The benefit of social media

Bulletin board focus groups as a tool for co-creation

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Bulletin board methodology emerged at the end of the 1990s and is becoming the most frequently used qualitative study technique. This interactive approach groups a community of participants in a private or public online forum for a duration that varies from several days to several months. Discoveries, exchanges of view, personal opinions and group reactions are all part of the power and interest of the internet in this era of social media. This article presents the principles of bulletin board development, and specifics to aid understanding of this tool within social networks and to help organisations adapt to a paradigm shift in marketing in which consumer-respondents are co-creators of meaning and knowledge.

Introduction

According to an annual US survey of market research trends (*GreenBook Research Industry Trends Report* 2012), more than 50% of professionals claim they will increasingly use online qualitative research methodologies within social media and brand communities, to the detriment of traditional methods of investigation.

Among new methods, focus groups in asynchronous time,[1] also known as bulletin board focus groups (BBFGs), are the leading techniques of qualitative online research, with a US corporate usage rate of almost 35% (*GreenBook Research Industry Trends Report* 2012, p. 10). There

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[1] For example, when respondents are not required to be online at the same time.

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are several reasons for this growing success. From the point of view of respondents, asynchronous time corresponds to a behavioural trend of our postmodern period enabled by new technology: respondents want to take part when it's convenient for them and not to suit someone else's timing. From the point of view of practitioners, BBFGs can be rapidly created in online communities while focusing attention on a precise research subject within a timescale required by the client.

BBFGs facilitate research within social media because their sources are online communities and they provide a means of interaction with consumers that is very similar to discussion forums. Poynter considers BBFGs to be one of the leading research techniques within social media:

> The first online qualitative technique that arrived on the scene was the introduction of email groups, which was an asynchronous technique but only occasionally used. The next was the development of a synchronous technique, the online focus group. This was followed by the asynchronous bulletin board group, which in many ways was the forerunner of the online research community (also known as an MROC). (Poynter 2010)

In this way, the development of social media encourages us to revisit the field of marketing studies, and especially qualitative research, to develop new research spaces, as suggested by Norbert Wirth:

> Some people consider social media to be mere hype, while others see it as the world's largest focus group. And many haven't the faintest idea what the term means. Nevertheless, social media has been part of our lives for some time now. (Wirth 2011)

Despite growing interest among practitioners, who regularly highlight the subject at conferences such as ESOMAR, for example, there are few published academic market research papers devoted to BBFGs. Yet social media, whose content and applications are constantly created and modified by users in participative and collaborative ways, radically modify the management of focus groups owing to the nature and quantity of interactions that these allow. BBFGs are thus much more than a simple, technology-led change from the traditional technique. This transition invites study of uses of this new technique within online communities.

The need for further study is increased by the demands of business on research consultancies to adapt their standardised solutions to the fragmentation and atomisation of markets (Cooke & Buckley 2008,

p. 270) and more generally to respond to a paradigm shift in marketing. Marketing is no longer a case of diffusing value to consumers but of co-creating value with them (Vargo & Lusch 2004). This involves interacting with consumers in a new way, from research and conceptual phases to co-construction of sense. Focus group techniques allow for co-construction as they depend on the focused interactions of a group engaging in reflection on the experiences of each member of the group (Kitzinger 1994; Morgan 1998). Social media, and particularly BBFGs, that use 'more creative forms of questioning in surveys' allow for research to be considered not only as a means of questioning but also as one of communicating and interacting with consumers (Puleston 2011).

The aim of this article is to present the principles of BBFGs, and to explore their contribution and limits in marketing research, given the development of social media. The first part of this paper offers a definition of BBFGs and the second part outlines the technique. The third part focuses on the benefits and limits of this method, and the paper concludes with an overview of research approaches and a conclusion based on paradigm changes that have occurred in marketing; this highlights the accompanying growth of interest in BBFGs.

Asynchronous focus groups or bulletin boards: a definition

Used initially by Merton and Kendall in 1946 in the sphere of influence of the Lewinian current of group dynamics (Lewin 1948) at the time of the Second World War, the original term 'focused interviews', later 'focused group interviewing', enables us to understand that the focus group is a qualitative research method of conversation centred on a theme within a group restricted to some 6 to 15 participants (Morgan 1998).

The advent of the internet saw the method introduced online. According to the typology proposed by Klein *et al.* (2007), online focus groups can be defined according to configurations determined by time, expressed popularly by the notion of 'chat' (in synchronous time) or forum (synchronous time) and location (web, intranet, extranet, LAN …). Our interest here is the bulletin board focus group (BBFG).

The BBFG is a private or public asynchronous online discussion space. It groups a number of participants (10 to 25) for a relatively long period (3 to 14 days, or more in some cases), during which time they exchange points of view continuously and progressively, overseen by an online community moderator. In marketing applications, the BBFGs are usually private spaces managed by a research organisation or a brand to encourage social

interaction about a research issue, so as to gauge consumer reactions. An example is Orange, an international telecommunications operator that uses more than 30 BBFGs each year to gain user feedback on new service concepts or existing products and services so as to identify areas of improvement. The Compagnie des Alpes, an international operator of leisure parks and ski terrains, used a BBFG to test service innovation concepts in ski resorts. The objective was to enhance innovations with user ideas in order to choose which to develop.

Participants have access at a distance to a secure discussion space and the moderator regularly posts a series of questions. Participants join in regularly at their convenience to contribute, and to respond to other participants' comments and the online community moderator's interaction. Moderators can also post regular summaries of the interaction to check whether their analysis of responses and discussions accords with participants' viewpoints.

The term 'board' refers to the English word for a notice board and emphasises the idea of a progressive posting of consumer reactions. The idea of an online focus group is that our perceptions develop over time and that they are enhanced by our interaction with our environment. The temporal dimension of a bulletin board is one of the key characteristics of this means of research. The duration enables an issue to be addressed cumulatively while capitalising on participants' earlier opinions, and those of their entourage and other group members. Figure 1 helps to situate BBFGs more precisely within the different internet discussion spaces in function of the length and focus of group discussions on a theme.

The use of asynchronous focus groups in social media leads to a notable evolution in focus group methods:

> Bulletin board groups are not usually seen as simply an online substitute for conventional, offline qualitative research; rather, they are offered as a method of accessing experience, reflection, and maturation. (Poynter 2010)

This development leads us to question three aspects of the implementation of BBFGs:

1. the participant group, and its recruitment, identification and competence
2. group interactions, group dynamic, and the impact of anonymity and textual interactions
3. the role of market researchers in these interactions, and their management of stimuli, intellectual property and data analysis.
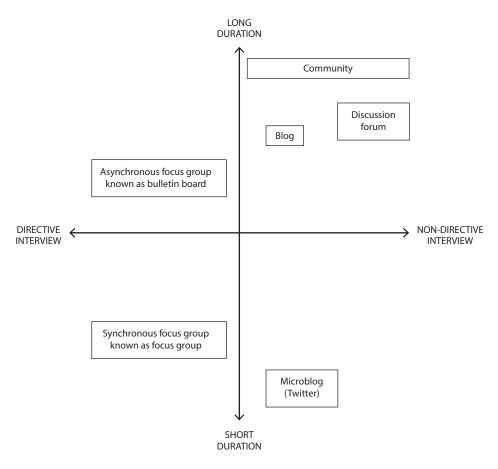
Figure 1 Discussion spaces on the internet

Implementation of BBFGs

The participant group

Resorting to social media has three types of effect on the composition of online participant groups, as described below.

Recruitment of participants
Respondents in traditional focus groups are often recruited locally to avoid travel costs. Alternatively they are recruited via 'access panels', groups of households or individuals that have agreed to participate regularly in market studies on a range of subjects. The methodological problems of these panels (multi-panelisation, professionalisation of respondents, short response

times, fraud) have led the international community to standardise their use,[2] and resorting to social media is seen by professionals as a diversification of sources of recruitment that can mitigate the problems cited. In effect, social media allow for the creation and recruitment of panels that are by their nature different from a traditional panel that Cooke and Buckley (2008, p. 280) defined as a 'participatory panel' or 'research community'.

Social media integrate a multitude of forums and thematic groups that can be close to the subject of the study, notably on Facebook, and this facilitates recruitment of people interested in the theme of the study. Facebook members provide information in their profiles, and join groups that highlight their interests and opinions (Casteleyn *et al*. 2009). In addition, different types of online community attract individuals who are prepared to spend time testing new products and offering opinions about new concepts (Kozinets *et al*. 2008). Market researchers can themselves join a social medium to recruit and manage a focus group, creating a specific group on Facebook or organising a private exchange area in a discussion forum. As Mariann Hardey suggests:

> The traditional market research 'tool' of a person with a clipboard asking 'real' people questions in the street may be supplanted by new mediated ways of collecting data from 'real' people and 'real' actions across social media. (Hardey 2009)

To recruit for its BBFGs, Orange, for example, created the *DreamOrange* community of people with a passion for mobile phone and internet innovation. The Compagnie des Alpes, meanwhile, publicised its BBFG on specialised winter sports internet sites that appealed to ski fanatics.

If the study requires that responses be representative, a substantial advantage of online focus groups is the possibility of reaching a target group of respondents who are geographically dispersed or habitually unavailable for this type of survey (Rezabek 2000), without negatively affecting the quality and quantity of information collected (Underhill & Olmsted 2003). This is particularly useful for international research (Scholl *et al*. 2002).

Identification of participants
While marketing studies aim to establish representative samples with individuals who are clearly identified, direct recruitment of individuals in social media poses a problem of identification of participants. It is always possible to request personal information by mail, and to verify

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[2] ISO 26362:2009, 'Access panels' for market research, social studies and opinion surveys – Vocabulary and service requirements.

the information by telephone and by cross-checking from several sources. However, internet users do not always wish to see their virtual identity linked to their real identity. Research into social relationships on the internet shows that internet users play with their identities and flag up multiple aspects of themselves (Turkle 1995). In virtual worlds, individuals adopt multiple identity positions depending on their rapport with each world and the process of identity creation (Parmentier & Rolland 2009). Hence it is possible that the BBFG integrates individuals who are role playing and amusing themselves by being someone else. However, in social media, the presence of 'the other' is spotted mainly through the response 'I am responded to, therefore I am' (Markham 2005). In addition, the asynchronous method of interaction and the written traces tend to favour truthfulness (Hancock *et al.* 2004). Participants in BBFGs don't misrepresent the truth because their submissions are registered, printable and controllable. This means that anonymity and the identity game do not reduce the pertinence of data collected on BBFGs, notably because the act of language is the base unit of analysis.

This problem of anonymity and identification is also one for the internet users vis-à-vis the survey sponsor. Internet users are likely to wonder about the motivation of the sponsor, and the reliability of the practitioner or researcher leading the study. These users can doubt the reality of the stated objectives, and can fear that their details might be diverted for commercial purposes or through trickery. One way of easing these fears is clearly to state the objectives of the research, revealing the identity of the sponsor and 'constructing' a long-term presence for the research organisation and online community moderators within social media, and with the help of blogs and groups on social networks.

For the Compagnie des Alpes' BBFG, the recruitment message directed potential recruits to the study enrolment page, which described the procedure and featured a questionnaire that we used to characterise the participants. More than 1,000 people visited the enrolment page, and 210 signed up for the online focus group. The final sample consisted of three groups of 15–16 participants: very active skiers, skiers with children and active skiers who also were interested in technology. To confirm their enrolment, they were required to submit their postal address, sign a confidentiality agreement and agree to log on to the forum every day.

Respondents' competence
When using online surveys, the first skill to be checked is IT. The propensity to engage in wide-ranging discussions online has an effect on the quality

and quantity of contributions in discussion forums (Wiertz & de Ruyter 2007). However, this disadvantage is limited for online asynchronous qualitative forums as the reaction time is not as immediate on BBFGs. In addition, the rapid development of the use of social media among all age groups limits the bias of incompetence in online conversation. In 2011, those over 35 years old represented more than 30% of base users of an application such as Facebook.[3]

As regards the subject competence of respondents, the main advantage of an online focus group compared with a traditional focus group is that market researchers can recruit people who are passionate about an activity or a brand, i.e. those with characteristics similar to lead users (Von Hippel 1986) within social media. The most active internet users in social media are effectively likely to have these lead user characteristics (Bilgram *et al*. 2008). This type of user is particularly valuable for BBFGs and particularly those focusing on innovation issues. In effect, to generate lively discussion with valuable contributions and strong creativity, the BBFG aspires to integrate active individuals with considerable knowledge of the use of the products or services tested. An illustration of this is that 43% of participants in the Compagnie des Alpes' BBFG proved to be lead users.[4]

When all is said and done, the use of online focus groups in social media allows for significant flexibility in the formation of groups of participants with a strong interest in the theme of the study. Social media integrate creative and active individuals with strong intrinsic motivation and sometimes lead user profiles. This avoids lower-quality results resulting from participation by individuals uniquely motivated by financial compensation (Tuckel *et al*. 1992; Brüggen *et al*. 2011). BBFGs that integrate a higher number of individuals with intrinsic motivation are more likely to obtain quality results. In addition, the experience gained from online conversations in social networks assures a greater quantity and quality of results, and anonymity lessens neither the quality of groups created nor of data provided by these groups.

Interactions between participants

In online discussion groups the group characteristics, technological competences and style of communication have a significant effect on satisfaction with the discussion (Van Dolen *et al*. 2007), which influences

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[3] Facebook Statistics, Stats & Facts for 2011, available online at: https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=10150184284593634.
[4] This survey was based on Morrison scales of measurement of leading-edge status (Morrison *et al*. 2004).

group involvement in the discussions. The quality of interactions is thus a key issue in the success of a BBFG.

Group dynamic
Within traditional focus groups, a group can inhibit participant behaviour. Free discussion of sensitive subjects is difficult (Morgan 1998). Online, focus groups can communicate simultaneously and encourage participation by all group members, including those who are more reticent (Walston & Lissitz 2000), while avoiding the risk of certain participants dominating the discussion (Tse 1999). This equality of participation creates a good group dynamic. Overall, online focus groups generate fewer words than live focus groups, although these words convey more information and novel ideas than traditional focus groups (Reid & Reid 2007). Reactions, notably those produced within the framework of new product or concept tests, are appreciable for their rapidity, even if a lack of depth compared with traditional focus groups is to be regretted (Brüggen & Willems 2009). However, interactivity exerts a marked impact on participants' satisfaction with an online discussion (Van Dolen *et al*. 2007) and this in turn can influence motivation to participate and involvement in discussions. Interactivity is strongly influenced by group characteristics: involvement, similarity and receptivity of participants (Burgoon *et al*. 1999). Hence recruitment in social media of active participants, lead users and others with similar practices who are strongly motivated by the subject matter can favour group interactivity, encouraging involvement and enhancing the quality of discussions.

In BBFGs, participants not only converse between themselves on the discussion platform, but also use other channels (emails, other forums, instant messaging). These multiple interactions can pose problems for the online community moderator because in such a context the timing and content of the activities are more easily questioned by participants. However, implicit rules of discussion in social media (netiquette, focus on a subject, moderation) help to avoid conversation veering on to slippery ground or off the subject. In addition, statistical tracking tools measuring the involvement of participants help the moderator to manage the group. On certain platforms the online community moderator can manage conditions of access to the debate (visualising responses and excluding disruptive members).

Impact of anonymity
The question of identification of participants also has an impact on the management of interactions within the group as members can choose

to be anonymous or not. Where they are, it becomes difficult for group members to determine one another's social demographic profile and social status (Williams & Robson 2004). Anonymity diminishes the impact of social norms on the participant. Using Montoya-Weiss *et al.*'s description (1998), this encourages 'an uninhibited environment favouring synergies'. On Facebook, for example, a photograph of the participant has more impact on the judgement of others than written submissions (Van der Heide *et al.* 2012). In a BBFG where a pseudonym is the sole means of identification participants can be less reticent about broaching intimate, delicate or personal subjects (Danet 1998; Walston & Lissitz 2000), and have less need to conform to prevailing opinions; they can be spontaneous (Markham 2004). If anonymity can exist within the group, the online community moderator is able nonetheless clearly to identify and trace comments and interactions by a respondent in order to summarise the contributions of each participant.

Textual interaction
In traditional focus groups the moderator has access to non-verbal nuances and emotions thanks to meaningful physical signs such as tone of voice and facial expressions (Klein *et al.* 2003). These enable wide-ranging and in-depth exploration of underlying components of consumption that do not emerge from more direct study techniques. In a virtual environment, the online community moderator can be affected by the absence of participants' body language, and so may have difficulty in interpreting their behaviour (Rezabek 2000) and may fail to spot the physical signs that indicate a lie (e.g. an evasive look). However, internet users have new strategies of communication (Morgan & Symon 2004) to compensate for the lack of physical presence on the internet. The virtual environment offers new symbolic languages that present marked resemblances to the word (Williams & Robson 2004), and emoticons and new expressions (e.g. LOL),[5] to compensate for the absence of physical touches.

   In conclusion, anonymity and the absence of traditional social status favour written exchanges in BBFGs. Exchanges focus on a discussion theme with a temporality that allows for more thought and distance than in traditional focus groups and open discussion forums. Participants can thus more easily enunciate the knowledge linked to their experience. In addition, the possibilities of interactivity offered by BBFGs combined with

[5] 'LOL' (laugh, or laughing, out loud) is a widely used acronym symbolising amusement.

the presence of individuals from social media who are strongly interested in the study subject favour online discussion quality.

The role of the market researcher

Management of social interactions

As in traditional focus groups, moderators play a key role online: they must encourage discussions while maintaining direction towards a fixed objective and without influencing the content of discussions. Nonetheless, social media fundamentally change the outline of communication. In effect, they enable participants to communicate between themselves and/or with the client or moderator (Cooke & Buckley 2008).

In addition, BBFGs are based on asynchronous interactions over a relatively long period. Market researchers are thus able to revive contributor participation through specific questions that check whether their own comprehension of the interaction accords with what participants are trying to express. The time factor allows the market researcher to explore themes more deeply, to pose supplementary questions, to request precisions if something is unclear, and to refer to previous discussions. This follow-up or management of the interactions and the advantages of written discussions favour a more in-depth interpretation of participants' actual experience.

Online community moderators must also learn how to manage these relationships. They must acquire the same skills as a forum moderator, adapting to the rhythm of the participants, questioning and reviving contributor participation to motivate participants and managing the specificity of interactions in a textual virtual environment. Within the Compagnie des Alpes' BBFG, the moderator posed 16 questions, representing some three to four questions per innovatory concept. The BBFG produced 337 contributions over the two-week study period. The least active participant replied to only two questions; the most active replied to 12.

Management of stimuli

The asynchronous format of online focus groups enables information to be transmitted to participants in different forms: referring them back to a website or an online video site, and sending them documentation by mail. Participants can also draw, send a photo or join in using a wiki application. The physical or virtual use of various stimuli stemming from social media (pictures, films and cartoons) makes participation more entertaining and

leads to better-quality responses, more involvement and satisfaction (Cheng *et al.* 2009). In social media, the focus group can be considered more like a game than poorly remunerated work (Puleston 2011). In addition, the online focus group offers the possibility of asking participants to use a product in real conditions and this favours involvement as it links with their experience. The moderator can question them at each stage of the consumption process, asking them to carry out a particular task linked to the study. Finally, participants' thoughts about the consumer experience can be enriched by the perceptions of their entourage as the asynchronous mode leaves time for interaction with friends and family.

Confidentiality and management of intellectual property
One of the major inconveniences of online group support techniques lies in problems of confidentiality. Contrary to the physical world in which it is not possible to preserve the visuals used during the discussion, the virtual world offers numerous opportunities to make screen prints, for example.

The BBFG is often used as a technique to develop ideas and new concepts or products, and as such it presents a risk of loss of know-how for the enterprise. Ideas expressed in the BBFG can find their way to competitors, or consumers can claim a share in the intellectual property (Enkel *et al.* 2005). These risks can be diminished if participants are asked to sign confidentiality and transfer of intellectual property agreements.

However, these practices conflict with current social media practices of sharing content and knowledge. For example, in open source online communities, individuals freely reveal their ideas (Von Hippel & Von Krogh 2003). This means the enterprise must assess what is at stake in intellectual property protection. In certain cases, notably when it is a case of testing general ideas or concepts that are difficult to patent at the first stage of innovation, to encourage participation rather than imposing constraints that contradict the values of social media internet users, it is preferable not to impose non-disclosure agreements.

Data analysis

To analyse data from focus groups, market researchers use qualitative research techniques such as comparative analysis by coding and categorisation (Strauss & Corgin 1998), discussion analysis (Potter 2004), keywords-in-context analysis (Fielding & Lee 1998) and quantitative analysis of word keys (Schmidt 2010). These methods take the whole group or an individual as a unit of analysis, often ignoring data from

group interaction as this is difficult to extract from the current of the conversation. In BBFGs, the direct presence of non-verbal data in a textual form, smileys and other emoticons, makes the interactional data directly accessible to the market researcher, who can study the structure of the message, titles, number of responses, size of the conversation threads, dates and intervals between messages. Likewise, online it is easier to lead multiple focus groups on the same subjects. By selecting groups based on criteria of theoretical sampling, and comparing the terms that emerge from the ensemble of groups, it is easier to reach saturation point in analysis, thus ensuring greater reliability in the research.

The mechanism nevertheless generates a large quantity of verbatim material (100 to 300 pages), which poses a challenge to the management of data, and emphasises the need for qualitative analysis, sifting and selection of the most pertinent elements. The use of qualitative analysis software enables the market researcher to better manage the volume of data, and facilitates coding and interpretation because the interventions of the online focus groups are automatically registered, avoiding what would be substantial time for retranscription.

Discussion within the Compagnie des Alpes' BBFG generated 70,000 words of text. The analysis relied on verbatim conversations and aimed to summarise the reactions of interested users to the innovative concept outlined, as well as the ways potential users might implement (or use) the innovation in ski resorts. It also identified 35 new concepts by exploring how ideas and suggestions could be exploited in terms of form and usage.

To conclude this discussion, Table 1 proposes a summary of the advantages and limits of BBFG in social media and solutions to overcoming the limits.

Benefits and limits

This article highlights the development of BBFGs in social media. BBFGs provide previously unpublished advantages and allow for the use of new functionalities to promote group discussions.

BBFGs enable substitution of the classic unilateral relationship of interviewer/interviewee by a multidirectional relationship that substantially enriches the content of exchanges and makes them less artificial. BBFGs profoundly modify relationships between participants and the market researcher, exerting a positive impact on participants' motivation, and on the quantity and quality of contributions. In addition, the interactive mechanism of BBFGs introduces flexibility as the participants are able to

Table 1 Benefits and limits of an online focus group

	Benefits of forums and social media	Advantages compared with traditional focus groups	Limits compared with traditional focus groups	Solutions
Recruitment	• Access to themed communities, scattered or difficult-to-reach targets	• Ease of recruitment • Improved targeting of sample	• Exclusion of people absent from the forums	• Mix recruitment across several forums and with 'access panels'
Identification	• Access to identities adopted by internet users in social media • The individual can avoid revealing physical characteristics	• Possible access to the identity complexity of the individual	• Difficult to verify physical identities • Increased risk of role playing • Risk of mistrust in the research institute by participants	• Clearly explain study objectives • Encourage participants to speak frankly • Construct a long-term presence for the research institute in social media
Competence	• Access to profiles of creative people and lead users • Interest from individuals used to contributing	• Greater motivation and involvement • Presence of more creative individuals	• Exclusion of people who are unfamiliar with online interaction	• Simplify platform interfaces • Plan questions to revive discussion
Interaction	• Increased possibilities of interaction (market researcher/ group; market researcher/ respondent …) • Introduction of time factor into interaction	• Increase in quantity and richness of contributions • Reduction in the risk of hijacking of the debate by dominant voices • Freeing voices of inhibited individuals	• Weakening of physical signs of communication • Risk of discussions going off the subject • Risk of questioning of calendar and study objectives	• Make use of smileys and images to reintroduce emotion • Revive discussion with collective or individual questions to verify the market researcher's comprehension • Use techniques of moderation in discussion
Intellectual property	• Easier access to the ideas and creativity of internet users	• Greater production of insights and ideas	• Risk of circulation of ideas and new concepts studied	• Ask participants to sign confidentiality agreements • Favour the study of concepts that can be rapidly developed

go beyond the questions posed, and the market researcher can reorientate the protocol based on intermediary summaries.

While these new techniques are to be used to renew the approach of marketing studies, it is nevertheless necessary to mention some limits to their use.

The first such limit concerns participants' IT or internet access skills. It is unlikely that all users will be able to participate in online focus groups, whether for cultural, generational or economic reasons. In addition, even though the use of the internet is widespread across the population, including in developing countries, the level of penetration does not mean that all consumer segments can be reached (Vicente & Reis 2012).

A second limit concerns loss of information from non-verbal channels of communication. However, communication in social media leads to user compensation strategies and the development of substitutes among users such as smileys, abbreviations and new styles of language.

The third limit relates to the emergence of multiple identities that work against the creation of representative samples. Nevertheless, the use of BBFGs for exploratory reasons moderates this limit as the primary goal is access to the different experiences of users rather than whether they are representative.

Research pathways and conclusion

In social media, BBFGs allow for reconsideration of the very goal of marketing studies, to respond to change in the field of marketing; the 'market with' is replacing the conventional 'market to' (Vargo & Lush 2004; Lusch & Vargo 2006). BBFGs fall within this new paradigm, establishing a new relationship with consumers on a continuum moving from an exchange of short duration through an initial product or service conception phase to a permanent relationship within a community of users. The power of collective contributions means that these consumers, reached through the targeting of social media, have a major knowledge of product usage, offer their opinions actively, and are particularly creative and innovative. This wide view of consumer behaviour, spread out over time, allows for improved integration of the temporal variable, which has long been underestimated in qualitative research. This opens up new research directions – for example, focusing on what connects consumers to products or services, the stability or instability of these connections, what motivates product choice, and the impact of the views of others on a consumer's connection to a product or service. In addition, social media

allow respondents to assume multiple identities, and this enables inclusion of profile characteristics and multiple tribal identities of the postmodern consumer (Cova & Cova 2002), while at the same time online exchanges free them from the constraints of time and place.

We propose new thinking about the market and market research both as a form and a means of management of social relations, using BBFGs as a tool to help the social reconstruction of market studies. This social co-construction of research conducted in or with social media will particularly respond to critics who point to the obsolescence of traditional market research and its inability to adapt to a fragmented market context (Cooke & Buckley 2008, p. 270).

While the survey techniques we have outlined appear to provide renewal of classical techniques of investigation and to enrich the data collected, it is important to focus on the following three principal research pathways.

The first involves investigation into the optimisation of this technique depending on the study aim. In effect, implementation and management of this technique could differ according to the exploratory and confirmatory character of the research, its conceptual stage (concept, product or one of the elements of the mix) or depending on whether the subject addressed is delicate or sensitive (Zuber 2012).

The second pathway involves questioning the transposition of this technique in more open forums such as Facebook groups, Twitter or groups formed in professional social media. A discussion that is focused but public and open to a large number of internet users is likely to pose new methodological challenges in terms of mediation of remarks made and analysis of data collected.

Finally, the development of online research must not rule out an important reserve: 'the field behind the screen' does not replace 'the field' (Kozinets 2002) and the articulation of plural methodologies must be considered (Cooke *et al*. 2009). The key to performance in marketing studies must come from the use of multiple methods (quantitative, qualitative), methods (on- and offline), sources (individuals, groups, communities, networks, networks of networks) and support (PC, smartphone, tablets …). This consideration is made more important by the need to control the effects of virtual discussions, to add to the data collected, and to encourage participation and interaction through a multimodal approach: using mobile phones to check respondents' profiles; text messaging to encourage logging on to online focus group; presentations using video support on a tactile tablet; and so on. These multi-channel methods should considerably improve the reliability and validity of these online studies.

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