Netnographic Study of a Community of Beauty Product Enthusiasts in China: Consumer Reflexivity and Social Concerns

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Abstract
A virtual community is a cyberspace built by groups of people who utilize networked computers to form and sustain a community through ongoing communications. Many such communities are structured around consumption interests. These communities provide both opportunities and challenges to marketers because of their potential effects on various aspects of marketing. We draw on the literature on consumer reflexivity and resistance in our netnographic study to understand how members of a virtual community in China become reflexive upon their consumption behaviors and questions the role marketing plays in promoting beauty products. Implications are discussed.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A virtual community is a cyberspace built by groups of people who utilize networked computers to form and sustain a community through ongoing communication (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002). Its development paralleled technological advancements that rendered networked computers an inexpensive medium accessible to many people around the world. Since there are more and more people communicating via virtual communities, this approach to meet, communicate and relate to people is emerging as a major social phenomenon. It has attracted research attention from disciplines ranging from social psychology (Turkle 1995) to sociology (Wellman 1997) and marketing (Kozinets 1997, 1998, 1999, 2002b).

A virtual community cuts across geographic boundaries and unites people with a common interest. Specifically, virtual communities that are structured around consumption interests provide both opportunities and challenges to marketers and consumer researchers because of their potential effects on branding, advertising, pricing and customer loyalty program (Hagel and Armstrong 1997). On the one hand, a virtual community facilitates the communication between companies and consumers, allowing marketers to leverage consumers’ ideas in designing and customizing products. On the other hand, a virtual community encourages consumer-to-consumer communication independent of companies and marketers (Catterall and Maclaran 2002). This form of communication can effectively influence fellow consumers and reject particular marketing activities through the members’ collective stance (Catterall and Maclaran 2002).

A number of studies have examined the factors influencing consumer’s navigation behaviors (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002; Novak, Hoffman and Yung 2000; Joines, Scherer and Scheufele 2003). These studies tend to examine the issue from a psychological or social psychological perspective. Less attention has been extended to examining the context of the community, the voluntary sharing of consumption-related information among members as well as the implication of consumers’ changing attitudes towards consumption and their relationships with the markets.

The purpose of our study is to examine how consumers make use of a virtual community to become proactive in the marketplace. Hagel and Armstrong (1997) suggested that the rise in computer-mediated communication significantly changes the relationship between marketers and consumers and it shifts some of the power from producers/marketers to customers by reducing the information advantage vendors enjoy. Our study would examine how Chinese consumers are becoming more reflexive upon their own consumption behaviors as well as becoming more critical about practices in the marketplace. We drew upon theories on social institutions and consumption reflexivity to understand the underlying rationale. Details of the institutions in China are discussed to support the framework. Findings of our study would reveal how consumers in China at this developmental stage are learning to be an active consumer.

We conducted netnographical research on a virtual community—a beauty forum affiliated with ONLYLADY (www.onlylady.com) that is popular among women in China. Netnography, as a naturalistic enquiry technique developed especially for the cyberspace environment, was considered an appropriate methodology for this study. Our analysis focuses on two major themes identified in the postings that are related to consumption activities: (1) reflexivity on consumption behaviors (susceptibility to marketing influences, forum members as experts, and reflection upon consumption criteria) and (2) strategic response to unwanted actions and agents (stop excessive buying, stop pirated goods).

Results showed that similar to other consumption communities, the beauty forum offered an important source of information to community members, provided them with communal interaction and social benefits, enhanced their level of reflexivity, and empowered them to protect fellow consumers. These results confirmed, as we have postulated earlier, that consumers in China are becoming reflexive on their consumption behaviors and are somewhat critical of the marketing process. Results of our study also show that the function of a virtual community is complex. As an agent independent of commercial forces, a virtual community is regarded by consumers as an alternative (and potentially additional) source of information boosting the consumers’ consumption aspiration. But at the same time, it has the potential to improve the bargaining power of consumers and guard against unwanted behavior in the marketplace.

Our findings also point to two directions in which the current research can be extended to. First, consumers exchange tailored-made information and adjust their purchase decision making based on other members’ comments and suggestions. Understanding the underlying group information processing will provide important implications for research about eWOM in the cyberspaces and benefit practitioners’ IMC planning. Besides, our study shows that Chinese consumers’ attitudes toward consumption are evolving as they become more involved and connected to other consumers through cyberspace. Members’ diversified backgrounds result in discussion on various consumption patterns and lifestyles that are desired and emulated throughout the community. Meanwhile, the consumer’s value set such as her consumption aspirations and materialistic orientations also appear to be interactively enacted. These are important issues to understanding the motivations behind consumption decisions. Future research could illustrate these processes using either case studies or a more structured research design.