is Easy) has Brazilian members only and involves an episodic event: wedding ceremony and party preparation.

The study was developed in two phases: at first, messages found in the many forums of this Orkut community were analyzed in order to discern categories to comprise a script for semi-structured interviews. Then, twenty-one women volunteered and were interviewed by telephone.

2. Literature review

Consumers develop decision-making strategies to reduce risk, so that they can act with relative confidence and ease in situations

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where information is inadequate, or when consequences of their actions are difficult to predict. One such strategy, broadly recognized by the literature (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955), is to seek out information in reference groups.

2.1. Influence exerted by a reference group

The degree to which a reference group influences behavior depends upon the individual's personality, the nature of the product to be purchased and social factors. A person who has little to no experience with a product, or who doesn't have access to objective information about it, is more likely to follow others' advice or example. Those peers, who the consumer considers reliable because they have values similar to theirs, can offer suggestions that may influence his (her) purchasing decision (Shen, Huang, Chu, & Liao, 2010).

An expert's opinion is even more credible and reliable, therefore people tend to agree more with experts and change their attitude in accordance with the expert's opinion (Bonner, Baumann, Lehn, Peirce, & Wheller, 2006; Petty, Cacioppo, & Goldman, 1981). Opinion leaders are those influential, respected, WOM-spreading individuals (Kozinets et al., 2010), whose perceived expertise could be considered especially credible (Shen et al., 2010), that others turn to for advice or information, thus exercising personal influence over a number of people (Rogers & Cartano, 1962).

Although theorists disagree about the function reference groups exercise in influencing individuals' attitudes, values, and behaviors (Cocanougher & Bruce, 1971), the majority accept that interpersonal influences are of two types: informational and normative (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955).

The informational influence is a tendency to accept another member's information, considering it to be true (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955), and is dominant when the individual's primary concern is with the quality of a decision (Cruz, Henningsen, & Williams, 2000). As it serves practical purposes, the information would reflect the cognitive, utilitarian function of group relations (Shen et al., 2010).

The normative influence is the tendency to follow other people's expectations, reflecting the psychological needs members have to conform to group standards and norms, in order to be accepted (Bearden, Netemeyer, & Teel, 1989; Shen et al., 2010). This has to do with the affective and emotional affiliation among members.

The normative influence was classified as value-expressive and utilitarian (Bearden & Etzel, 1982; Bearden et al., 1989), although Bearden et al. (1989) considered that the difference between the two types could not be easily identified.

2.2. Virtual communities

Virtual communities are social aggregations on the Internet, such as chat rooms, online forums, and bulletin boards (Baker, 2002; Balasubramanian & Mahajan, 2001; Blanchard, 2007), where individuals conduct public discourse for a period of time and with a certain degree of involvement. The community is constructed around a common interest, experience, or task that members have, and guided by both explicit and implicit codes of conduct (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997). These individuals form personal relationship networks (Rheingold, 1993) that provide friendship, information, belongingness and social resources to each other (Wang et al., 2012). Even though virtual communities take place in a virtual environment, group members truly act like a community that physically takes place in public, with shared rules, values, and codes of conduct (McWilliam, 2000).

Dholakia et al. (2004) introduced a typology based upon the distinction between network-based virtual communities and small-group based virtual communities. The former are specialized (they delimit content divided among members), geographically dispersed,

and founded based on relationships between members who hold a common interest.

Members of such communities relate to each other in a structured, dynamic, and relatively dispersed manner and define the community as a location (a website, for example). Discussion forums, periodicals' websites, and various blogs are examples. Members only superficially relate to each other on an individual basis, depending upon how often they frequent the environment, not expecting personally meeting or communicating with any particular member.

In a virtual community based on small groups, members are able to identify with a specific group of individuals: the "location" is less important, the community is composed of individuals that have an intense network of relationships, that interact together in order to achieve a broad range of jointly conceived objectives and maintain the relationships. Virtual relationships largely depend upon the interactions, but are complemented by in-person encounters. Some examples are consumer organizations that are patronized by organizations, such as Harley-Davidson motorcycle owners.

When an individual first joins a virtual community, he/she is generally not familiar with the environment, other members, and the codes of conduct, having few social ties and little commitment to the community. Compared to more experienced members, he/she lacks the knowledge to participate in the social interactions and their visits are more to acquire knowledge and obtain information. With time, this lack of knowledge is overcome and the individual begins to feel more confident in exchanging information. Participation becomes more regular and the person comes to spend more time in the community, coming to hold a position as an effective member (Langerak, Verhoef, Verlegh, & De Valck, 2004).

2.3. Participation in a virtual community

Literature on virtual communities (Burnett, 2000; Kozinets, 1999) displays community participant typologies primarily based upon the intensity and modes of participation, as well as the type of social relationship established with the community. Kozinets (1999) defined a typology that distinguishes between four forms of participation: *Tourists*, who include those with few social ties to the group and a superficial relationship with community activities; *Minglers*, who maintain strong ties with the group, but don't have much interest in the community's central activity; *Devotees*, who have sincere interest in community activities, but weak group ties; and *Insiders*, who maintain strong ties with the group and intense interest in the theme and activities of the group. Burnett (2000) recognized that members of virtual communities present three types of behavior: *non-interactive* ("lurking"), which limits participation to relatively passive conduct, such as reading posts; *hostile interactive*, adopted by members that use verbal violence, including discriminatory comments and derogatory arguments, aimed at either only a few participants or the entire community; and *collaborative or positive interactive*, who can be divided into the two groups of information oriented (either seeking information or offering it to other people) or not. What distinguishes these groups is the motivating factor for interaction. In the first, a desire for specific information is the motivating factor, whereas in the second relationships between participants is the motivating factor.

2.4. Virtual communities as reference groups in purchasing decisions

Ridings, Gefen, and Arinze (2006) emphasize that one of the most common motivations cited for joining a virtual community is access to information. The desire to interact socially is another important motivating factor to be a member. Another motivation is to find out specific information related to a purchasing decision. Social interaction is very strong, thus helping others and responding to requests for information or help is a social investment that takes time, empathy, and effort.

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