

DISPOSITIVE ANALYSIS APPLIED TO BRAND-MANAGED VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES: THE USE OF A FOUCAULDIAN METHOD

Abstract:

Research on virtual communities is mainly focused on the community itself and minimizes the community-brand interactional effects. After a review pointing out the lacks in the existing literature, the dispositive analysis method and its theoretical framework are proposed. This framework provides the conceptual tools needed to study a brand-community interaction with a regulative purpose. It analyzes power-knowledge structures by focusing on relationships between discourse and objects. The framework and its epistemological and methodological aspects are presented and discussed. This analysis aims at explaining how regulation is created and implemented inside brand-managed virtual communities.

Key-words: Foucault, Virtual Communities, Knowledge, Power, Dispositive Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Brand communities have become a classical topic in marketing literature. Since the seminal work of Schouten and McAlexander (1995) and Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001), communities have been studied through various lenses including members' behavior and positive consequences for the brand. Despite an indecisive denomination (subculture, community or tribe), brand-related communities refer to gatherings of individuals around a brand, even for a rather short time. They include brand-created and consumer-created communities. Marketing literature does not make a clear difference between those two and seems to prefer to pay a particular attention to three aspects: motivations to join a community, community structuration and benefits for the brand.

Our asserted goal is to propose a way to investigate the reciprocal impact of the brand and the community on one another. Consequently, this paper focuses on brand-managed virtual communities, defined as brand-initiated communities occupying a virtual space owned by the brand (Arnone, Geerts and Scoubeau, 2009). It is rather obvious that brands manage communities to get some benefit. The efficiency of marketing actions is usually studied by manipulating several variables and testing their effect on consumers' decisions. Managerial recommendations consequently originate from research rooted in a *ceteris paribus* logic, isolating phenomenon in order to generalize their effect. Questioning their actual (and sometimes capital) contributions is not the point of this paper. Nevertheless, marketing practices are embedded into complex networks influenced for instance by the brand reputation and history, retailers practices and consultants action. These practices should be studied taking this complexity into consideration.

But surprisingly, the actual community management practices are not very studied: what brands actually do is still unknown. In the same time, many communities are ruled by

guidelines supposed to regulate members' behavior: those guidelines commonly focus on banishing disrespectful and aggressive behavior against either the brand or other members. Interviews with Community Managers conducted in a previous study showed that an important part of their job consists in handling those negative behaviors:

[Alexandra, freelance CM] "School don't teach you how to manage a troll¹" "If a troll is against your brand, he can do everything in order to shake your community"

[Arthur, freelance CM] "Trolling is a very disturbing phenomenon for companies. It can cause much damage" "Maybe 5 to 10% of my time is spent managing them"

Deviant behaviors may have dramatic consequences: Revillard (2002) shows that communities, as a reaction against trolls, stopped welcoming new members and perished. On the opposite, brand communities which offer a federative space where members adopt a positive behavior can be profitable. Hence, regulation is an important but poorly studied issue, which lacks conceptual foundations. We seek to demonstrate how regulation is not only required but also caused by interaction between the brand and the community. We propose a method and its conceptual framework, both grounded in the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault and in his key-notion of dispositive. As we demonstrate, dispositive analysis is able to study the influence of brand community management on members' behavior, whether positive or negative, through the analysis of power relations.

We are not trying to foster a paradigm revolution: our point is that some methods cannot embrace marketing phenomena produced by interaction between multiple actors. Traditional methods like ethnography, projective methods, in-depth interviews or surveys have shown their huge potential in consumer research. But they are not "supermethods" able to solve every marketing research issue. Consequently, the first part of this paper highlights the lacks in terms of methods (and concepts) able to grab these interactional effects in community-

¹ A troll is an individual who wants to shake a community through insulting, provoking or unpleasant behavior.

related literature. However, inside the CCT literature stream lie some interesting results which legitimate a focus on interaction between brand and its community. The second part presents the dispositive analysis itself, investigates epistemological and methodological issues. Thus, we demonstrate that this analysis is particularly well suited for research on communities.

THE MINIMAL PRESENCE OF THE BRAND IN COMMUNITY RESEARCH

BRAND AS A SIMPLE CONTEXTUAL ELEMENT

Marketing and consumer research literature generally studies communities as singular objects, mostly independent from the brand they gather around. Brand is considered as the element causing the existence of communities. We can explain this by the consumer behavior orientation generally adopted, focused on the individual. What is in relation with the brand is then considered through this individual filter. Thus, Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) describe antecedents to join a community. Cova (1997) explains the community phenomenon with the linking value of the products and services: the brand supports the social link, nothing more. Despite their fundamental contributions, these studies use a sociological/psychological point of view: they point out motivations that the brand may use to implement strategies *ex post*. Brand practices are not an object of study but a consequence of the study.

Another area of research focuses on the experience lived by members or on the nature of membership and its related identity issues. Kozinets (2001) shows how brand communities become shelters for individuals who want to escape from the market by developing a religious-like relationship with consumption objects. Muñiz and Schau (2005) also study religious consumption meanings created by Apple fans. Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) point out core characteristics of brand communities: consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions and

moral responsibility. All these studies make progress the understanding of communities, but the brand remains a distant object, as the communities under study are members-managed.

The last area of research questions the impact of communities on brand-related behaviors. It has been found that communities favor loyalty (Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann, 2005), enhance word-of-mouth and positive attitude toward the brand (Woisetschläger, Hartleb and Blut, 2008). But communities may exert an unwanted influence on brands (Cova and Carrère, 2002). In this vein, Hickman and Ward (2007) show that communities may foster negative outcomes when they contribute to stereotypes diffusion or insulting behaviors exhibition. In this stream of literature, the brand is conceived as a passive object which suffers the influence, either positive or negative, of its own community. As a consequence, community management practices remain unquestioned, as the brand seems to have no impact on its community.

RECIPROCAL INFLUENCE BETWEEN THE BRAND AND ITS COMMUNITY

Paradoxically, in most of the articles about brand communities, managerial recommendations are directly addressed to the brand. For example, Cova and Cova (2001) encourage tribal strategies: the brand should be a support for links creation between tribe members in the tribal network. Some studies adopt a normative approach and seek to highlight what the brand should do. Thus, virtual environments should be designed according to the impact that the brand wants to exert on consumers (Nambisan and Baron, 2010); members must be classified according to the values and benefits they expect (Prykop and Heitmann, 2006). Fosfuri, Giarratana and Roca (2011) suggest four community strategies, differentiated through two dimensions: brand-community congruence and brand's ability to modify the identity of the community. Nevertheless, all these recommendations emerge in the conclusion of consumer-focused studies. In a close logic, McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig (2002) seek to show up

how companies can influence community dynamics but their ethnographic approach of the communities does not really allow them to study systematically brand practices.

To conclude, the identity of the brand seems of little importance: whatever the brand's specificities, whatever its actual management, the recommendations are the same. Centered on the community phenomenon, researchers neglect the brand itself. Symptomatically the brand arises at the bottom of the brand community definition: "a community ... among admirers of a brand" (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). The most commonly used methods (surveys and n-ethnographic work) are well-adapted to consumer and group consumers study but much less to the analysis of brand management. In other words, we "jump" from a deep and valuable understanding of the community phenomenon to general recommendations, without paying enough attention to the brand actually involved.

Brodin (2000) moves the scope to study brand-managed virtual communities. Unlike traditional brand communities, they gather individual around subjects that go beyond the brand. They are brand-initiated and brand-managed: they are specifically suited to a study of the brand-community interaction. Brodin (2000) suggests that community development follow three stages: a strategic stage (strategic analysis and definition of objectives), a sociocultural stage (community framework definition, recruitment of members, community dynamics creation) and a relational stage (relationship development between the brand and the members). Arnone *et al.* (2009) add an iterative dimension which allows an appropriation of the space by members. Despite the importance of this space (defined as the concrete means of interaction given to members), the authors insist on the sociocultural aspects.

This change of scope reveals the existence of interactional effects: brands and communities influence each other. Mere one-sided impacts cannot exist, as the actors are in a close relationship. Nevertheless, because this scope is too much focused on sociocultural aspects, we would like to broaden it one last time. Hence, the following section explores some

marketing studies which add three issues in community research waiting for being grasped: power issues, discourse issues and physical environment issues.

THE NATURE OF INTERACTION BETWEEN THE BRAND AND ITS COMMUNITY

How to define the reciprocal influence between the brand and its community? Communities have an impact on markets as they can be competitors (Cova and Pace, 2008). Struggles of power result from this competition. The community is no longer a vessel of the brand, and both entities can be treated as equals. In the same way, at a micro-level, the brand employees have an influence on the community behavior (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002). As they point out as an example, “certain techniques ... were codified in a booklet” (p.42): the brand uses some techniques to foster some behaviors. Here is an example of a kind of regulation implemented by the brand, through a discursive material. As a matter of fact, discourse is the main media between brands and consumers (Iglesias and Bonnet, 2012). Finally, Arnone *et al.* (2009) point out that a virtual environment can influence consumer behavior as well. Thus time must be dedicated to enhance space appropriation by members. Hence, as its design constrains consumer behavior (Bonnin, 2006), this virtual space can be used as a regulation technique.

In the end, we are looking at a complex network of discourse and objects which produce power phenomena in order to regulate the individual behavior. This complex network has a name: its name is a “dispositive” (Foucault, 1975).

In fact, several marketing researchers already use Foucauldian approaches. Some studies (Denegri-Knott, 2004; Shankar, Cherrier and Canniford, 2006) use his notion of power to study consumer empowerment. Foucauldian power is a fluid force flowing through the entire society, not a “thing” that can be owned. Knowledge and power are closely tied as they mutually create each other. Humphreys (2006) shows how Amazon consumers are

constructed as “objects of knowledge”. An object of knowledge can be defined at this point as a discursive object partially recovering a real object in order to define and discursively apprehend it. Definition of objects of knowledge influence the way brands handle consumers. For example, Amazon does not use specific analytics because the consumer has a specific reality: the historical use of those analytics forms the consumer’s definition, gives it its reality and its truth, and this constructed reality leads to the creation of new analytics.

DISPOSITIVE ANALYSIS AND BRAND-MANAGED VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

The following development mainly refers to Gilles Deleuze’s book ([1986] 2004), as it is a synthetic and systematic analysis of the Foucauldian framework. However several developments are directly from Foucaults’ books (mainly Foucault, 1969, 1975, 1994). For an illustrative purpose, this framework will be applied to a fictional community: the PouicPouic community, gathered around a massage accessories retailer. Three characters are created: SpaAddict, defined as a “normal” member of the community; Esalen, a “deviant” member; Fengshui, a community moderator.

DISPOSITIVE ANALYSIS AND ITS THEORETICAL GROUNDING

Knowledge: building objects through interaction; stratified knowledge is the foundation of the Foucauldian framework. According to him, knowledge is made of two elements: discourse and objects. As a result, “if discourse possesses an object, it is its own proper object, which is not isomorphic to the visible object” (Deleuze, [1986] 2004, p.68). The object of discourse is not a “physical” object, because objects and discourse are irreducible to one another. Discourse creates its own object. In simpler words, Foucauldian objects are surrounded by

discourse-crafted objects. Successive waves of discourse, sometimes contradictory, lead to the stratification of knowledge: discourse and objects are at one point immobilized and a correspondence system can link them. In the end, objects are confounded with their discursive representation. This discourse-object complex is called an “object of knowledge”. Knowledge itself is neither language (e.g. discourse) nor perception (e.g. objects) but the relationship system established between them. In *Surveiller et Punir* (Foucault 1975), the delinquency as a discourse is the way law defines delinquents. The delinquency as an object refers to the prisons, the concrete individuals imprisoned. Knowledge about delinquency is the link made between law definition of delinquency and the real delinquents imprisoned.

The main objects of knowledge in our fictional community are the members. They are the correspondence between objects (e.g. Esalen) and discourse (e.g. deviant member, Californian member). Esalen cannot be reduced to his behavior or the place where he lives. The link between these discourses and the object Esalen form the corresponding object of knowledge Esalen. We use the written form [Esalen-deviant] as the stable correspondence between the object Esalen and the discourse “deviant”. [Esalen-deviant] is an object of knowledge.

Power: regulating objects through interaction; talking about strata means that there is a stratification process. Stratification is the temporary immobilization of objects and discourse in a stable system of correspondences. The force ordering this chaos for a moment is power seen as an “action on action” (*ibid.*, p.77), not an action on objects. In other words, power creates objects of knowledge. Although knowledge can become stratified, power is merely dynamic: a stable power means no power at all. Hence, Foucault’s studies are historical: power is more easily perceived through comparison between successive knowledge strata.

Organizing multiple objects and discourse, power is a system of forces acting on a system of relationships. Foucault calls it a “diagram”. His main example of a diagram is Bentham’s Panopticon, a model of perfect prison. It is the “pure function of imposing any task or conduct

to a multiplicity of any individuals, under the sole condition of this multiplicity to be small and the space to be limited” (*ibid.*, p.79). Whatever the building, the individuals or the tasks, the diagram is the function imposing, organizing and allocating. It shapes the buildings, formalizes the tasks and makes the organization concrete: it crafts the regulation system. But power forces are scarce: “the last word of power is that resistance is first, as power relationships are completely embedded into the diagram, although resistances are necessarily in a direct relationship with the outside where the diagrams originate. A social field resists more than it strategises” (*ibid.*, pp.95-96). A power force is continuously targeted by resistance forces trying to reorganize knowledge in another configuration. The strength of power originates in the dispositive, the concrete, physical organization which supports it.

Let us go back to our example. We assume that SpaAddict just asked for help about massage with sunflower oil. Esalen insults him, then Fengshui suppresses Esalen’s answer and replaces it with a message saying “Esalen, you were already told to stay respectful”. Forces link discourses to objects: SpaAddict becomes a normal member, Esalen becomes a deviant member and Fengshui becomes a legitimate moderator. These three associations exist in every community: they are a part of the virtual communities’ diagram which puts one member in a dominant position in order to regulate others.

Dispositive: behavior regulation through concrete application of a power diagram; according to Foucault (1994), the dispositive “results from the interlacement of power relations and knowledge relations”. It is “a heterogeneous range, virtually including every element, whether discursive or not, at a same level ... the dispositive itself is the network who settles between those elements”. It always has “a concrete strategic intention”. Put in simpler words, the dispositive is a combination of words and objects with a strategic intention. This intention is not individual: “every effect, whether positive or negative, whether wanted or not, resonates or contradicts with the others, and calls for a readjustment of heterogeneous elements”

(Foucault, 1994, p.299). The dispositive itself is dynamic: it modifies itself in order to gain strength. In some way, it creates its own strategy (Foucault, 1976) so it can survive even if a key strategic actor disappears. This is why power forces, even scarce, can bear multiple attacks from resistance forces: the dispositive reinforces itself by his inner coherence, while resistance forces lack coordination. If the Panopticon is a diagram, the prison is its resulting dispositive: it is a diagram applied to objects (delinquency) and discourse (penal law) which creates new objects (prisons, courts, experts) and new discourse (prison rules, justice decisions and experts' evaluations) in order to manage behaviors. Finally, the dispositive can be defined as a network of objects and discourse, being the concrete manifestation of a power diagram, which organizes a specific social field.

Our fictional dispositive is made of the software application which supports interaction in the PouicPouic community and of the discourse surrounding it (guidelines, brand communication and so on). Members' activity is organized: they have to talk about massage without being insulting. Esalen has his own part as a deviant: he has to disturb conversations so he can be used by moderators as an example of what is forbidden. Fengshui's part is to protect members from Esalen. Roles are supported by technical prerogatives: Fengshui can suppress some content, for example. The strategic goal is to make happy members produce rich content about massage. This production is protected by moderators who use deviants as examples to maintain peace. The dispositive we are looking at is similar to a workplace dispositive, with happy workers meant to produce and bad HR managers punishing deviance. The dispositive is not immutable: if Esalen successfully shows that his insulting messages are jokes, he modifies the diagram: [message-insult] becomes [message-joke]. [Esalen-joker] is no longer [Esalen-deviant]. [Fengshui-legitimate] can become [Fengshui-illegitimate] if he punishes Esalen who is not deviant anymore. In the end, behaviors are modified: [Fengshui-illegitimate] must be more cautious when punishing [Esalen-joker] and has to justify his actions differently.

We are here facing a problem. We assume that discourse modifies perceived reality and its corresponding behaviors: how far can go this modification? Is reality so intangible that discourse can do everything? The following epistemological part discusses the link between reality and discourse in Foucault's framework.

DISPOSITIVE ANALYSIS, EPISTEMOLOGY AND METHOD

Foucault as a critical realist; dispositive analysis does not fit in a positivist paradigm, as shown by the following quotations: "Again, it should be emphasized that only prediction is sought [in positivism], not "deeper" or causal explanations. Theories and laws, therefore, must be treated solely as calculation instruments for making predictions" (Hunt, 1991, p.34); "the positivists, guided by the views of Mach and Hume, viewed unobservable as metaphysical concepts to be strictly avoided" (Hunt, 1991, p.35). Dispositive analysis aims at explaining reality: it is certainly not a predictive tool. As far as we know, we cannot use dispositive analysis for prediction, while it still produces excellent explanations. On the other hand, Glaserfeld's (2001) constructivism postulates that only human experience is knowable. The subject exists prior to the experience, as experience is created by subject-reality interaction (Piaget, 1967). In the Foucauldian framework, the subject is present, but later. Later, as the prime evidence is: "There is discourse". The subject is in a reactive position in front of discourse as he uses it to build his identity (Foucault, 1984). On the contrary, the formation of power-knowledge systems is rooted in discourse-objects interaction. The subject has a role to play, but only as the vehicle of discourse. Knowledge is formed at a macro-level, so an individual cannot reverse the balance by himself. Hence, what is studied is how this discourse impacts on him. As a matter of fact, discourse is qualified as "discursive events" (Foucault, 1969): we have to understand the mechanics which make these events happen.

We approach here the critical realist paradigm, based on philosophical works of Harré and Bashkar, and proposed in management research by Tsang and Kwan (1999). Critical realism describes a stratified reality: an empirical realm made of observed events; an effective realm made of happened events; and a reality realm made of structures between events (Tsang and Kwan, 1999). Science has to infer the structures existing in the reality realm by observing events in the empirical level. The researcher creates a model of a reality made unobservable because of the existence of a discursive curtain. “In other words, the world causes us to have beliefs but it cannot tell us what to believe” (Tsoukas, 2000, p.533). Our access to reality is mediated by discourse: words dress objects with knowledge, and we cannot undress them. We must imagine how they look. Critical realism borrows the replication imperative from positivism: replication makes a theory more plausible (Tsang and Kwan, 1999). Pragmatism, confronting knowledge to action in order to judge its usefulness (Piaget, 1967), is borrowed from constructivism: a theory is valid as long as it allows “adaptation and survival” (Boisot and McKelvey, 2010).

Methodology: studying knowledge through discourse; each Foucauldian researcher we looked at seems to use his own method. As a consequence, we have to do the same. Nevertheless, the most cited method in knowledge studies is Jäger’s (2001). First, the researcher must locate his body of knowledge: racism knowledge is not found inside texts about racism but inside texts about refugees or immigration. The second step is most controversial: as much as the researcher can, he must use only one discourse plane (a discourse plane is the location from where it is spoken). It is mandatory to use several discourse planes: the purpose is to study a multi-discourse interaction. Using a single plane can be justified by the study of a very specific knowledge in an area using mostly a single media. For example, it is possible to study Strategic Management knowledge creation using only peer-reviewed journals because journals are the main media for knowledge diffusion.

Knowledge studies begin with the selection of the relevant discourse planes. In our case, they can be guidelines for moderators, conditions of use for members but also the forum itself as we want to access members' discourse. The researcher must then focus on a few fragments of the global corpus and locate in them every important object for his research purpose. These objects pointed out are objects of knowledge. They can be members, moderators, deviant members, rules (as objects) and even the brand. We find here the first analytical material we need. To process it, three analytic concepts are used.

The *surface of apparition* refers to “places, social groups, information sources inside which it is possible to point out individual differences which are designated, analyzed and become objects of a discourse” (Jardat, 2005, p.43). One surface of apparition is the community itself: obviously, each member is at least a member. Yet it can be something else, as deviance can be located inside the member's discourse instead of being inside himself. The *delimitation instances* are “institutions, disciplines, constituted bodies which, in society, part, designate, give a name and establish the differences constituted as objects” (Jardat, 2005, p.43). Delimitation instances can be managers, moderators, of maybe consultants. Finally, *specification grids* are “systems through which different objects are split, opposed, related, classified, and derived one from another in different species” (Jardat, 2005, p.44). Community members can be classified according to their behavior or their psychological characteristics. These analytic concepts must be applied to every object of knowledge, in order to discover power and resistance forces inside the discursive part of the dispositive.

Methodology: studying the dispositive through non-discursive events; a dispositive, according to Bührmann (2005), is made of three strata: discourse, non-discursive practices and objects. We prefer a classification in terms of events, as Foucault himself emphasizes the “discursive events”. Thus, dispositives are made of discursive and non-discursive events. They manifest power effects: discursive events are the concrete results of a knowledge link created by a

power force, and non-discursive events are mere manifestations of a power force created by a knowledge link. These non-discursive events are called “power practices” (Foucault, 1975).

In our example, Esalen’s post was replaced by Fengshui’s message. The suppression is a non-discursive event, and is the power practice which stabilizes the object of knowledge [Esalen’s message-illegal message]. Its origin lies in previous knowledge links: [Esalen-deviant] and [Esalen’s message-illegal message]. This power practice reinforces the diagram. Resistance practices, on the contrary, modify the diagram. The message posted by Fengshui is a discursive event. It results from the power practice which suppressed the former message. It originates in a previous knowledge link: [message suppression-necessity to justify]. Fengshui’s discursive event creates another power force reinforcing the link [Esalen-deviant].

Bührmann (2005) proposes four levels of analysis. The *area of reference* is made of a knowledge field (what are the objects concerned by knowledge) and a power field (which individuals are concerned by power). The *regulation authority* is defined as individuals, groups or mechanisms who allow knowledge emergence and power exercise. The *regulation processes* corresponds to practices of knowledge creation and practices of power. The *strategic imperative* is the goal of the dispositive. Those concepts create a system of correspondences between knowledge and power. At each level, knowledge and power are linked and lead to the goal of the dispositive. This goal emerges from interaction between individual strategies, discursive and non-discursive practices. Analysis is iterative: the knowledge part points out objects of knowledge which make power forces appear. Those power forces discovered lead to find new relevant objects of knowledge. We use a critical realist criterion to stop the analysis: the researcher must stop when a theory can be extracted. This theory must be able to explain the happening of events in a plausible way.

Data selection; dispositive analysis must use discursive and non-discursive data. They are multiple: documentary sources, discursive (texts) and non-discursive (as images, plans,

schemes), but also observations, discursive (spoken text heard during a Community Management formation, for example) and non-discursive (moderation actions, members' practices and software structure of the community). The purpose is a global understanding of the dispositive (domination structure vs. resistance structure). Consequently, the researcher must collect data inside and outside the community, among all the actors who exercise both power and resistance. In other words, we will find valuable data among both the community management team and the community members.

We purposely did not mention interviews as a possible data source. One can argue that Jäger (2001) and others use them frequently. First of all, we do not state that interviews are not a relevant material in Foucauldian studies; we are simply warning about an inherent bias. During researcher-respondent interaction, discursive practices of the researcher can destabilize the discourse produced by the respondent. The researcher is indeed put in a specific hierarchical position by discourse on science: in other words, the object of knowledge [Researcher-knowledge owner] produces power effects. As a result, what the researcher says is a practice of power meant to convey the truth. The respondent may consequently mimic his discourse in an attempt to link himself, as an object, to a discourse of truth: he implements a resistance practice. Researchers must be very careful about the possibility of resistance happening everywhere there is an exercise of power. Obviously, if the respondent discourse is modified, there is a problem: the researcher looks at a destabilized knowledge instead of accessing the stratified knowledge he is looking for. Consequently, the interview must produce the same discourse as another discourse plane to be considered as valid.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES OF THE DISPOSITIVE ANALYSIS

The point of the previous sections was to demonstrate the utility of dispositive analysis to community-related research. Indeed, it explains the structuration of a social field by the existence of power-knowledge systems. We find power and resistance to be very similar: only their goals differ. Power reinforces the existing dispositive while resistance destabilizes it. Hence, resistance is conceived beyond Resistance with a capital R: everyday practices and revolutions are different in terms of scale, not in terms of nature. With a bit of irony, we would call the Foucauldian framework a “prismatic Panopticon” (Humphreys, 2006): multiple concepts look at each other while a researcher is put in the center, watching the whole picture. Placed at this specific location, the researcher can handle concepts one by one but also study the interaction between them: he “watches them watching themselves” (Humphreys, 2006). The dispositive is something more than the sum of its parts.

The literature review of the first section showed that the brand was commonly forgotten or put in a peripheral position by marketing research. On the contrary, the Foucauldian framework provides a simultaneous analysis of community and its related contextual actors: software platforms creators, managers or whoever else. Multiple interactions, whether cooperative or competitive, form this social field. Although resistance of the consumer is an emergent issue (Roux, 2007) and day-to-day resistance has now turned into an object of study (El Euch Maalej and Roux, 2012), this concept remains poorly applied to virtual communities, even though they are a powerful media of expression of this resistance (Cova and White, 2010).

Finally, despite its theoretical background, dispositive analysis is a methodological tool. As a method, it is used to create theoretical developments. In our case, it can theorize a power structure which organizes the observed community behavior. It grants access to the knowledge which forms a specific regulation structure and therefore gives keys to managers who want to adapt their management practices.

CONCLUSION

We deliberately chose communities as our lead example. Indeed, they are a natural extension of Foucault's studies: they are (more or less) closed spaces where individuals are managed in order to produce specific effects. In some way, they are dispositives similar to prisons (Foucault, 1975), with a different goal. The dispositive analysis can bring many contributions to this field: taking into account interactional effects, it can provide deeper understandings of regulation mechanisms and their effect. Understanding the logic of the community dispositive can provide tools in order to help marketing professionals handle more efficiently the community phenomenon. Dispositive analysis can also be used in other fields. Every marketing strategy is a dispositive, from loyalty cards (El Euch Maalej and Roux, 2012) to behavioral metrics used by commercial websites (Humphreys, 2006). At a macro level, markets can also be conceived as macro-dispositives.

However, two limits must be enlightened: two major aspects of the Foucauldian framework were excluded from this paper for a simplification purpose. The first one is the historical dimension of the dispositive: power-knowledge systems are created in a large time period. Nevertheless, dispositive analysis in a static perspective still makes sense: "There is archaeology of the present. Present or past, visible is like enunciable: they are the object not of a phenomenology but an epistemology" (Deleuze, [1986] 2004, p.58). The second limit is the exclusion of the subjectivation theory. Approached in the epistemological section, we did not develop it due to lack of space. According to Foucault, the individual bows the power forces in order to recognize them inside him and develop an ethic. This theory may be used to study individual issues inside the Foucauldian framework. Contrary to knowledge studies and power studies which have been applied many times, conceptual and methodological work remains necessary in order to make subjectivation analysis a practical method.

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