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**HOW DOES A VIRTUAL BRAND COMMUNITY EMERGE?
SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETING RESEARCH**

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Introduction

Nowadays, the marketing literature largely admits that the complexity of consumption behaviors cannot be completely captured through the multi-attributes individual approach (Holt, 1997) because behaviors are embedded within a social organization (Costa, 1995) as well as within a cultural environment (McCracken, 1988).

Marketing researchers have long emphasized the influence of the cultural system on consumption (Henry, 1976; McCracken, 1988; Ward, 1974). More recently, cultural approaches stressed the systemic nature of culture: individuals are influenced by the macro-cultural order but also manipulate it (Featherstone, 1991). Consumers are therefore seen as playing with the meanings carried by the cultural order (Kates, 2002; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995) and participating to the construction of new social representations, norms and rituals (Holt, 2002; Thompson and Haytko, 1997; Thompson and Troester, 2002).

Because individuals are aware of the consuming nature of the society (Baudrillard, 1970) and their very nature of consumers (Featherstone, 1991), they play with the cultural values linked to consumption (Holt, 2002). According to Boorstin (1973), the development of the consumer society led to the emergence of “communities of consumption”. These communities gather people sharing values, norms and representations emerging from the patronizing similar stores and consuming the same products and brands. As these stores and brands go beyond the natural and national borders, the communities of consumption are no longer national groups and gather people from around the world (Schouten and McAlexander, 1993).

Until recently, communities formed around a particular brand have been surprisingly neglected by the marketing literature, while potential consequences for the brand in which the community is interested may be important. Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) call them brand communities. They show that brand communities actually exist, but don’t try to show how such communities could emerge or what consequences they could have for the brand.

The brand community is a concept that shades a new light on the relationships between consumers and a specific brand: they are no longer considered as dyadic relationships between a brand and an isolated consumer (Fournier, 1998) but rather as relationships overlapping associations and interactions among consumers within a specific group (Gruen *et alii.*, 2000). The brand community concept also provides new ways for studying the word-of-mouth by defining a specific group that diffuses information (Johnson-Brown and Reingen, 1987). Thus, the brand community presents a special interest both for marketing researchers and brand managers because it gives new theoretical perspectives on key concepts (e.g. the brand loyalty, word-of-mouth, and leadusership) and because of its considerable implications for marketing strategies.

Surprisingly, there are few researches dealing with this concept (McAlexander *et alii.*, 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Muniz and Shau, 2003). To our knowledge, no article shows how a brand community could emerge and be constructed by customers. For instance, McAlexander *et alii.* (2002) try to show how a firm could build a brand community by organizing brandfests. Nonetheless, they don’t study the emergence process of the community *per se*, but look at the communal state of the group formed during that particular event¹. The group is not yet a brand community because it is not perennial and needs structure itself after the brandfest in order to become a brand community.

¹ This allows the comparison with the *communitas* gathering river rafters (Arnould and Price, 1993) after an extraordinary experience.

In this paper we focus on the emergence process of a brand community formed by consumers. For this purpose, we studied the emergence of two online brand communities and compared their specific processes to extract the common factors and steps that contribute to form and structure these communities.

This article is divided in three parts. We propose first a conceptualization of the concept of brand community. Then we present the methodology used to study the emergence process of two online brand communities. Finally, we discuss our results before presenting some implications for the brand management as well as future research tracks.

Defining the brand community concept

The community concept

The concept of community has been at the key issue of sociological and anthropological thought since Tönnies (1887) distinguished society from community (Brint, 2001). In this perspective, the term “society” refers to a social group built on a social contract, whereas the term “community” defines a group of individuals gathered by emotional and organic links.

Community was primarily considered as a group of individuals who share a common territory and have daily interactions with one another (Brint, 2001). This view stressed that the community is geographically marked, and researchers focused on rural communities, which they opposed to cities in which predominated social anomy². Community was then apprehended as forming a whole, encompassing every aspect of its members’ lives (Redfield, 1955). The Chicago School has been particularly involved in this way by studying local communities that are parts of the global society, but differentiate from it through different traits (Warner, 1955; Whyte, 1943).

The generalized use of the concept of community led to an increase of the number of definitions attached to the term community in the literature. Thus, Hillery (1955) has compared 94 different definitions of the word “community” before suggesting his own one.

Since the mid 1960’s the study of communities has been considerably renewed, especially with the contributions of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) and interactionist sociology (Goffman, 1967). These approaches contributed to underline interaction phenomenon and interpersonal communication and to overcome the vision in terms of macro- or micro-social structures (Hilbert, 1990).

Moreover, due to the expansion of the internet as a communication medium, the gathering of people from different backgrounds became easier (Kollok et Smith, 1999) and the community is more viewed as a particular social network (Wellman and Wortley, 1990; Wellman and Gulia, 1999). This new approach of the community leads to put less emphasis on geographical localization and spatial co-presence of the members of the group. For Bender (cited by Jones, 1995: 23-24), “*communities are defined not as a place but as social networks [...]*”.

Considering these developments, additional researches were conducted on *elective communities*, which are not based on the spatial co-presence of their members (e.g. Hebdige, 1979). Anderson (1983) showed how every community, even the more “natural”, was in fact the result of a social construction of its members. Besides, the communitarian phenomenon grows correlatively with the development of the Internet (Costigan, 1999; Jones, 1995) and

² This has to be linked with Durkheim’s (1893) idea of an opposition between mechanical solidarity (corresponding to little communities) and organic solidarity (inherent to differentiated societies).

many *virtual communities* (Rheingold, 1993) or *cyber communities* (Ward, 1999) emerged leading to a renewed interest for the community studies.

Consequently, communities are now considered to be based on the individuals' free will. Thus, community members *choose* to take part of it. Since community is formed by and through its members' will, it can be created on various bases; the origin of the gathering being the common interest or passion of individuals for an object or an activity. Consumption becomes a cause of communitarian gatherings (Wright-Isak, 1996). The communities of consumption (Boorstin, 1973) can lay on different motives: nostalgic consumption (Belk and Costa, 1998; Peñalosa, 2001), rejection of the market ideology (Friedman, 1999; Kozinets, 2002a; Kozinets and Handelman, 1998), involvement in a product category or in a consumption activity (Kozinets, 2001; Thompson and Troester, 2002) or attachment to a particular brand (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

The brand community

The concept of brand community has been introduced by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001: 412) to define "*a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand.*"

The so-defined brand community is (1) specialized, meaning that it is not holistic and more specifically oriented, (2) non geographically bound, its members are not compelled to be located in the same physical area, and (3) gathers consumers attached to a brand.

Even if the definition above introduces some interesting characteristics of the brand community, it raises yet some questions relating to its lack of clarifying either the content of the very concept of community which is still highly debated or the membership bases to that consuming group.

For these reasons, we propose a completed definition that better clarifies and captures the brand community concept. We define brand community as "*a self-selected, hierarchical and non-geographically bound group of consumers that share values, norms and social representations and recognize a strong feeling of membership with each other members and with the group as a whole on the basis of a common attachment to a particular brand.*"

At the core of this definition is the emphasis of the membership feeling that exists on two levels: inter-individual and collective. It also draws attention on hierarchy and duration of the community; all this excludes an ephemeral or non durable gathering. Thus brand community can be clearly distinguished from postmodern tribe (Maffesoli, 1988; Cova, 1997) and *communitas* (Turner, 1960; Arnould et Price, 1993).

Furthermore, our definition of brand community allows differentiating the former concept from subculture of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). The distinction between these two concepts stands at the cause of members gathering and is also a matter of level of analysis. So a subculture of consumption refers to a group of consumers formed around a product category or a consumption category (involvement cause, aggregate level) whereas a brand community would designate a group of consumers gathered around a particular brand (attachment cause, disaggregate level).

Even though the brand community concept has potentially important theoretical and empirical stakes, so far very few researches were interested in the way such a community could emerge. McAlexander *et alii.* (2002) analyze the possibility for a brand to bring its consumers together through *brandfest* to reinforce relationships between customers, the brand and the marketers. Nevertheless, this kind of punctual events organized by the brand doesn't ensure that

customers will continue to meet after the event has ended. Consequently the question of the lasting of the relation bonding marketers and customers is asked. According to us, the answer to this question depends on the way the brand community emerges.

To our knowledge no work took an interest in the way a brand community could emerge *on consumer's initiative* while brand communities are often created by customers. For this reason, we propose to explore the process by which a brand community can emerge on consumer's initiative.

Research methodology

Because our research is exploratory by nature, a qualitative method of data collection and analysis seems relevant. Case study method is particularly adapted to research concerning community psychology or sociology (Yin, 1984). Besides, according to this author, case study is very interesting for every research on contemporary events on which the researcher has little or no control.

Our research focuses on recent brand communities that allow access to reliable data and lead to find out the key periods and factors explaining the community development.

Data collection procedure

To capture the elements explaining the emergence of a brand community, we have to reconstitute the steps of the genesis process of that brand consumers group. This in-depth knowledge can be reached thanks to an ethnographic research. This kind of methodology allows a systemic approach and understanding of the event while putting it back in the context in which it took place.

Even though ethnography was long used only for distant and “backward³” communities, it is also appropriate for the study of groups existing within the researcher's society (Van Maanen, 1983). Observation, participation and interviews are the core of this method (Werner et Shoepfle, 1987). More recently, Arnould and Wallendorf (1994) showed the potential of a market-oriented ethnography. *De facto*, a lot of marketing researches use the ethnographic method – for instance Arnould and Price (1993), Belk *et alii.* (1989), Belk and Costa (1998), Celsi *et alii.* (1993), Holt (2002), etc.

Nevertheless our research has the particularity to highlight online communities. Regarding the field and data accessibility constraints - recency of the community, accessibility to archives and gathering enough consumers - we choose to analyze the emergence of online brand communities. Consequently, it is necessary to adapt the ethnographic method to suit the very nature of the environment dealt with in our research. Researchers propose to call *cyberethnography* (Ward, 1999) or *netnography* (Kozinets, 1998, 2002b) this adaptation of ethnography to the cyberspace. These methods both consist in the ethnographic study of groups gathering mainly online.

We made a retrospective (Jones, 1997) netnography (Kozinets, 2002b) of an online brand community that allowed us to identify the elements contributing to understand how this community emerges and takes shape. Then, we tried to validate the results obtained by

³ We should remember that Warner, before studying his famous *Yankee City*, stayed within an aborigine community. His interest for the American community studied after that is due to his will to compare modern and “backward” communities.

confronting them to another brand community emerging process operating within the same field (photography).

(N)ethnographic method is made up of three major steps (Belk et Costa, 1998; Schouten et McAlexander, 1995; Werner et Shoepfle, 1987): familiarization with the culture of the studied group⁴, data collection and analysis of the data – the two latter steps being intimately linked.

The retrospective netnography conducted allows us to have access to a large amount of information from different sources through the following steps. First, we observed the community in a not systematic manner (i.e. lurking) to become familiar with the particular culture of the group (Kozinets, 2002b). Then, we became member of the community and participated more importantly in the exchanges and activities of the community. Later, we collected the data concerning the emergence phase *per se* and triangulated them with data from other sites and/or interviews with the community founders via Internet. To check the reliability of the analysis, we used a double coding and asked the informants to evaluate the results of the study, especially the definition of the different stages, the elements explaining the emergence of the community, etc.

Nature of the collected data

Interactions between the community members constitute the core of the data we collected. As we focused on online brand communities, the interactions between the members are disembodied because they are computer-mediated. Moreover, we chose communities with asynchronous conversations that are stored on an Internet site allowing an easy access to the data for the researchers (Wellman *et alii.*, 1996). Thus, the data we collected and analyzed are mainly electronic messages exchanged by members on the site of the community.

Data coming from the community members' interactions have some distinctive features that should be underlined and taken into account during the analysis. They come from a medium that is not only a communication medium but also a storing medium (Jones, 1999). So researchers have to recontextualize the social space constituted by the cyberspace (Kendall, 1999). More precisely, data collected throughout the World Wide Web should be linked to external social structures and researchers should use a permanently iterative process between data collected within the community and those collected outside⁵.

Data stored in the cyberspace allow researchers conducting a longitudinal (Forgues and Vandangeon, 2001) or at least a comparative analysis (Ward, 1999). These available data within online communities are rarely older than a decade and are generally both archive documents and computer-mediated interactions between individuals (Costigan, 1999). As social interactions, these conversations must be approached very carefully by researchers. Since the studied people can't physically see the people with whom they interact, researchers must take into account "strategies"⁶ constructed to recreate consciousness of social co-presence (Burkhalter, 1995) and the interaction rituals (Goffman, 1967).

⁴ This step is fundamental to reduce what Werner and Shoepfle (1987) call « semantic gap » between the sense given by natives and the one perceived by the non acculturated researcher. Schouten and McAlexander (1995) showed how important this step is for the validity of the research or the access to the field itself.

⁵ Data collected « outside » the World Wide Web are all the information one can find in the so-called physical world. They are for instance, data from the face-to-face meeting between members (Ward, 1999), data collected in the newspaper, etc.

⁶ The term strategy refers here to Goffman's idea of strategies for the presentation of the self.

The empirical study

We conducted our study in two steps. First, we made an extensive investigation on the Nikonians community (users of Nikon cameras). Then, we compared the obtained results, for validation, with another community of camera users: Powershot-a.com.

The Nikonians community

This community (www.nikonians.com) was created in 2000 by two passionate consumers of the brand: the German BGS and the Mexican JRP. They met online in 1999 within discussion forums dedicated to photography. They became closer and decided to create an online community committed to their favorite brand: Nikon. In January 2000, the site “nikonians.org” was sent online, but still not opened to public. BGS and JRP asked other Nikon customers previously met online to visit their site, give their opinion and track any potential bug. Between February and April 2000, twenty-six people subscribe to the site and became “Beta Users”. At the end of April, the site was opened to public and everybody was able to visit the site and become member of the community. At the end of May 2000, the Nikonians community had 180 members; it reached 1,000 members in September and 2,000 at the end of the year. Today it has over 19,000 members.

Of course, like every online community, all the Nikonians members are not active (Ward, 1999). Whereas a hard core of about a few dozens of members, daily interacting one with another exists, and thousands of other members only interact from time to time.

One of the researchers became member of the community in February 2003 observing and participating since then to the interactions and taking part to a face-to-face meeting that took place in Brussels and gathered three dozens of European members. This event allowed meeting physically some community members and collecting additional data through discussions with members about the history of their relationship with the brand Nikon and their belonging to the Nikonians community. Moreover, we made a content analysis of the exchanged messages gathered about an 18-months period (from May 2000 to October 2001) in order to locate the emergence and the structuring phases of the community emergence. Besides we electronically interviewed the two creators of the community, asking them to react to our interpretations of the community genesis and development.

The Powershot community

Powershot is a Canon brand-daughter dedicated to digital photography. Powershot-a.com (www.powershot-a.com) is a community shaped around the camera brand Powershot.

We chose this community because it is centered around the same product category as Nikonians (photography) which enables us replicating the first study undertaken on the Nikonians community. Besides, the brand Canon is considered as the “enemy” by Nikonians: they consider it as “unfriendly” and use specific words to make negatively reference to it (e.g. Kwanon, C*, “the five letter word”, etc.). Thus, in the social representations of consumers, the two brands are different or even opposed, even though they act in the same product category.

Powershot-a.com derived from a yahoo discussion group that began on November 2001. Adam, a member who subscribed to the yahoo group in January 2002, proposed to make the group evolve and convert it into a message board. At the end of January 2002, the message board was launched. Powershot-a community has today over 4,000 members, of whom 2,000 are considered as active.

Although we didn't conduct a research as systematic as the one undertaken on the Nikonians community, we tracked the interactions between the community members and analyzed their exchanged messages.

On the basis of the data collected within the two communities and their comparison, we deconstructed the emergence processes of each of them independently. This allowed us making apparent the elements that are not idiosyncratic, presented hereafter in the final results.

Results analysis and discussion

Our two brand communities under study emerge under some specific conditions: individuals must encounter and be aware they share a common loyalty towards a specific brand. It is also necessary that they interact regularly enough to allow the emergence of common values, norms and social representations. It is only at this stage that a strong feeling of membership with each of the members, and with the group as a whole, will emerge.

Construction of a “There”

In the cyberspace, individuals can either choose places they visit based on a conscious choice or browse randomly when they have no precise idea on what they are looking for or on the way to reach it. For instance, consumers strongly involved in a product category are going to search information about this specific category or about a specific brand in this category. Discussion forums are the places where they get in contact with other customers who are commonly interested in this particular product category⁷.

Nevertheless, information exchanges and interactions taking place in these generalist forums may soon be perceived insufficient and not much structured by some individuals. This scarcity can be explained by two factors: (1) individuals consider that information exchanged is no longer relevant enough considering their expertise level (Alba et Hutchinson, 1987); (2) they can judge the exchanged information as too generalist and not enough focused on their favorite brand. This transition from a generalist forum to a dedicated brand site appears clearly from the content analysis of the messages exchanged within each of the Nikonians and the Powershot communities.

Besides we have observed within the photography sector, that an oppositional loyalty (Muniz and Hamer, 2002) exists between the brands Nikon and Canon, which leads to extremely negative mails about the “enemy brand”⁸. Loyal customers to one of the two “enemy brands” strongly reject and reject the opposite brand but no other brand operating in the same range of products. The opposition shouldn't be considered to be as strong as it is presented in the messages exchanged within the community. Actually, the opposition to the enemy brand is a symbolic representation that emerges *between* the members of a brand community. Even though this consumers' opposition to one particular brand considered as an enemy is not absolute, it establishes a common cultural reference (Linton, 1945) and ties more strong links between the members of the brand community.

⁷ We underline the fact that we only focus in this article on the process of emergence. Hence, it is possible to consider that there is no community at this stage. On the contrary, consumers can become members without participating to generalist discussion groups we mention here.

⁸ These negative mails are normally not allowed by the “netiquette” (i.e. the usually accepted rules of the Internet). They are called flames. These flames are quasi-absent of the brand communities we observed but are pretty common in the generalist forums concerning the product category.

These various elements allow loyal consumers to a particular brand being aware that they share more within their group than with the rest of consumers of the product category and that they experience the discriminating perceived values and properties of the brand within the product category.

Once they are aware of sharing some distinctive interest to a brand, individuals must have opportunities to interact with one another to create social links and to build common values, norms and representations. It is then necessary that individuals should meet regularly within a cyberplace that (1) is accessible for all the individuals interested in the brand and (2) lasts long enough so that individuals know where to find people with whom they wish to discuss. This critical step consists in creating “a there” or a place where consumers committed to brand can meet each other.

Some authors wrongly consider the concept of place doesn't exist in the cyberspace. Nevertheless, as argued by Fernback (1999), if there is neither place geographically speaking nor physical co-presence, it is important to understand that cyberspace is a particular space that really exists for people who are interacting within it (Kendall, 1999). In a computer-mediated universe, places must be symbolically constructed by the individuals through their social interactions. The existence of a cyberplace is exclusively constructed through the interactions of the individuals and corresponds to a real place for them. Cyberspace is then a particular space where the definition of place is entirely built by its “inhabitants”. For Fernback, (1999) “there is a ‘There’ there.” This “There” doesn't actually correspond to a geographical place but to a symbolically delimited location in the cyberspace (e.g. a web site or a list of discussion⁹ within which individuals can meet and interact).

This “there” is a key element for an online brand community to emerge. Concerned consumers will visit once this dedicated place to exchange with other consumers also interested in that particular brand. Then, they will be able to interact regularly and hence co-build a specific identity of the brand community.

Concerning the communities we've observed, the place in which the community meets is described by the members as “friendly” – by opposition to generalist forums considered as “unfriendly” and “rude”. Members feel at ease in this specific place and feel like coming there again. The site of the brand community is seen as a haven for all consumers loyal to the brand. The following messages illustrate this feeling of belonging to the same community.

“Scott,

Thanks for the Kudos. We try not to compare this community to others as this can very fast turn into something being very ugly.

Our main focus is to provide a true community feeling amongst all members and JRP and I think we have achieved that together with all the other members.

Jasper's comment on what might be in five years from now... 😊 Well, things are changing so fast and not having a crystal ball at hands, it comes down to pure guessing. I would say though, that we would still be a friendly place since this is our main goal.

Have fun!

Bo (Nikonian in the Black Forest/Germany)

[My profile](#) and [My gallery](#)”

⁹ We believe that the feeling of membership is less stronger within a general discussion list than when the consumer visits the “There” of the community.

“Yes, welcome to the forum!

When I joined this forum (although it didn't even exist in mid January. I joined Oguz' Yahoo Group back then) I haven't had any clue about digital photography or photography at all either. I never was a fan of photography. But my new A20 together with the nice people at the Yahoo Group and this board really made photography one of my biggest hobbies. I'm so glad to be here, meeting so many nice people from all over the world that I can share my experiences with. This is a great community, everyone's friendly and helpful! I guess I'll never buy something else than a Canon A-series camera, because otherwise I would have to leave this community. 🌐

Just wanted to share these thoughts of mine with you all. Thank you all very much, Oguz, Adam, and all the other nice people that I've met here. I'm so happy to be here.

Oops, seems like I got a bit sentimental. 🌐 Sorry 😊”

Forum URL: <http://forums.powershot-a.com/showthread.php?s=&threadid=269&highlight=friendly>, Forum Name: The Lounge, Posted by TobyM on 03-Apr-02 at 2:29 AM

Symbolic construction of the community¹⁰

Once the place in which the group meets is defined, members must develop *regular* interactions with each other. As mentioned by Jones (1995), online communities don't survive if their members don't maintain regular interactions. These interactions are generally asynchronous electronic discussions (Wellman *et alii.*, 1996). This type of communication allow the members having more “opened” conversations since it presents less constraints in terms of temporal co-presence¹¹. During these computer-mediated interactions, the members bring together their representations of the group. This leads to the emergence of a common vision of what the group is (Baym, 1995). This represents a symbolic construction of the community. This construction of the group abound with what Anderson (1983) calls “imagination”. The links individuals share are socially built through interactions to form a common cultural referential system¹².

Members interact more and more regularly. The group ritualizes the interactions of its members by creating dedicated forums for new comers, by establishing an introduction ritual, by enhancing forums or threads reserved to off-topic messages to allow the members sharing personal information, etc. In their messages, the members use specific interaction patterns that become a kind of *taken-for-granted* (Garfinkel, 1967) within the brand community and permit structuring the interactions. Consequently, the group lives a period of definition of interaction rituals (Goffman, 1967).

As indicated by Turner (1969), rituals may be at the origin of a “*communitas*”. According to this author, the “*communitas*” is an anti-structure insofar as the usual structure of the group is inversed or at least modified. Turner considers that, by opposition to the closed society

¹⁰ Title inspired from Cohen (1985), *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, Routledge, London.

¹¹ As mentioned below, there is no physical co-presence in the cyberspace. Consequently, the co-presence of members on a web site is the simultaneous presence of two or more members. That's why we refer to as a temporal co-presence.

¹² This common cultural referential system leads to a common understanding of the community (its nature, its origins, etc.) the brand and the product category. We link this to what anthropologists call “cosmogony”.

represented by the structure, the “communitas” is an “opened society” where individuals are unified by a feeling of communion, with one another and with the whole group. Indeed the “communitas” corresponds to a stage, a moment and not a permanent condition (Turner, 1969).

However, the “communitas” itself generates a structure in which free relations between individuals are changing into relations guided by defined norms and rules. The communitas emerging from ritualized interactions hence leads back to the structure. The informal group will structure itself and set up a hierarchy among the community members according to their role and statuses in the community. Communitas also enables creating a specific and shared identity among the members of the community. As the young people of the so-called “primitive communities”, who undergo an initiation ritual before sharing a group identity, the new comers to the brand community are indeed going to feel members of a group that shares a specific identity.

Though, in each of two case studies, we find out that the emergence process of the brand community is not over once structure and hierarchy appear. The community must also be capable of self-managing¹³ (Kollock and Smith, 1996). So as to allow the community self-managing, it is necessary that (1) the frontiers of the group are clearly defined, (2) most of the members participate to the elaboration of rules, and (3) a control of behaviors by the members themselves as well as a system of sanctions¹⁴ is established (Kollock and Smith, 1996).

These various elements are getting together over time through members’ interactions. Consequently, other key questions arouse such as the end of the period of emergence of the brand community as well as the transition to a stage of stabilization of rules.

If one can easily understand that it is hard to precisely date the end of the emergence phase of the community, it is essential to propose indicators allowing revealing the end of this phase. The indicators we have found relevant in our case studies are: (1) the apparition of conflicts and the development of collective strategies to solve them and (2) the organization of face-to-face meetings of the community members.

When the community exists for a sufficient time, some members are likely to go against the existing rules. By disrespecting the accepted rules of the community, these members threaten the very existence of the community. For Kollock and Smith (1996), it is decisive that other members watch and punish deviant members. Punishment of these deviant members takes the form of a symbolic punishment through unfriendly messages, refusals to discuss, and even temporary exclusions. For instance, the rule of the Nikonians community is to be and to stay friendly and to exchange courteous ideas about Nikon products. The criticism of the brand Nikon is not allowed since the community is formed around this particular brand. Thus the following example in this community illustrates the reaction of a Nikonian member to the non-respect of the rules by a “deviant” member:

“Why are you constantly bashing Nikon and the newer Nikon products? It certainly appears to me that you are. Now, this is totally my opinion, not because I'm a moderator or because I own a Nikon, it's just a feeling I have from reading your messages.

[...] I do understand that you will get the last word in on this subject, even if it requires going into another topic and expressing it, so go at it. I personally will not

¹³ The self-management here refers to the management of the community by itself and not by an external authority.

¹⁴ Kollock and Smith (1996) propose 7 rules for the management of common good of an online community. We only selected the 4 rules we considered relevant in the context of an online brand community.

enter this topic site from this day forward. It was a great topic; however, it somehow went from "Change" to Nikon bashing and I don't need this. Al started this topic here because of some discussion on metal versus plastic bodies in the Bodies forum, yet, that discussion on the F100 was drawn over to this discussion.

So, have a great day,

DD''

Forum URL: <http://www.nikonians.org/cgi-bin/dcforum/dcboard.cgi>,
Forum Name: Nikonians Café, Topic ID: 41, #28, RE: Re: "Changing
times... good or bad?", Posted by **f5fstop** on 21-Sep-00 at 11:47 AM, In
response to message #26

Even though conflicts exist at many stages of the history of a community, it is very relevant to search the apparition of a collective strategy aimed to manage and solve such conflicts (Reid, 1999). It is when different members of the community act together to solve a problem that the community really has its own structure. The emergence phase can then be considered as ended.

Very often, when the members interacted for a sufficient time, they feel like physically and personally familiar with each other. By so doing, they actually go further the computer-mediated relation and live what Arnould and Price (1993) call an “*extraordinary experience*”. The face-to-face meeting or at least the desire to meet other members is a key indicator that members really feel like *being part of* the brand community. The community exists as a real social entity in the mind of the members because it exists not only in the cyberspace but also in the physical world.

To sum up, the community can be considered as an institutionalized one when it has a structure of conflict resolution and when its members feel the need to go further the computer-mediated relationships. It is at this very point that the feeling of membership to the community truly exists at a double level, inter-individual and collective. It is also at this precise stage that a hierarchy gets set up within the group. The management of the community will become easier thanks to this hierarchy.

Conclusions and research implications

This article must be considered as a first necessary stage of a larger research aiming to understanding how online brand communities are developed, work and represent serious stakes for marketing researchers and practitioners. This work tries to improve our understanding of how online brand communities emerge. Its main contributions lie in better defining the very concept of brand community and the way this kind of consumers gathering can be developed and structured.

The emergence of online brand communities seems to get through several steps and to depend on the activation of some factors. We observe in particular that the emergence processes of both Nikonians and Powershot communities require that one or few people, strongly involved in the product category and highly committed to the brand take the initiative to create a “place” to accommodate the interactions between individuals around the brand. The former individuals who play a key role in the emergence and the management of the community, constitute the “hard core members” of the future community. They impulse the contacts and interactions between the members, have the legitimacy to referee potential conflicts and participate actively in defining the community rules and norms.

Furthermore, to be considered as an active and a perennial online community, it is decisive that the largest part of community members interacts frequently enough online to give rise to a feeling of membership with one another and with the whole community. These regular interactions permit also to develop common rules, norms and representations that structure the community.

The understanding of the emergence and the structuring processes of such a community could allow firms to evaluate the opportunities to have contact with the hard core members so as to forecast information about the brand, to build relationships with the brand within the community or to include them in the new products conception process.

These most involved community members are experts in the products of the brand. They're in touch with a large number of consumers thanks to their social relationships, both inside and outside the brand community. These *hard core members* show then some traits that are common with the *lead users* defined by Urban and Von Hippel (1986) which allow these members to be worthy associated in the innovation process of the firm. The firm could also use the brand community as a market-test since it brings together consumers with different levels of familiarity and expertise in the product category and different levels of attachment to the brand. Moreover, the brand community originates a social control on the loyalty to the brand of its members and transforms their dyadic relationship to the brand into a triadic one (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). That's why the brand community represents a captive market, all the more important than the community members generally over-consume these branded products. Lastly, the brand community is an incredible information diffuser¹⁵. It could therefore play a major role in the adoption process by the market as a whole.

All these opportunities of the brand community should make way for further researches on this concept to better explore its potentialities both for brand managers, consumers and marketing researchers.

Nevertheless, as any exploratory research, our study suffers from some limits. It is based on a too limited number of case studies to allow an external validation of the obtained results to other brand communities in different product categories. Moreover, our analysis is mainly based on the exchanges messages stored in the community web site and less on in-depth interviews that could reveal more information about the perceived shared values, the self-representation of the community and the history of belonging to it. Such interviews are however difficult to implement owing to the nature of online community members that are not geographically concentrated.

¹⁵ It must be underlined that the brand community plays a role in the construction of social representations of the brand and the building of associations with the brand, that are an element of the brand equity (Aaker, 1991).

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