The Many-Faced Consumer: Practices and Consequences of Social Media Government

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We study Social Media Management practices on social media platforms. We find three fundamental practices (framing, optimizing and channeling) which create and manage three populations: a conversation made of words, a community made of individuals and specific influencers. These practices have side-effects impacting both the marketer and the community.

[to cite]:


[url]:

http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1021507/volumes/v44/NA-44

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A recent body of literature started to investigate marketing as a technology of government (Beckett 2012). Several studies looked at what is called the “marketing governmentality” (Cova and Cova 2009) and expose the way marketing discourse create representations, while others investigate the consequences of these representations on consumer subjectivity (Zwick and Dholakia 2004). According to Foucauldian theory (Foucault 1975), these representations are part of the government activity. Beyond consumer subjectivity, we still know little about how marketing practice organizes consumption systems of power (Thompson 2004). Moreover, research about this performative capacity of marketing government is scarce when it comes to online communities, while their management is a core business activity. Communities are often understood as fostering consumer empowerment (Labrecque et al. 2013), while Social Media Management (SMMt) aims at governing online consumers (Zwick and Denegri-Knott 2009). The scope of this activity is wide and includes different marketing activities; as a result, it concerns marketing in a broader sense. We therefore investigate empirically the SMMt practice to answer two questions: how do marketing practices create and reinforce representations of consumers? What are the consequences of these practices?

We conducted a three years long netnography on a community of Social Media Managers (SMMs): The ForumMyCM, with more than 8000 SMMs, 7-8 posts per day and 20-25 comments per day. We conducted 10 interviews with SMMs (Mintion = 50 min) and collected two types of additional sources: professional literature (13 blogs and 3 books among the most cited by the community and 12 reports about SMMt) and 11 software providers’ blogs and institutional websites (they provide all the analytical tools used daily by SMMs and therefore their metrics participate in creating representations). These providers are Hootsuite, Sentiment, Lithium, Over-Graph, trackur, Agorapulse, Viralheat, Cision, Mention, nukesuite and SA.

We use a framework based of the concept of governmentality (Foucault 2004). We focus on four elements: the ontology (what the entities are), the deontology (what the entities must become), the ascetics (which practices are enacted) and the teleology (what the aim of the practices is). This framework is adapted from foucauldian theory of ethics (Foucault 1984).

We find that the SMMt practice is composed of three fundamental practices: framing, defining categories and their nature; channeling, moving entities from one category to another; optimizing, acting on one category to influence some of its relevant properties. These practices are interrelated: framing defines which relationships exist between categories for the channeling part and the relevant properties for the optimizing part; channeling practices can help optimizing the target category, and optimizing a category can create channeling effects. The framing operation in our case defines three categories: conversation, made of words, community, a collection of individuals acting as a whole, and influencers, specific individuals. Conversation, while its size is unknown, is considered eternally active: whatever the brand does, conversation exists. Community is of finite size and mortal: SMMs have to act on it so it remains active. While composed of individuals, it is always treated and measured at an aggregated level. Influencers are individuals who were extracted from the aggregated mass because of a remarkable behavior, and are treated individually. This system of practices has two main consequences.

First, SMMs are subject to loyalty tensions. They work for the brand but are also attached to the community. Whenhumanizing their interaction, SMMs take over the brand’s actions, and may pursue their own objectives instead of the brand’s ones. As such, the role of SMM is subject to interpretation: should the SMM be embedded in the organization or in the community? Second, some practices can also result in the creation of new categories of population: we call that the derivation effect. For example, optimizing the size of the community, considering the size as a valuable metric led to the apparition of companies selling fake fans. Fake fans represent a category of their own, distinct from the community. SMMs consider them prejudicial, but their practices contribute in creating them: consumers’ agency can counteract SMMs’ strategies even though this agency fits into the social media governmentality. Derivation effect originates in the difference between the SMM’s mission and the dispositive’s teleology. The derived categories are part of the dispositive but SMMs still consider them “bad behaviors”. The derivation effect illustrates a type of misbehavior which cannot be conceived as resistance in Foucault’s terms (Foucault 1975), as resistance represents behaviors going against the current organization of power relationships.

We contribute to marketing governmentality studies by outlining the fundamental role of representations in SMMt. The circle of practices (framing, channeling, optimizing) has two functions: on one hand, it stabilizes representations and allows marketing actions; on the other hand, the derivation effect allows the evolution of the system of representations. As a result, similarly to organizational path dependence, the circle of practices orientates market evolution while avoiding a deterministic lock-in (Garud, Kumaraswamy, and Karmesc 2010). The derivation effect may be a fundamental mechanism in market evolution, and future research should investigate it more closely.

We extend the study of the figures of the consumer (Cova and Cova 2009). While previous research outlined the discursive aspects of the representational activity, we point at its material aspects: the architecture of software carries representational features (Orlikowski 1992) and therefore influences marketing governmentality. Service providers are therefore important actors in market structuration, as the tools they provide participate in fixing consumer representations. Future research should build on previous market devices studies (Callon, Millo, and Muniesa 2007; Zwick and Cayla 2011) to deepen our understanding of the role of service providers in consumer markets evolution and to add material features to the discursive aspects of marketplace power structures (Thompson 2004).

REFERENCES