

Virtual Community Management and Measurement for Goal-Centric Outcomes (Social Representation Research and Other Metrics)

Ruth Leshar Taylor, Texas State University

Tyler Laird-Magee, Linfield College

Business use of virtual communities (VCs) is a contemporary and fast-growing internet phenomenon. Web 2.0 technologies enable easy creation, management, and measurement of VCs using external- or proprietary-hosted platforms. Some marketers, however, may be violating several hallmarks of sound goal-, customer- and outcome-centric strategies. Perhaps this is due to a near void in academic business literature regarding VC-centric goal and assessment methods. We address these issues and provide basic explanations of VCs, their management, and VC-centric goals and metrics for interested marketers, other business disciplines, academics and practitioners who otherwise may not be familiar with this area. Netnography-based social representation research as an assessment metric is also emphasized.

Astute virtual community (VC) marketing managers, social network managers and others, ensure goal-centric outcomes by supporting their business decisions to build, monitor, and manage these communities as they continuously modify their strategies to exploit emerging opportunities. As contemporary marketers augment traditional marketing plans to incorporate greater utilization of virtual strategies, it is incumbent upon them to transform their traditional assessment arsenal to include VC-centric metrics. Many new VC marketers may not be familiar with this virtual-metric realm; this paper addresses that issue by specifically focusing on the hallowed benchmark principles of sound marketing strategy: aligning both business and marketing strategy metrics.

This paper's focus is threefold: 1) Introduce virtual communities, their development, management and marketing to those unfamiliar with these concepts; 2) Discuss the need to align VC marketing strategy goals with business strategy goals as the initial step to accomplish VC-centric outcomes; and 3) Introduce both quantitative-based and qualitative-based VC-centric metrics, specifically, qualitative social representation research (SRR) which is applicable to the measurement of investments made to build, maintain, and grow virtual communities. New VC-centric metrics are not offered, rather, this paper's focus is to introduce VC-related issues and related outcome metrics, and provide empirical examples.

Construct Definitions

Rheingold (1993) and Singh & Cullimane (2010) defined virtual communities (VC), also known as social networks, as aggregations or groups, of social, interactive, like-minded folks, that emerge on the Internet when enough people interact on a common topic long enough, eventually forming a web of virtual personal relationships in cyberspace. While this definition reflects more of a Consumer-to-Consumer (C2C), model, Armstrong and Hagel (1996) identified Business-to-Consumer (B2C) communities as having four basic types depending upon need. Jenkins (2010) distinguish VCs as either being purposefully branded (by marketers) or unbranded and identify some problems and pitfalls with each type. Schouten and McAlexander (1995), referred to communities, virtual or co-present, as collective groups of admirers of a brand, product, or cultures of consumption. Porter (2004) identified Business-to-Business (B2B) VC applications, that are the least of all examined VC types within academic literature (Arnone et al, 2010; Kollock, 2002). In all cases these categories are not geographically bound, but structured with like-minded individuals who develop on-line, social- content-, and/or professional-based relationships. Depending upon type (C2C, B2C or B2B), a community can be facilitated by the use of external public platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and others, or internal proprietary built-out platforms, around which admirers of a brand, product, object, or advocates of an idea, collectively surround (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

The term social representation was coined in France by Moscovici (1961) and is understood to mean the collection of the elaborations (or meanings) of a social object, such as a brand, product, service, behaving, etc., by a community of members for purposes of communicating and behaving. Social representation theory assumes people in communities need a common system to understand and interact with one another regarding some product, brand, etc. that is outside of what is normally common to them. Over time, through these social interactions, cultural (community) members create unique, cultural- or community-specific meanings for formerly unfamiliar concepts (words, objects, symbols, behaving, etc.), thus the formerly-unknown concepts become imbued with special meaning within that particular

social group (Moscovici, 1961). Social representations can be used in the study of communities to elaborate context-related meaning on several levels: individual or community, or the former shaped by the latter, or even the latter shaped by the former. Additionally, social representation might be elaborated to refer to “consumption meanings in community contexts;” or, a preferred term might be “socially-constructed product/brand meanings” (Anonymous Reviewer, January, 2009).

By extension, social representation research (SRR) is based on social representation theory and is a methodology used to study what meaning culture members (community members) assign to certain objects, products or brands, which values they associate with them, and which norms they follow in using them (Penz, 2006; Bauer & Gaskell, 1999). The concept of SRR is multifaceted. Not only is SRR a study of the social process of collecting and communicating meanings of concepts and objects as socially-generated and elaborated, it is also empirical, context-oriented research that allows the analysis of why social events happen and social-specific meanings come about. Such assessments have crucial implications (Wagner, 1995) whether studying co-present or virtual communities, and whether studying communities for business-related or other discipline-related implications. An example of applying SRR to study of community is provided by Schau et al (2009). These researchers studied nine brand communities to identify common value-creating practices across communities where their research revealed the process of collective value creation within and among brand communities. The value of and goal in applying SRR is three fold or greater: 1) Its ability to gain access to community members’ mind-set of brand/product meanings; 2) Its theoretical applicability to study either virtual or co-present community contexts; and 3) Its theoretical adaptability to the use of either direct or indirect elicitation methodologies, e.g., use of interviews, observations, classic projective techniques, or Web-related content-analysis of virtual communications and interactions (Anonymous Reviewer, 2010). SRR is popular among European social psychologists and marketers but is less well-known in America; perhaps this is because many years passed before Moscovici’s 1961 work in French was translated into English. Today, however, SRR use by North American researchers is growing steadily and is applicable to the study of VCs and other on-line marketing efforts.

A theory closely linked with SSR is consumer culture theory (CCT), a relatively new field of study. By definition, CCT is a diversity of research approaches addressing the co-constituting relationships among consumers, consumption practices, cultural meaning systems, market structures, and their contextualizing socio-cultural and historical conditions, and that addresses the relationship between consumer actions, marketplace (co-present and virtual) and cultural meanings (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Informally defined, as adapted from Wikipedia (2010), CCT is a certain approach to the study of consumers, culture, and consumption that is other than based on psychological and economic consumption phenomena. Rindell (2008) offers a short introduction to brand research with consumer culture theory (CCT).

Traditionally, ethnographic research is an anthropological research method used to investigate human, social and cultural patterns as well as meanings in communities, organizations and other social settings. Researchers primarily use an etic (outsider) approach, remaining objective, rather than an emic (insider) one that is sometimes considered a ‘slippery slope’ that can compromise a researcher’s objectivity (Fetterman, 1998). In ethnographic research, data is gathered through first hand observation, daily participation, artifact examination, and/or use of discussions, interviews, or questionnaires given to and responded by memberships within a cultural (community) context (Schensul et al, 1999). By extension, netnography research is the Web-related application of ethnography research designed specifically to study consumers’, organizational buyers’, or other members’ behavior in online communities (Kozinets, 1998; 2002).

According to Kozinets (2002), netnography is primarily used for observation of textual discourse determined by accessing and analyzing the expression of sentiments and opinions by consumers who have expressed them in writing via digitally chatting in blogs, forums, online discussion and other digital venues (Osofsky, 2007). Netnography, whether observational, participatory, or autonetnography in nature, and whether practiced from an emic or etic perspective, is a fast growing methodology used to study the effect that online variables have on formation of product/brand meanings in computer-mediated community environments. Web 2.0 technology is defined as a technology innovation enabling efficient creation and distribution of user-generated content (UGC) (Hanlon & Hawkins, 2008) that allows ordinary citizens to take online or virtual social actions and interactions to communicate with and influence audiences. Thus, Web 2.0 technology enables researchers to gain virtual community member behavior insight (Stokburger-Sauber, 2010; Daugherty et al, 2008). Examples of Web 2.0 external platform technologies include well-known community hosts: Facebook, You Tube, My Space, Wikipedia, Flickr, Blogger and others. Virtual communities can be hosted on these external platforms and also can be hosted on external proprietary platforms, internal proprietary platforms, and ‘open-source’ platforms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Virtual Communities: C2C, B2C and B2B

Tapping the need for individuals to access or create information, remain socially-connected, and/or to share resources, virtual communities are growing in response to several converging trends: rapid increase in the use of digital technologies; decline of family-based community influencing the need to make pseudo-family connection elsewhere; seeking of like-minded groups with whom to connect regarding professional, hobby or personal interests, and the growing power of technology-enabled individual consumers in marketplace transactions (SSRIV, 2010). Virtual community members generally have one or more common goals: share information, increase product or brand usage and enjoyment, gain project expertise, and/or extend their lifestyle (Ovwersloot & Odekerken-Schoder, 2008; Daughtery et al, 2008).

In identifying and responding to the above digital-related behavior trends and goals, large companies like Dell, Coca Cola, IBM, Starbucks, UPS, Ford Motor, JetBlue, Best Buy, Pfizer, Novartis, Bayer and others have embraced B2C VCs as fundamental to their consumer marketing strategies (Caras, 2010). These international businesses are using VCs to better manage their global consumer brands (Arnone, Colet, Croquet, Geerts, & Pozniak, 2010) by harnessing both digital and brand power, as both reflect technology-based and social-based procedures and influences (SSRIV, 2010). Small and medium-sized enterprises likewise use social media-based, consumer-centric brand and product virtual communities. Individuals, too, create VCs as they seek to gain and/or contribute information and skill advancement advice digitally with like-minded others, for example, the VC of hand weavers hosted by Interweave.com (2010).

Virtual communities are also a growing phenomenon with B2B applications. In one industry example, electrical engineers using Electronic Design Automation (EDA) software to perform their jobs of designing chips and printed circuit boards for the electronics industry initiated a VC to share insights with each other on specific software usage. The company's marketers recognized this collaboration as vital to its marketing efforts and transformed that initial community, fully supporting it with a full-time, company-paid community manager (Laird-Magee, 2002a). Virtual communities can range in size from a very few home country members, to multi-country regional VCs, to colossal-size global virtual communities. Regardless of community type - C2C, B2C or B2B - four elements remain commons to all types: 1) Shared purpose; 2) Networked interactions; 3) Hosts as contributors; and 4) Continuous and evolving (Radian6.com, 2010).

Virtual Communities: Creation and Management

Much has been written about virtual communities and how they form (Algesheimer et al, 2005; Kozinets & Sherry, Jr., 2003) and two approaches to VC origination remain consistent: 1) Organic or Member-created, those whose VC members 'pull' information from manufacturers and/or other like-minded members who create communities based upon their lifestyles or interests, and 2) Engineered or Organization-originated, those developed by marketers to 'push' information into the hands of target VC members (Laird-Magee, 2002b; Porter, 2004). Despite the VCs origin - organic or engineered - community members pass through different development cycles and roles as they interact within the community. Development stages appear to be typical across VC type as members move from one stage to another based on discretionary interactions with others (adapted, Madanmohan & Nevekar, 2010) as noted in Table 1.

Table 1: Virtual Community Member Development Stages - Organic or Engineered

Stages	Characteristics/Skills of Community Member
Newbie	Has little knowledge of the community workings
Intermediate	Has sufficient knowledge of the community system and other online community members and has a willingness to learn more
Advanced	Is capable of solving others' problems; is involved in propagation of community virtue
Expert	Community member is one in the community whose word matters to others; has deep community/product/function knowledge

Not only do individual VC members go through developmental stages, according to Madanmohan & Navelkar (2010), some VC members can serve in administrative or quasi-administrative roles as shown in Table 2:

Table 2: Community Manager Roles and Responsibility: Organic

Role	Responsibility
Core Organizer	Organizes the community; initiates talks and group formations
Expert	Has tacit knowledge and shares knowledge
Problem poser	Brings problems to the platform; poses queries
Implementer	Establishes empirical validity of suggestions made; informs members of limitations and bugs
Integrator	Collates several rules/suggestions; builds taxonomy and manual
Institutionalizer	Pushes for standardization and regulatory support
Philosopher	Someone who pontificates about VS standards; doesn't necessarily use the technology but has vision of its usefulness and communicates it

Generally speaking, engineered communities created by an organization will have a community manager tasked with eight job activities (Laird-Magee, 2002a) itemized in Table 3.

Table 3: Virtual Community Manager Responsibilities: Engineered

1. Promote the VC
2. Gather editorial content
3. Manage contributing content authors
4. Produce newsletters to encourage repeat visits
5. Test incentives to entice members to contribute their relative insights
6. Moderate message boards for adherence to posting guidelines
7. Maintain an environment for organic growth
8. Set and monitor performance metrics measuring VC effectiveness and efficiency

Virtual Communities: Strategy, Goals & ROI

Many marketing managers who use VC marketing strategies often fail to specify expected outcomes before originating and implementing a VC, as advocated by Amisampath (2010), yet a successful VC is all about managing expectations. As examples of VC-expected outcomes, a manager might consider one of the following VC-related expectation scenarios: 1) Our firm expects a direct monetary benefit of X dollar amount of cash or profit; or 2) Our firm is expecting increased brand awareness during the period (beginning date) to (ending date), that will later translate into a monetary outcome. Metrics measuring ROI of traditional marketing expenses have been effectively and efficiently employed for years. Today, however, a shift to online VC-centric metrics is required. Using virtual consumer- and marketer-centric collectives or communities, today's marketers seek to accomplish several goals. A representative sampling of academic research keyed to this issue is shown in Table 4:

Table 4: VC-Centric Marketing and Business Goals

1. Use budget-sensitive VCs to reach target customers and potential customers. (Munz & O'Guinn, 2001 - according to Thomson Scientific & Healthcare, this is one of the most cited papers in the fields).
2. Generate increased customer traffic by facilitating a customer-centric virtual community. (Stokburger-Sauber 2010).
3. Increase authenticity of product, brand and/or service through use of a VC. (Fournier & Lee, 2009).
4. Enhance sales through a customer request-driven virtual community. (Hanlon & Hawkins, 2008; Wells, 2009; Algesheimer & Hermann, 2005; Fournier & Lee 2009; Veloutsou & Moutinho 2009; and SSRIV 2010).
5. Source for new product innovation ideas by analyzing use of VC strategies. (Fuller et al, 2008; Hanlon & Hawkins 2008).
6. Serve as a customer retention strategy. (Laird-Magee, 2002a, 2002b).

Quantifying the investment value of a VC and its marketing strategy is not easy as it remains a topic of ongoing debate. However, as Connor (2010) notes, many companies continue maintaining or increasing corporate resources to support VCs and social media tools. A few quantitative VC-centric metrics have been offered by advertising online service providers with tools and platforms to track specific metrics which measure for factors such as 'dwell scores' and other virtual-related metrics. Dwell scores are determined by combining the length of time a viewer spends actively engaged with an online advertisement times the rate at which the viewer is engaged (Caras, 2010). Dwell score metrics can reasonably be applied to the measurement of VC member engagement. Although advances have been made in VC-centric metrics, and positive results of brand communities are well-documented in the literature (Stokburger-Sauber, 2010), little is known about quantitative and qualitative VC-related issues, specifically: 1) Similarities and differences between organic or engineered VCs with regard to consumer motivation for joining

them; 2) Attitudes and commitment of members to VCs (Munz & O'Guinn, 2001); 3) The influence of online word-of-mouth among VC members (East et al, 2008; De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008); 4) and other issues.

Additionally, few academic papers have been published about setting goals for VC-centric marketing strategies and selecting applicable goal-centric metrics. From a literature survey, and according to Radian6.com (2010), it appears that goal-centric VC metrics have been largely ignored in the academic business literatures, although goal-centric measurement is a hallmark of sound business strategy. Metrics for measuring engagement, level of engagement, and engagement outcomes related to the use of VC marketing strategies and overall business strategy fulfillment must be understood, and disseminated among marketing academicians and VC practicing marketers.

Virtual Community Metrics: Radian6 Community Managers' Contributions

Radian6.com's community managers (2010) advocate spelling out VC goals and how aligned they are to a company's business strategy. Articulating specific VC-centric goals and metrics is requisite, as a successful or failed VC strategy can impact many organizational functions. Radian6 VC managers advocate creating SMART goals: S = Specific; M = Measurable; A = Actionable; R = Realistic; and T = Timed. These managers, like others, know there are no universally applicable metrics for every VC strategy, thus benchmarking, an estimate of where the virtual community is now, is critically important. Benchmarking is also employed to create a baseline of those success factors applicable to a marketer's VC efforts, as for example, with customer retention (Laird-Magee, 2002a,b). Radian6 virtual community managers stress that managers need to go beyond just counting VC members and hits on the firm's VC site, to looking in depth at 'engagement' trends and engagement activities over time, and taking robust looks at community health, community member sentiments, key community member conversation topics, community lead generation, and community customer relationship management issues. These evaluation efforts require both quantitative and qualitative metrics. Radian6 community managers further advocate that the entire purpose of measurement is to give VC managers intelligence about what is working, what needs fixing, and what is not working, goal-centric wise from both day-to-day and strategic perspectives.

Virtual Community: Quantitative Metrics

Several quantitative VC metrics exist for tracking and measuring VC strategies and their impact on overall marketing and business goals. Community managers at Radian6 (2010), for example, offer that virtual community metrics can be divided into eight groups, as shown in Table 5. Appendix A shows the several individual goal-centric metrics that relate to each of the eight A-H groups.

Table 5: Eight Groups of Quantitative Virtual Community Metrics

For Measuring:
A. Conversation and Engagement
B. Community Health
C. Buzz and Competition
D. Sentiment and Trends
E. Issue Resolution Time and Costs
F. Lead Generation and Sales
G. Website Analysis
H. Content Performance

For a further explanation of these metrics, consult the Radian 6.com website (2010). Radian6 virtual community managers stress that each of these listed metrics or measurement ideas still take a look at VC outcomes through a distinct single lens. They suggest that any metrics used and any resulting outcomes statistics should not be used to demonstrate that a VC or VC marketing strategy was a success, or failure, rather that each quantitative or qualitative metric and outcome measured be viewed as a part of a continually-evolving measurement eco-system within the firm. This measurement eco-system ideally would integrate multiple measurement participants and multiple quantitative and qualitative measurement tools and platforms to help firms track VC-centric spending and the impact these expenditures have on the firm's overall marketing- and business-centric goals.

Virtual Community: Qualitative Metrics

Many qualitative research metrics are directly adaptable to VC study and can be used. This paper's focus is netnography, its qualitative rather than a quantitative use, and its application to marketing-related, social representation research (SRR)-related understanding of VC members' thoughts about and meanings assigned to certain objects, brands or products. One of its benefits is that SRR enables marketers to identify which values are associated with VC members and what norms are used within the context of their community (Penz, 2006). Several researchers confirmed that SRR-centric study was also very useful in identifying cultural differences when considering context and diversity of cultural members (Stewart & Lacassagne, 2005; Wagner & Haynes, 1999; Herche et al, 1996; Plank, 2009; Langer & Beckman, 2005). Whether a researcher remains an outsider observing only and does not participate in community "life", an etic and traditional approach, or engages in VC discussions, an emic approach, really depends upon the researcher's comfort level of becoming a member in his or her own VC study. If one employs a community manager, for example, who is readily identifiable by VC members, then an emic approach seems reasonable.

SRR as an American research methodology has grown slowly but steadily since the 1980s, especially from the emic point of view. It has replaced studies that formerly were based on the observations of cultural participants by others (etic view) to its current state of being aimed at understanding the research constructs from a socially- and culturally-shared knowledge perspective and how they influence individual and collective perceptions, expressions, and actions (Hofstede et al, 1999; Flick, 2006).

Results from previously conducted VC-centric studies demonstrate the usefulness of the SRR methodology and validate that VC management and SRR principles are universally applicable. Based on this universal applicability, Flamet (1992) argued that in the world of changing social and cultural conditions, researchers must also learn how other SRR investigations have been conducted; VC-related study must change if researchers are to interpret, understand, and compare findings in the context of social representations used and communicated among community members.

SRR can be conducted using one of several formats: word associations, sentence completion, Thematic Apperception Tests (story completion), cartoon dialog balloons, and role playing. Additionally, and third-party techniques are generally found to eliminate the social pressure of respondents' giving a standard, 'right,' or politically-correct responses (Klopper & Davidson, 1962), however some researchers debate whether the use of such third-party projective research techniques reflect valueless subjectivity or insightful reality (Boddy, 2005). To illustrate a VC-related application of SRR methodologies, a researcher might present to a VC member a term, brand, product or other object prompt and asked the member to, in the context his or her own culture or community (an emic approach), discuss the prompt's importance in his or her own various work, home, play, or to society settings. Afterwards, the researcher would analyze the gathered data and develop insights into values, meanings, and beliefs community members' individually and collectively attach to the brand, product, or other object prompt.

It appears SRR methods translate almost seamlessly to the study of virtual community members with little adaptation required, however, SRR has limitations in either co-present or virtual environment. One set of limitations relate to translation problems when using society-specific words, symbols, and other prompts in another cultural settings. To minimize these issues SRR researchers have used visual-based prompts such as pictures, projective techniques, associations, or other non-verbal data gathering instruments free associations are especially plagued with translation problems cross cultures (Penz, 2006). Although no data gathering tool is perfect, the generally-accepted value of visual-based prompts lies in gaining a respondent's indirect revelation of his or own underlying motivations, beliefs, attitudes and/or feelings when asked to respond as to an 'other-party's probable response' when presented with the physical or online prompt.

Further elaboration of applications of SRR-based methodologies is beyond the scope of this study. Interested readers are referred to Tsoukalas's (2006) study published in *Quality and Quantity* (December). Tsoukalas creatively used elicitation and elaboration of free associations to determine the semantic field and cognitive organization of given social representations and shared with readers the complete survey script as a model to follow, creating a common ground for discourse.

Gillespie (2008) pointed out the existence of 'alternative representation' research that is a sub-component of SRR and offers an etic perspective. Here alternative representation image-based prompts are intended to elicit from one cultural group (or one virtual community) respondents' thoughts, ideas, beliefs, associations, and such about a prompt that they would attribute to being the same or similar to that of how second cultural group (or virtual community's) members would respond. As with the parent SRR concept, Gillespie (2008) cautioned that several semiotic barriers may work to neutralize the affect on behavior regarding alternative representations. Although both parent representations and alternative representations are faced with barriers, both fields of study are experiencing use growth in the U.S.

Social Representation Research: Marketing Application

Social representation research methodologies are used increasingly to study social construction of diverse marketing phenomena as the links between social representations and social practices are well-established (Abric, 1994). One of its important applications is in market segmentation research as it can be used to analyze VC group formations based on shared beliefs, emotions, lifestyles, and consumption and relationship market segments can be formed at all geographical levels, domestic to global. Widely-used internationally, although rarely thus far in America, SRR researchers are beginning to make significant contributions to the SRR literature by linking segmentation and other useful and practical marketing application. Appendix B offers several empirical examples and serve to document SRR-marketing links, and address a near void in marketing literature. SRR researchers enthusiastically responded to Flamet's 1992 call, during the first conference for international marketing SSR researchers, for building a communal repository of SRR-related studies and the sharing of the open-source sharing of these among SRR researchers.

Today, many SRR-related papers are published as 'open source' on a website entitled, Papers on Social Representation Research, available from <http://www.psr.jku.at/> (PSR, 2010). Applying SRR in marketing research in the U.S. is a relatively new phenomenon, however, it is SRR methodologies could be applied to study a variety of virtual and co-present community consumption practices: health, education, philanthropy, cultural events, and many other required and discretionary consumption practices. What business disciplines beyond marketing social representation theory-based research could be appropriately applied? The empirical examples presented in Appendix B are good starting places.

Social Representation Research: Future

As applied to virtual or co-present community, qualitative-based SRR is experiencing steadily use-growth in America, although it has not, for the large part as we know it, become a widely-offered course of study in U.S. academic curricula. Just five years ago Wagner & Hayes (2005), an Austrian team, published the first single text addressing the theoretical, epistemological and empirical frameworks, major concept issues, and debates of modern social representation research. Their work, entitled, *Everyday Discourse and Common Sense - The Theory of Social Representations*, is a 472-page text published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2005.

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

This paper should be of interest to American educators and marketing practitioners as it introduces many to new research tools and topics - mostly from Europe - and may encourage them to become involved in these new technologies, methodologies, and metrics of assessing virtual community strategy outcomes. Virtual communities, the role of VC managers, how marketing researchers can utilize goal-centric quantitative and qualitative metrics to measure VC marketing strategies to produce goal-centric outcomes that are aligned with overall business goals, and other VC-related issues were discussed throughout the paper. Additionally, this paper introduced SRR as a social representation theory-based practice and the use of netnography in practice and how these practices allow marketers access to VC members' mind-set (and the mind-set of co-present community members) for identifying consumer-centric value-added experiences and satisfaction improvement strategies. Through these practices top customer concerns can be identified and addressed and customer relationship management improved.

Implications

The growing importance of virtual communities, social representation research, consumer consumption theory, and netnography implies that marketing educators and researchers are pressed to stay current with technological developments and research advancements and proactively integrate information about and training regarding these into marketing and other educational curricula. The study of virtual communities is relatively new, however, these concepts have begun to appear in consumer behavior texts. Some take away thoughts and experiential project ideas for incorporating virtual community and social representation knowledge into marketing courses are offered in Table 6. Students could be asked to conduct ethnographic, netnographic, or both types of research, on brand or product community in these marketing courses: consumer behavior, marketing research, and international marketing. As was shown, growing attention is being devoted the virtual/ brand community phenomenon increasing the likelihood research will grow in relevance with practitioners and educators alike.

Table 6: Possible Experiential Projects Involving Social Representation Research (Taylor, 2009)

A.	Virtual community research projects that give trainees experience in analyzing on-line blogs, chat rooms, and virtual communities with open source memberships. Here the trainees could be asked to identify top-rated virtual community member problems or concerns, and learn what product- or brand-related information is being exchanged.
B.	Online projects to help trainees realize the importance of and growing necessity of the link between virtual community platforms, marketing, and overall business strategies and customer relationship management. These projects might take the form of interviews with or job-shadowing projects with virtual community managers.
C.	Projects to help trainees realize that virtual communities can serve as a channel of communication. In conducting such study, trainees come to realize that there is a link between devoted product or brand users and firm sales, profit, and image enhancement.

Full implications of virtual communities to marketers, other business administrators, and to academics are not yet known. The boundary-less nature of virtual communities crossing geographic, time, gender, nationality, ethnicity, and education boundaries, richly endows the need for research regarding virtual community, social representation research and related study.

Recommendations

Since one of the practical application of SRR is in measuring VC-centric outcomes, marketing academician and practitioners researchers should read, discuss, and become more familiar with virtual community strategies, VC management, community manager responsibilities, social representation research, netnography, and other applicable research methodologies. Knowledge of VC community management and VC-centric metrics, specifically SRR and related concepts and skills, are requisite in today's global workplace. As many marketers, due to cost cutting measures, move from their dependency on outsourcing creative and media services to advertising agencies and specialized virtual media suppliers, they are pressed to become more self-sufficient with skills in-house, and should expect new hires to be skilled in, digital marketing infrastructures and go-to-market virtual functionalities and solutions. Investing in digital demand generation and virtual relationship communities ranks among top initiatives being taken to maximize the impact and value of marketing in coming years (Farrell, 2010). In our opinion, it is expected that present and future marketers will continually be directed by management, stockholders and stakeholders to do more with less, and be continually asked to justify marketing investments, VC-centric or otherwise. To accommodate these directives, many marketers should transition without hesitation toward immediate execution of virtual community marketing strategies (Farrell, 2010), and many are asked to do so without applicable training.

Perhaps it is time for academic business departments to build out proprietary virtual community platforms. Ideally, these platforms would enable marketing educator, marketing practitioner, and other like-minded people to have collective, 24-hour, seven day discourse, interaction and free-flow of ideas - thus engaging and connecting university, business world, and community at large.

Directions for Future Research

Future research investigations could examine a multitude of variables regarding the tracing, visualizing, analyzing, and explaining and permanently capturing of virtual community textual and visual elements and member relationships and the influence of these on VC members' behavior performance or hindrance of performance. Data mining VC textual data through both qualitative and quantitative research is of utmost importance, as it eventually enables the ability to quantify the economic value of virtual communities, ranging from negligible up to multimillion dollar values, and offers the possibility of securitizing the future streams of income of these values to obtain working capital for today. Future research should debate the treatment of VC space as whether it is personal or public. Other related ethical issues regarding researcher access, acquisition, quotation, and storage of textual and/or visual information exchanged among VC members in VC space should be examined. As VC-user benefits increase and as users share increased information between VC members, spammers and scammers are attracted, thus research on securing virtual communities is of utmost importance. Many research streams surrounding ethics, privacy issues, social responsibility, standards of conduct, member participation in and marketer use of virtual communities are needed. We suggest researchers consider virtual communities as a broad research domain, open to a variety of researcher disciplines by looking more in detail at any of the above mentioned and other virtual community issues. Additionally, researchers could look further at VC-centric metrics, including customer retention, appropriate for assessing individual and group performance of virtual community strategies and the 'so what' impact on businesses, VC-members, and society members at-large. As the use of virtual communities continues its rapid expansion, and additional functionalities within user bases grows, the demand for VC-centric research studies, both quantitative and qualitative, will grow proportionately for longitudinal and comparative studies.

REFERENCES

- Abrie, J. 1994. **Pratiques sociale el representations**. Paris: Presses Universaries de France.
- Algesheimer, R., Dholakia, U., & Hermann, H. 2005. The social influence of brand communities: Evidences from European car clubs. **Journal of Marketing**, 69: 19-34.
- Amisampath. 2010. Why do online brand communities fail? (June 21). Retrieved from <http://www.amisampath.com>.
- Armstrong, A., & Hagel, J. 1996. The real value of on-line communities. **Harvard Business Review**, 84: 276-30.
- Arnone, L., Colot, O., Croquet, M., Geerts, A., & Pozniak, L. 2010. Company managed virtual communities in global brand strategy. **Global Journal of Business Research**, 4: 97-112.
- Arnould, E., & Thompson, C. 2005. Consumer culture theory (CCT): Twenty years of research. **Journal of Consumer Research**, 31: 868-882.
- Audebrand, L., & Iacobus, A. 2004. **The social representation of fair trade in a business student population**. ISTR Conference Proceedings, (July 11-14, Toronto, Canada). Retrieved from: <http://atlas-conferences.com/c/a/m/k/93.htm>.
- Bauer, M., & Gaskell, G. 1999. Toward a paradigm for research on Social Representation. **Journal of Theory of Social Representation**, 2: 263-186.
- Boddy, C. 2005. Projective techniques in marketing research: Valueless subjectivity or insightful reality. **International Journal of Marketing Research**, 3: 239-254.
- Breakwell, G., & Canter, D. 1993. **Empirical approaches to Social Representations**. Oxford Science Publications, Editors, Illustrated Edition, Clarendon Press.
- Caras, A. 2010. **Evaluating the effectiveness of digital advertising**. Retrieved from www.community.microsoft.com.
- Daughtery, T., Eastin, M., & Bright, L. 2008. Exploring consumer motivation for creating user-generated comment. **Journal of Interactive Advertising**, 8: 16-25.
- De Bruyn, A., & Lilien, G. 2008. A multistage model of word-of-mouth influence. **International Journal of Research in Marketing**, 25: 151-163.
- East, R., Hammond, K., & Lomax, W. 2008. Measuring the impact of positive word-of-mouth on brand purchase probability. **International Journal of Research in Marketing**, 25: 215-229.
- E-mint. 2010. **Association of online community professionals**. Available from: <http://www.e-mint.org.uk/>.
- Farrell, M. 2010. **Digital marketing driving transformation in global marketing organizations**. CMO Council. Retrieved from <http://www.marketwire.com/press-release/digital-marketing-driving-transformation-glo>.
- Fetterman, D. 1998. **Ethnography**. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Flamet, C. 1992. **Request to all researchers on social representations**. Papers of Social Research, 2: 137. Retrieved from <http://www.psr.jku.at/>.
- Flick, U. 2006. **An Introduction to qualitative research**. London: Sage Publication.
- Fournier, S., & Lee, L. 2009. Getting brand communities right. **Harvard Business Review**, 87: 105-111.
- Fuller, J., Matzler, K., & Hoppe, M. 2008. Brand community members as a source of innovation. **Journal of Product Innovation Management**, 25: 608-619.
- Gillespie, A. 2008. Social representations, alternative social representations and semantic barriers. **Journal for Theory of Social Behavior**, 38: 375-391.

- Godet, G., Meurgey, B., & Lacassagne, M. 2009. Brand social representations: Strategic perspectives for a fitness club, **International Journal of Sports Management and Marketing**, 5: 369-383.
- Hanlon, P., & Hawkins, J. 2008. Expand your brand community online. **Advertising Age (Midwest Region Edition): Chicago**, 79: 14-16.
- Herche, J., Swenson, M., & Verbeke, N. 1996. Personal selling constructs and measures: Emic versus etic approaches to cross-national research. **European Journal of Marketing**, 30: 83-97.
- Hofstede, F., Steenkamp, J., & Wedel, M. 1999. International market segmentation based on consumer-product relations, **Journal of Marketing Research**, 34: 1-17.
- Interweave. 2010. **Interweave communities - hand woven**. Retrieved from: <http://www.weavingtoday.com/user/member.asp>.
- Jenkins, L. 2010. **3 ways Facebook administrators can avoid complicated situations with fan posts**. (August). Retrieved from: www.lindajenkins.com
- Klopfer, B., & Davidson, H. 1962. **The Rorschach technique: An introductory manual**. Harcourt, Brace and World.
- Kollock, P. 2002. **Communities cyberspace ten years later**. Taylor and Francis.
- Kozinets R., & Sherry, J. 2003. Teaching old brands new tricks: Retro brand and the revival of brand meaning, **Journal of Marketing**, 67: 19-33.
- Kozinets R. 2002. The field behind the screen: Using netnography for marketing research in online communities. **Journal of Marketing Research**. 17: 252-264.
- Kozinets R. 1998. On netography. Initial reflections on consumer investigations of cyberculture. In J. Alba & W. Hutchinson, (Eds.). **Advances in Consumer Research**, Association for Consumer Research, Provo, UT. 25, 336-371.
- Laird-Magee, T. 2002a. **Online communities build customer loyalty and support customer retention goals**. White Paper, Confidential case study (August).
- Laird-Magee, T. 2002b. **Winning Internet strategy addresses customer acquisition and retention**. White Paper. Confidential case study. (August).
- Langer, R., & Beckman, S. 2005. Sensitive research topics: Netnography revisited. **Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal**, 8: 189-203.
- Levin-Rosalis, M., & Bar-on, N., & Hartaf, H. 2003. The structuring process of social responsibility on violence in abusive men. **Psychology and Culture**, 9: 361-382.
- Madanmohan, T., & Navelkar, S. 2010. **Roles and knowledge management in online technology communities: An ethnography study**. IIMB. Retrieved from <http://www.citeseerx.ist.psu.edu>.
- Moscovici, S. 1961. **La psychanalyse, son image et son public**. Paris: Presses: Universitaires de France.
- Muniz, A., & O'Guinn, T. 2001. Brand community. **Journal of Consumer Research**, 27: 412-432.
- Osofsky, M. 2007. **Enhance marketing research with netnography**. Retrievable at <http://www.mediaconnection.com/content/17211.asp>.
- Ovwersloot, H., & Odekerken-Schoder, G. 2008. Who's who in brand communities. **Journal of Marketing**, 42: 571-585.

- Penz, E. 2006. Researching the socio-cultural context: Putting social representation into action, **International Marketing Review**, 23: 418-437.
- Penz, E., Neir-Pesti, K., & Kirchler, E. 2004. It's practical but no more controllable: Social representation of the electronic purse in Austria. **Journal of Economics Psychology**, 25: 771-787.
- Plank, R. 2005. **The emic vs. etic dilemma in cross cultural marketing research: A personal construct theory perspective**. Retrieval from <http://www.sbaer.uca.edu/research/1998/MMA/98mma089.htm> posted 5/7/2004.
- Porter, E. 2004. A topology of virtual communities: A multi-disciplinary foundation for future research. **Journal of Computer Mediated Communication**. Retrieved from <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue1/porter.html>.
- PSR. 2010. Papers on Social Representation. **Open access journal**. Retrieved from <http://www.psych.lse.ac.uk/psr/>.
- Radian6. 2010. **Measuring community impact**. Ch. 6. Building and Sustaining Brand Communities - Radian6 E Book. Retrieved from http://www.radian6.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/02radian6_ebook_Feb2010.pdf.
- Rheingold, H. 1993. **The virtual community homesteading on the electronic frontier**. Rheingold.
- Rindell, A. 2008. **What do brands mean to us? A short introduction to brand research with consumer culture theory**. Haaga-Helia.
- Schau, H., Muniz, A., & Arnould, E. 2009. How brand community practices create value. **Journal of Marketing**, 73: 31-51.
- Schensul, S., Schensul, J., & LeCompte, M. 1999. **Essential ethnographic methods: Observations, interviews and questionnaires**. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.
- Schouten, J., & McAlexander, J. 1995. Subcultures of consumption: An ethnography of the new bikers. **Journal of Consumer Research**, 22: 43-61.
- Singh, T., & Cullinnane, J. 2010. Social networks and marketing: Potential and pitfall. **International Journal of Electronic Marketing and Retailing**, 3: 202-220.
- SSRIV. 2010. **Brand community concept**. SSRIV, (Abstract). Retrieved from <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1444833>.
- Stewart, I., & Lacassange, M. 2005. Social representation as a diagnostic tool for identity of cultural and other group differences. **Psychology and Marketing**, 22: 721-738.
- Stockburger-Sauber, N. 2010. Brand community: Drivers and outcome. **Psychology and Marketing**, 27: 347-368.
- Taylor, R. 2009. **Social representation research: Uses, importance and relationship to netnography and marketing communities**. Conference Proceedings, Marketing Educators' Conference, Seattle (April).
- Tsoukalas, I. 2006. Methods for studying social representation. **Quality and Quantity**, 40: 1089-1095.
- Veloutsou, C., & Moutinho, L. 2009. Brand relationship through brand reputation and brand tribalism. **Journal of Business Research**, 62: 314 -322.
- Wagner, W. 1995. **Description, explanation and method in social representation research**. Papers on Social Representation Research. 156-176. Retrieved from <http://www.psr.jku.at/>.
- Wagner, W., & Haynes, N. 2005. **Everyday discourse and common sense - The theory of social representation**. Palgrave Macmillan: US.

Wells, J. 2009. **Building brand communities, Business Opportunities**. Retrieved from <http://www.business-opportunities.biz/2009/05/19/building-brand-communities>.

Wikipedia. 2009. **Social representations**. Retrievable from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_representations.

Ruth Taylor is a professor of marketing at Texas State University - San Marcos. She received her Ph.D. in marketing from University of North Texas. Her current research interests include international marketing, branding, marketing education, and hand woven textile marketing and virtual community analysis. She has published in Journal of Brand Management, Journal of Marketing Education, Marketing Education Review, Journal for Advancement of Marketing, Competitiveness Review, Journal of Contemporary Business Issues, Journal of Global Competitiveness, Journal of Professional Services Marketing, and others.

Tyler Laird-Magee is an assistant professor of marketing and management at Linfield College. Tyler is completing her doctoral studies in business administration at George Fox University and holds an M.A. in communication and marketing from the University of Portland. She has over 25 years of experience in strategic marketing management in settings ranging from Fortune 500 companies to venture capital start-ups. In 2000, she built the first online communities for the Electronic Design Automation (EDA) industry. Tyler's research is focused on the management of international virtual communities, the intersection of organizational culture and brand, and outcomes-based teaching in marketing and management, domestically and internationally.

Appendix A: Quantitative-Based Virtual Community Metrics

(Adapted from: Radian6 E Book (2010), Building & Sustaining Brand Communities, "Measuring Community Impact," Chapter 6)

- A. Measuring Conversation and Engagement
 - 1. Proactive blog posts or conversation treads initiated by the firm.
 - 2. Tweet and Retweet ratios.
 - 3. Length of comment strings per company-initiated posts.
 - 4. % of community members engaged on topic posts per week/month.
 - 5. # total monthly/type conversations & their ratios: Support; Topical; Goodwill; Others
 - 6. Presence by media type.
- B. Measuring Community Health
 - 1. Growth rates for different properties.
 - 2. Community member satisfaction/ renewals/retention and attrition.
 - 3. Average community member engagement time.
 - 4. Community member connections: actual (friends) and implied (conversations).
 - 5. Ratio of company to community posts/conversations.
- C. Measuring Buzz and Competition
 - 1. Number of posts and % positive posts vs. competitive virtual communities.
 - 2. Recommendations and referrals versus competitive virtual communities.
 - 3. Share of conversation.
 - 4. Reviews of product or service
- D. Measuring Sentiments and Trends
 - 1. Sentiments toward product or service per product/service review analyses
 - 2. Positive/negative/neutral ratios over various time periods and as compared to competitive VCs.
 - 3. Recovery time for sentiment rations after an encountered crisis.
 - 4. Emergent evangelists (% positive posts) and distracters (% negative posts) from a single source
- E. Measuring Issue Resolution Time and Costs
 - 1. Posts and issues addressed in social media channels.
 - 2. Resolution of first contact; average resolution time.
 - 3. Issues initiated and reached online and offline (like phone contact) and comparative cost per issue.
 - 4. Cost per issue (as compared to offline mechanisms like phone contact).
 - 5. Peer-resolved issues (support).
 - 6. Supportive comments/defending gestures by community members.
- F. Measuring Lead Generation and Sales
 - 1. Community membership overlap with sales; Referrals via online channels.
 - 2. % leads originating through online channels; % leads closed though online channels.
 - 3. Cost per dollar raised.
- G. Measuring Website Analysis
 - 1. Referral traffic volume from virtual community site.
 - 2. Time on virtual community site for online referrals.
 - 3. Conversations/click through % for various referral channels.
 - 4. Inbound links.
- H. Measuring Content Performance
 - 1. Downloads from site: Uploads of User-generated content (UGC)
 - 2. Revenue and paid out count.
 - 3. Shares (share of Tweets; Retweets; Inbound links; bookmarks; votes, etc.
 - 4. Unique conversations about community created content & external or user-generated content.

Appendix B: Empirical Social Representation Applications

1. Penz, Neir-Pesti and Kirchler's study (2004) in Austria concerning consumer behavior toward the 'electronic purse' (the chip card).
2. Godet et al (2009) work with social representation research methodologies in the UK where they sought consumer opinions and prejudices toward fitness clubs to learn of salient elements of a particular sports brand and the way these elements are structured the community members themselves.
3. Houtilainen, Pirttila-Backman and Tourill's (2006) study in Finland regarding the marketing of new foods to consumers based on consumers grouped into their suspicions of new foods, adherence to natural foods, adherence to technology, eating as an enjoyment activity vs. eating as a necessity; and other eating behaviors. Research findings of this study were used an attempt to predict community consumers' willingness to try/use new foods.
4. Levin-Rosalis et al (2003), showed how social representation research was used as a therapeutic process in conditioning a community of habitually violent men to understand and manage their own aggression tendencies.
5. Audebrand (2004) describe how social representation research was used to show how 'fair trade' was elaborated among student community member interactions based on free associations.
6. Breakwell and Canter (1993) in their book, *Empirical Approaches to Social Representation Research*, illustrates the multi-functionality of social representation research.
7. Many other phenomena as subjects of social representation research:
 - a. Brand/product building and brand/product mapping - indirectly or directly elicit from community members reality- based values, perceived benefits attitudes, and other such information about particular brands or products to aid brand image building, brand image mapping, and other brand-related endeavors.
 - b. Building sales volume – indirectly or directly elicit information about barriers to consumption from community members and to determine important reasons for non-consumption.
 - c. Others