

## The role of virtual communities in purchasing decision making: A Netnographic Approach

دور المجتمعات الافتراضية في اتخاذ قرار الشراء: المنهج التنوغي

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### Abstract:

Since the advent of the internet, consumers have been using this web to communicate with each other. Cyberspace has become a new kind of social terrain, cluttered with "virtual communities". Our research aims to show the importance and the role of virtual communities of brands on the decision-making of Internet users. In order to achieve this objective, we based on a Netnographic approach to analyze the opinions shared by members of the virtual community of Sephora. Then a thematic analysis was carried out in order to reorganize the verbatim into different themes. The results show that virtual communities have a very important impact in decision-making among Internet users, and this at each stage of the purchasing decision-making process.

**Keywords:** Virtual communities; Purchasing process; Purchase decision; Internet user; Netnography.

### ملخص:

منذ ظهور الإنترنت، أصبح المستهلكون يستخدمون الإنترنت للتواصل مع بعضهم البعض. حيث أنشأ هذا الفضاء الإلكتروني نوعاً جديداً من التضاريس الاجتماعية، المزدهمة بـ "المجتمعات الافتراضية". يهدف بحثنا هذا إلى تقصي أهمية ودور المجتمعات الافتراضية للعلامات التجارية في اتخاذ قرار الشراء عند مستخدمي الإنترنت. و من أجل تحقيق هذا الهدف، اعتمدنا على المنهج التنوغي لتحليل الآراء التي شاركها أفراد المجتمع الافتراضي للعلامة التجارية "سيفورا". حيث تم الاستعانة بطريقة تحليل المحتوى من أجل إعادة تنظيم المواضيع المختلفة التي كانت محل نقاش وتواصل بين أفراد المجتمع الافتراضي المدروس. في الأخير أظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن المجتمعات الافتراضية لها تأثير مهم للغاية في اتخاذ قرار الشراء بين مستخدمي الإنترنت وذلك في كل مرحلة من مراحل عملية اتخاذ قرار الشراء.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** مجتمعات افتراضية؛ عملية الشراء؛ قرار الشراء؛ مستخدمو الإنترنت؛ نتوغرافيا

## **I- Introduction :**

The use of the Internet by individuals and by businesses is constantly growing. More and more consumers are turning to the Internet to research, exchange and produce information on topics of common interest (Kewin, 2010). The rise of technologies for publishing dynamic interfaces specific to the Internet has given birth to a new form of electronic communication classified in the category of "web2.0" (Gaëlle, 2007).

Virtual communities are becoming more and more important with the development of cyberspace and the globalization that it entails. In fact, according to Sicilia and Palazon (2008), "over 40 million people Worldwide are estimated to participate in some form of virtual community". The Internet therefore makes it possible to bring together individuals from around the world around points of common interest and to express a common voice. The ranking of different brands by Internet users in virtual communities determines the purchasing decision. The latter depend on important information, features and functionality shared by members of virtual communities.

Attitudes expressed by other Internet users and the quality of the shopping experience and of the store and / or e-commerce website can also affect Internet users' decision-making. Thus, the advice given by consumers is likely to influence the choice made. The ranking of different brands by Internet users in virtual communities determines the purchasing decision. The latter depend on important information, features and functionality shared by members of virtual communities.

Therefore, the main objective of our research is to show the importance and the role of brands' virtual communities on the decision-making of Internet users. In order to achieve this objective, we carried out a Netnographic study to analyze the opinions shared on the virtual community of Sephora "Beauty Insider". Through this research, it seems appropriate to answer the following question: **What is the role of virtual communities in the purchase decision-making of Internet users?**

### **I.1. Virtual communities Definition**

Armstrong and Hagel were among the pioneers in explaining the concept of virtual community. Indeed, they speak of the first examples of non-physical communities based on the Internet, therefore virtual (Gauthier, 2012). According to Srinivasan and al. (2002) virtual communities are "An online social entity comprising existing and potential consumers which is organized by electronic commerce in order to facilitate the exchange of opinions and information regarding products and the services offered."

Sicilia and Palazon (2008) have also defined virtual communities as a group of individuals with common interests in a brand and who communicate with each other electronically on a platform provided by the company that supports the brand .

The different definitions of the researchers have made it possible to note that the different elements coming back most often in virtual communities are (Kewin, 2010): 1) the gathering of a group of people 2) online around 3) of a common interest for the purpose 4) to obtain and exchange information or experiences.

## I.2. The typology of virtual communities

Different types of virtual communities exist. Diversity is partly associated with the presence of different motivations for leaving. Another factor that complicates this diversity is the fact that a virtual community can be created by a group of individuals or by a company. In these two cases, the communities were created by different motivations (Kewin, 2010).

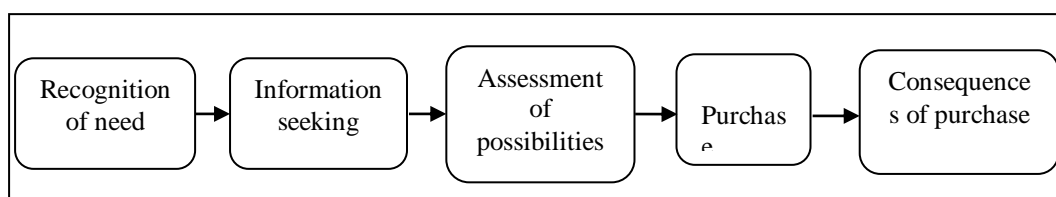
Porter (2004) presents a typology that classifies virtual communities on two levels. The first level consists in differentiating the virtual communities created by the organizations and the virtual communities created by the members. The second level classifies virtual communities initiated by members and those initiated by organizations according to the general orientation of relationships.

Faced with this diversity, several terms are used to designate a virtual community: online community, electronic community, community of interest, virtual community of economic interest, social network site... (Guillou, 2008).

## I.3. Purchase decision process

According to marketing research, a purchasing decision is the behavior of a consumer who determines and follows a decision process comprising various stages in order to arrive at a choice (Du Plessis and al., 1991; Erasmus and al., 2010; Howard and Sheth, 1969). The classic model of purchasing behavior is a linear model which illustrates the main stages of the purchasing process. This model is based on several studies including those of Engel and al. (1968), Howard and Sheth (1969), Nicosia and Mayer (1976) and which has been used as a standard model in research on consumer behavior. It includes the recognition of needs, the search for information, the evaluation of alternatives, the stages of purchase and post-purchase (Figure1). Decision analysis offers a different perspective on how purchasing decisions are made, which are one type of decision-making process.

**Figure (1): Decision making process**



**Source: Filser (1994)**

A widely used decision-making model, presented by Holtzman (1989), involves three steps: formulation, evaluation and appraisal. The two phases of formulation and evaluation are important steps in any decision-making process (Frensh and al., 2009; Holtzman, 1989; Papamichail and Robertson, 2005), but they have been neglected in the literature review on consumer decision. At the formulation stage, the decision problem is formulated in the mind of the decision maker, alternatives are proposed and criteria are set out. The assessment is where the resulting choices are assessed. These steps are therefore included in the purchasing process. Decision makers often skip steps or do not follow all steps in a linear form (Papamichail and Robertson, 2008) and process instances often include divergences from the main road and iterations between steps (Lastovicka, 1979). As the decision-making process

unfolds, individuals make choices about the process and may follow different paths. This type of flexibility has been defined by Dorn and al. (2010) as the ability to adapt the process flow to demand by adding, skipping or sequential reorganization of the process steps.

## **II– Methods and Materials:**

The main objective of our research is to show the importance and the role of virtual communities of brands on the purchase decision-making of Internet users. To reach our objective, we opted for a qualitative study, based on a netnographic approach. Yohan (2004) defined this approach as "a method which uses the internet as a data source by relying on the virtual consumer community, it analyzes the communication acts of the members of a virtual consumption community with the aim of producing new knowledge relating to the object of consumption around which the community revolves ."

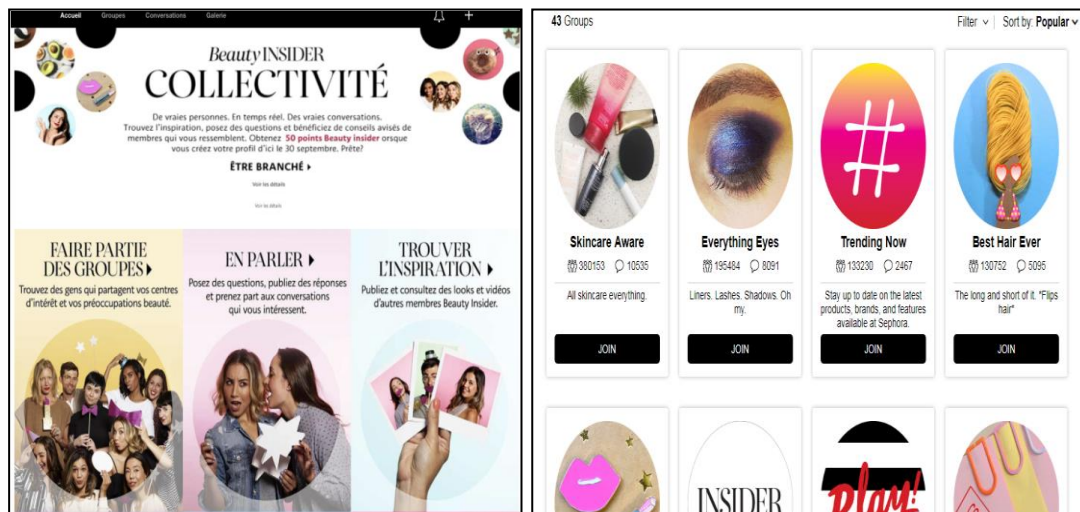
To study virtual communities, classical qualitative research methods quickly showed their limits. In 1997, Kozinets proposed the netnographic method (which is a combination of the words network and ethnography) in order to study virtual environments (Sayarh, 2013). Besides netnography is ethnography suitable for the study of online communities (Kozinets, 2002). The choice of a qualitative Netnographic method was motivated for several reasons: First, the explosion of virtual communities around the world and the development of NICTs. Then, the interest of this method resides in the ease of access to the data relating to the virtual communities. The Netnographic study consists of an immersion in the community as a visitor or member (Kozinets, 1997) allowing permanent monitoring of communication .

We used the virtual community of the Sephora brand on their web site; this community was created by the Sephora brand, allowing community members to create discussion groups that respond to their common interests. Initially, we conducted a month-long non-participant observation period (March 2019) to be able to determine several points of decision-making as well as the purchasing decision of community members. Our study population is made up of all Internet users who are members of the Sephora "Beauty Insider" virtual community dedicated to the use of beauty products. After, we reader and analyzed the opinions and comments published by Internet users on the "Beauty Insider" community website regarding the use, purchase and experience shared on beauty products from Sephora. Then, a content analysis was carried out which allowed us to reorganize the verbatim in order to know the factors which have an impact on the decision-making of Internet users. The analysis of the reviews allowed us to identify a set of elements which are shared by the members of the virtual community of Sephora "Beauty Insider".

### **II.1. Presentation of the Sephora virtual community**

In 2010 Sephora integrated these ideas for sharing experiences into its social media strategy by creating the "Beauty Insider" community. On the new Beauty Insider platform in the United States and Canada, buyers can chat with each other, create their individual profile and even receive recommendations and advice on beauty products and looks. The Beauty Insider community is structured into several discussion groups, around 43 beauty groups: Skincare aware, Lip lovers, Acne-prone skin, Customer Support, Trending now, nailed it, Moms only...(Figure2).

**Figure (2): Sephora virtual community "Beauty Insider"**



**The Source:** <https://www.sephora.com/profile/BeautyInsider>, consulted the 23/03/2019.

### **III- Results and discussion :**

The analysis of the opinions allowed us to identify a certain number of points which will be presented in five phases according to the decision-making process:

#### **III.1. Recognition of need**

The starting point of the purchasing process is the revelation of the need. A need may arise in response to internal or external stimuli. In general, the individual has learned, through his experiences, to respond to this need, he naturally goes towards products likely to satisfy him. A need can also be revealed by external stimuli .

It happens when the Sephora brand launches a new product in its virtual community "Beauty Insider", "... Attention Rouge makeup lovers! Brand new, exclusive beauty products are coming to Sephora.com...", this type of sharing on the brand community is considered to be stimuli and push the user to react and begin to realize that the need for try, "...So pretty,... excited for everything in the kit...", "... Can't wait to get it"....!!

#### **III.2. Information seeking**

Once the need is felt, the consumer can react quickly to the search for internal information (his experiences is personal knowledge) in order to reach a solution. Indeed, not all needs can be solved by means of its memory, so it conducts an external search through the virtual community of the brand by sharing discussions for the search for information on. Criterion essential, that we noted on the opinions given by the customers, the research of the recommendations "... what is a recommended eye shadow palette for dance competitions?...", Thus to find the best products which is appropriate for him, "... a good lip liner color for the gent universal gloss bombs...". The search for suggestions "...Any suggestions?...", "...Please help with a moisturizer for dry sensitive skin."...

### III.3. Assessment of possibilities

In this view, cognitive factors, in particular the rules by which the consumer judges a product he wants to buy (for example attributes, perceptions, prices) play an important role.

According to the opinions collected on the page of the Sephora virtual community we noticed that the majority of the members want to know the difference between several products, "... I have this and find it gives a pretty dramatic effect to the lashes...", "...I can tell you the sleep mask is a lot thicker than the lip balm and i feel will be more moisturizing in the long run...", "... I would get the Jaclyn Hill palette especially as a beginner...", "...Honestly, I really like the elf waterproof mascara...."

### III.4. The purchase

The behavior of the consumer in his purchase and his decision can be affected by certain elements such as the quality of the shopping experience and the store and / or the e-commerce site, the presence of a promotion, a policy of return or interesting condition of sale .

The important criteria when making a decision, the shared experience of members of the virtual community, on the one hand make the purchasing decision positive, "... you're making me want to try one of the Rouge Allures... ", "...I will try exercising in lipstick ...", "...Love it, I used to keep my hair that shade, it looks fabulous...", or on the other hand a negative purchase decision, "...I decided not to shop at any Sephora store from now...", "...Very sad, it never include Canada in new brands and we don't get new products too...."

### III.5. The consequences of the purchase

After buying and experiencing the product and/or service, the consumer feels a sense of satisfaction, but also of dissatisfaction. He may feel certain. Consumer satisfaction reinforces the latter in his behavior, leading him to continue to buy the same brand .

Once the purchase has been made, and the product has been tested, during this step in this step we noticed that the majority of consumers have expressed their feelings, have their satisfaction with the use of the products "...I buy it and i love it, it provides great volume...", "...they are amazing...", "...i really love how too faced peach perfect looks on my skin...", "...I love how soft and bright it makes my skin...", "... Love this! It's gentle enough for daily use ..."

## IV- Conclusion:

The main objective of our research is to show the importance and the role of virtual communities of different brands on the decision-making of Internet users. In order to achieve the objective of our research, we carried out a netnographic study to analyze the opinions shared on the virtual community of Sephora "Beauty Insider. "

Through virtual brand communities, consumers can make a decision using other members of the community through e-sharing. These platforms constitute a virtual space for exchanging information and procedures and a preliminary step to sharing "real" experiences.

The exchange of information in virtual communities revolves mainly around connecting people who share a common interest in a brand. This is in line with the work of Belk (2010)

who considers exchange on the internet as an important element of sharing "it is only by recognizing that everyone is on the same platform which is a basis for exchange, product, which can create a critical role of sharing in the behavior of consumers and which is based on its good experience for the continuity of the exchange ."

The results of our research provide valuable information on virtual communities that have a very important role in decision-making among internet users, while making the user's decision positive (buy) or negative (do not buy) for the consumption of a product. and / or service of a brand and this through opinions, discussions, opinions on products and experiences shared on the consumption of products and / or services by other consumers.

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