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**"ONLINE COMMUNITIES: AN EXAMINATION OF ONLINE
COMMUNITY-BASED CASE STUDIES"**

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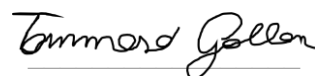

Tommaso Galloni

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Abstract

Billions of people access the Internet and the World Wide Web every day. Inside this vast network, individuals interact with one another, whether consciously or unconsciously, sharing thoughts, views, and information at an unfathomable rate. The creation of Online Communities (OCs) is based on this perpetual phenomenon, which happens silently in everyone's life. Without a thorough comprehension of every component triggered by these architectures, which is highlighted across disciplines, definitions, categorizations and classifications, it would be difficult to obtain a profound understanding of OCs.

Intercepting such tendency, which is defined by the widespread use of OCs, is becoming a rising priority for businesses and marketers. This topic will be studied through an in-depth examination of selected case studies, which show a wide range of community uses in a variety of disruptive business models.

Twitch's analysis triggers the creation of a specific category, namely *community incubator*, where professional streamers can monetize their content with a level of interactivity never seen before. Estetista Cinica represents one of the most resonant cases of cultivation, investment and *social influence* in the OC, to the point of building a business around it. OneDay Group, on the other hand, has built its success thanks to the unique management of its OC, representing their *targeted customers*, on which communication and marketing are continuously projected. Finally, Meta has been launched with the aim of developing a metaverse, meaning an immersive virtual environment, namely, surreality. This case study suggests the emergence of a fourth classification of disruptive OC-based business models, described as the *all-around* OCs.

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List of Abbreviations

OC: Online Community

B2B: Business-to-Business

B2C: Business-to-Consumer

C2C: Consumer-to-Consumer

P2P: Peer-to-Peer

ToS: Terms of Service

WOMM: Word-of-Mouth Marketing

SME: Small-Medium Enterprise

1 INTRODUCTION

It seems to be traditionally recognized, both among researchers and marketers, that the large space for growth dedicated to digital interaction and connectivity is directly caused by the extraordinary reduction of the costs of access to supporting technologies, such as the Internet and networks (Plant, 2004). This is strongly supported by Iriberry & Leroy (2008), whose analysis develops around the main assumption that Internet is the most diffused media for social connectivity and exchanges of information. Following this perspective, this study is intended to connect such mass diffusion to Online Communities (OCs).

As a matter of fact, the spread ubiquity of digital technologies within the life of every individual, both inside and outside organizations, contributes firstly to the formation and continuous emergence of sites and social networks as OCs (Reid & Gray, 2007), and, secondly, to the identification of a strong multidisciplinary component of this domain (Iriberry & Leroy, 2008).

In any case, it would be virtually impossible to achieve a deep understanding of OCs without comprehending the vast array of disciplines these structures involve. As a matter of fact, valuable contributions for the study of this domain can be found in sociology and ethnography, focusing on how individuals interact in societies (Rheingold, 1993); computer science and information technology, which provided a more restrained set of empirical studies of OCs (Gupta & Kim, 2004; Lee et al., 2003; Li, 2004); management and marketing, focusing on the role of OCs as content generator for companies and their business models (Iriberry & Leroy, 2008), as well as on the ways to best stimulate a successful word-of-mouth able to cross the boundaries of the community (Kozinets et al., 2010); finally, psychology, where scholars were interested in analyzing the drivers of participation in OCs (Lampe et al., 2010), including the feeling of belonging and attachment of the members to their communities (Blanchard, 2004; Blanchard & Markus, 2004).

The multiplicity of points of view in the context of OCs is also reflected in a wide variety of models created by authors who sought to characterize as many types of communities as possible. As a matter of fact, following the creation of an extraordinary number of classifications on the types of OCs, some authors have been challenged with the difficult task of gathering and grouping these models according to their similarity or dissimilarity.

In general, what seems to be a common agreement between authors from different disciplines is that the existence and development of OCs revolve around three focal and central elements.

First, the pillars that support OCs are people (Preece, 2000). Without community members, there would be no content to discuss and share. The second component is strictly linked to the motivation driving members and people to connect in the network, which consists in the sharing of interests, passions, information and much more (Porter, 2004; Koh et al., 2003). Such connection between members should be vast enough to support and sustain the formation of interactions and relations (Wenger, 1998). The third component, on the other hand, implies a strong distinction between OCs and physical communities, where online connectivity survives thanks to more or less complex technologies (Rheingold, 1993; Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; Jones & Rafaeli, 2000).

Groups and communities are firmly distinct concepts. A group is defined as a *set of two or more people who interact with each other to achieve certain goals or meet certain needs* (George & Jones, 2012, p. 279). Although communities share some attributes with both traditional groups and networks, including - even partially - their process of formation and development (Torres, 2020), the fundamental discontinuity lies in the organization of people.

As individuals self-select themselves in different OCs according to their interests, dreams and needs, social control occurs in a more complex and challenging way, if compared to traditional groups and teams. This is surely due to the existing dynamicity inside and outside the context of OCs (de Souza & Preece, 2004). In fact, within the OCs, the roles of the members are often emerging and not formally organized (Yang et al., 2019).

This represents the main reason why the identification of the roles that structure OCs is so widely discussed in literature. Among the various limitations and the inherent complexity of this approach, there is a concrete possibility that the roles of participants in the OCs are fluid and may even coexist in the same person (Yang et al., 2019). This led Veloutsou & Black (2020) to draw at least three research streams, considering different degrees of procedural complexity in roles identification.

The participation of both individuals and business organizations within these communities, although studded with substantial benefits, is certainly not free from risks.

The main benefits of individuals can be classified into three categories. The first class of benefits originates from the ability to share and exchange valuable information, through the creation

of relationships, or to simply enjoy entertainment (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). The second class of benefits that individuals can obtain from OCs, unlike physical communities, is directly related to the ability of the Internet and new digital technologies to allow constant access and support (Iriberry & Leroy, 2008). The third class of benefits, perfectly interpreting Belk's (2014) definition of "sharing", allows community members to achieve self-satisfaction by helping others through their experience (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004).

By contrast, Millen et al. (2002) mainly worked on confirming the existence of a set of benefits for organizations participating in OCs. Their analysis confirms that the connection between firms and communities may increase customer loyalty, ensure communication between employees, enhance visibility and reputation and, of course, optimize productivity.

The risks and the dark side of OCs are partially represented by the structural limitations and boundaries of the organizations, which lose direct control over the members. These situations are frequent, for example, in online brand communities, whose members may share critiques or inappropriate opinions, over which organizations have no hierarchical or administrative power. In other contexts, however, as was the case with the development of the Alt-Right stream, social movements can emerge as hate communities around various anti-social behaviors such as intolerance against diversity and narrow-mindedness (Hodge & Hallgrimsdottir, 2020). Unfortunately, in these contexts, activities like trolling, doxxing and flaming are extremely common.

The best practices for proper communication within the OCs certainly start from the recognition of these benefits and risks. Anyway, there are clear factors that can predict the success or failure of an OC. Among these, the analysis of Preece (2000) and his colleagues has certainly allowed to build a rich framework around two specific attributes of the OCs, namely, sociability and usability. Therefore, the authors themselves who develop indexes and matrixes can empirically describe and test these attributes. According to the same approach, Cunha et al. (2019) conclude that there is no single dimension of success for OCs, which means that there are several strategies capable of achieving success once implemented.

These strategies may change depending on the life cycle the community is living at the moment of participation. As a matter of fact, just like traditional teams, OCs evolve in stages. Among the most famous propositions, Ahituv and Neumann's conception (1982), which divides the life cycle of OCs into five phases, is taken up by Iriberry & Leroy (2008) to highlight how each stage possesses specific indicators of success.

Until now, OCs have been exploited by business organizations in different ways and specific competitive advantages are developed thanks to the interaction between companies and OCs (Fisher, 2018), which may result in the dissemination of brand values (Arndt, 1967) or in the detection of ideas for product innovation (Pitta & Fowler, 2005), also through the application of text mining or machine learning activities carried out by AIs (Christensen et al., 2016).

Intercepting this trend, characterized by the mass diffusion of OCs, consists in a growing priority for companies and marketers. The main objective of this thesis is to highlight how the relationship between organizations and OCs is reversing and transforming. As a matter of fact, OCs are nowadays perceived by many organizations as an essential component within their business models. This aspect will be investigated through an in-depth analysis of selected case studies.

In recent times, the role of community management has become relevant in successful companies. In general, it is now also necessary for marketers to comprehend the internal functioning of OCs and the implications that could derive from the interaction between business organizations and OCs. In fact, Wenger et al. (2017) stressed the necessity for companies to include OCs as a focal component of their digital business strategy, while contemporarily evidencing many reasons to incorporate community managers on board, thanks to their ability on acting as information filters for the OCs, quickly realizing the results of the implementation of different communication strategies and asking sincere feedbacks to the markets.

For this reason, the implications for managers are several, ranging from the revolution in marketing techniques, to the stimulation and induction of contents for OCs. On the one hand, the spread of OCs makes the interaction between users more complex, while, on the other hand, the insertion and management of these relationships by companies that want to exploit this phenomenon in a profitable way have become increasingly challenging.

In this paper, a deep analysis of case studies and the ways of interacting for communities on different contexts will enable to focus on understanding how and if the theoretical inputs on OCs are confirmed and applied in practice. Therefore, starting from the analysis on business case studies on OCs, it should be possible to test the existence of replicable best practices, which can be followed and implemented by companies in disparate industries to engage with their OCs. Moreover, this work is intended to stress whether or not the introduction of a strategy based on OCs can help businesses canalize their community building and management efforts.

The structure of the thesis results in a combination of notions from different disciplines. This is necessary to reflect the deep multidisciplinary of the OCs topic.

As a matter of fact, the second chapter will be entirely focused on the explanation and analysis of the theoretical background that surrounds the ecosystem of communities and OCs. It will therefore be useful to highlight both the common and the discordant factors between the various definitions of OCs by authors from different backgrounds. As a consequence, various models for the categorization of OCs will be analyzed. It is useful to specify that these models, as they are built around different variables and dimensions, could also coexist. For a complete understanding of a given community, for example, it may be proposed to apply several models at the same time, an approach that allows to highlight and stress different attributes of the community in question. Likewise, the stipulation of different models concerning the life cycle of the OCs will contribute to a total understanding of the topic.

The third chapter, on the other hand, entirely focuses on the participation of individuals within the OCs. The motivating drivers and different communication strategies will then be analyzed. Once individuals join a community, they become part of a complicated social control mechanism, which represent a constituent part of OCs. Although it is undoubted that this phenomenon produces the self-selection of OCs members in emerging roles, the vastness of the theorized models does not allow for a clear visualization.

The exploitation of OCs by companies is now a widespread phenomenon. Hence, the fourth chapter will focus on the examination of selected case studies, which consist in four different companies or brands that have been able to successfully include the surrounding OCs within their business models. The factors that allow the enactment of such inclusion must therefore be specified, utilizing all those aspects that researchers and literatures have been able to recognize during the last decades. This could sometimes result in the extension of the investigated research stream, in combination with additional hints and features coming from different discipline, industries and situations.

The final section of this master thesis is dedicated to managerial and practical implications for organizations, marketers and scholars in the academic field where the stimulation of OCs should be considered a critical skill for running successful and impactful digital business strategies.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Almost 4.54 billion people are connected to the internet today and about half of the world population, 3.8 billion people, regularly uses social networks, an increase of about 9% compared to 2019. Overall, internet users around the world will spend 1.25 billion years online in 2020, with more than a third of their time being spent on social media. It results in an interesting and worrying piece of data if we consider that the average internet user will spend more than 40% of their time online this year, distributed by different platforms, services and websites (Digital Dictionary, 2020).

Being part of a group has always been an essential need of human beings, as demonstrated by several psychologists, including McClelland (1987), who popularized the term “need for affiliation”, referring to the individual’s motivation and ambition to achieve involvement and sense of belonging to social groups.

According to the theories of social perception relating to the theme of social cognition, there are various reasons for perceiving one's belonging to a group:

- By proximity: often people start relationships with others who are physically close, for example who live in the same neighborhood, go to the same bar, the same school, sharing the same social places and spots (Newcomb, 1960). They certainly all represent early opportunities to make acquaintances or share experiences.

Proximity in digital contexts is based on computer-based interactions disregarding the constraints of distance, while it seems that still people prefer to connect with individuals, they have already had the opportunity to meet (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2012).

- By similarity: it deals with a criterion of belonging relative to the disposition in some individuals to reflect in the other their own convictions, ideas and needs (McPherson et al., 2001). In this case, it does not mean physical similarity, but affinity of thought, interest and lifestyle.
- By identification: people can belong to a group even when there is no similarity in ideas or needs, but with a mostly unconscious motivation for identification other human beings (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Many individuals aspire to belong to groups that possess a specific identity, representing a socially desirable status. According to this point of view, joining a group can therefore represent fulfillment, success, and prestige.

Different combinations of these motivational drivers, as well as different situations in the life of individuals, have allowed Forsyt (2009) to identify different types of groups.

- Primary groups: cohesion, member identity, physical connection, and solidarity are all characteristics of primary groups. Individuals can rely on such groups as their primary source of socialization. They are usually small and long-term oriented.
- Social groups: they are also small, but they last for a moderate period of time. These groups are frequently created in order to achieve a common purpose, while it is possible for outgroup members to become in-group members with relative easiness.
- Collectives: their duration varies from the short length of time up to instantaneous and crumbling interactions, as could happen in an audience of different sizes.
- Categories: this is generally associated with the largest amount of membership, since it is based on individual similarities on a wide range of traits, such as gender or nationality.

Given the amount of people who visit the web on a daily basis, it is almost impossible to assert that individuals do not enter into relationships with each other also in digital and computer-mediated contexts. Indeed, these phenomena, typical of real life, obviously also reproduce on the Web. While the term “community” had a widely accepted territorial connotation and was in most cases referred to geographical proximity, over time its meaning has changed, freeing itself from physical constraint. Over time, the communities have taken on a different shape, more liquid and less compact, and undoubtedly much more immediate.

There are numerous definitions for OCs, where people with common interests, behaviors, ideas, passions meet and confront each other, sharing opinions, questions, experiences and so on. Members feel identified with the values of the group they are part of and share common interests that strengthen this union. In the next section, the most famous and accredited definitions for the concept of OCs will be analyzed, trying to generalize and highlight the common traits between them.

2.1 Definitions and Components of OCs

The pervasiveness of digital technology in everyone's life, both inside and outside of organizations, leads to the construction and ongoing growth of sites and social networks as OCs (Reid & Gray, 2007), as well as the characterization of a strong multidisciplinary approach to this topic (Iriberri & Leroy, 2008). One of the most significant repercussions of this feature is that

the great intricacy surrounding the OCs context has made - and will continue to make - it difficult to achieve coherency between definitions from various fields and authors with varying backgrounds in specialization (de Souza & Preece, 2004).

The first sociologist who approached the issue of OCs with deep dedication was Rheingold (1993, p. 5), who proposed to define OCs as “*social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace*”.

The sociologist was involved as an early user and pioneer in the utilization of WELL (Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link), one of the oldest active OC, set up by Larry Brilliant and Stewart Brand in 1985, just few decades after the launch of Brand’s ambitious project called “Whole Earth Catalog”, with the intent to revolutionize the US information system by sharing experiences and interests among peers (The Guardian, 2013). To fully understand the impact of this book, defined by many as utopian and almost science fiction, it is necessary to utilize the commencement speech made by Steve Jobs in 2005, who compared the ideas proposed in the book to the search tool of Google, more than 35 years before the birth of the company from Cupertino (Jobs, 2006).

In addition to Steve Jobs, other illustrious enlightened and revolutionary personalities have dealt directly or indirectly with the theme of OCs. Among them, Mark Zuckerberg (2017) describes the business model of the Facebook platform as aimed at achieving what he calls the “*Global Community*”. It is not a sensational news that Facebook Inc. represents one of the most efficient incubator platforms for OCs, as well as Reddit or blogs. However, what makes the manifesto of the American entrepreneur and computer scientist interesting, concerns the proposed concept of OC itself. As a matter of fact, in his vision, Facebook should have aimed at building an OCs community characterized by:

- *Supportiveness* to reinforce the traditional institutions’ operations.
- *Safety* to reduce damages and frictions.
- *Informativeness* to ensure common understandings.
- *Civically-engagement* to defend participation.
- *Inclusivity* to reflect collective and global humanity.

Returning to the comment of the renewed literature, Rheingold's goal was to convey to a fairly skeptical category of sociologists how the adoption of the internet and computers in relationships helped to strengthen, and not diminish, the social bonds between the participants, thus justifying the combination of terms such as "*virtual community*" or "*online community*", born from the fusion of strictly separate concepts.

There has been much discussion on whether virtual communities are the electronic equivalents of real communities, that is, whether they enhance or subtract from genuine social interaction and community. One of the most renowned and accredited criticisms had been moved by Wellmann and Giulia (1999), which posed a series of questions, evidencing what they considered limits in the concept of OCs (p. 169):

- *Are online relationships narrowly specialized or broadly supportive?*
- *In what ways are the many weak ties on the Net useful?*
- *Is there any reciprocity online and attachment to virtual communities?*
- *Are strong intimate ties possible online?*
- *How does virtual community affect "real life" community?*
- *Does the Net increase community diversity?*
- *Are virtual communities "real" communities?*

Finding answers to these concerns is highly challenging, while due to the lack of rigorous studies, academics have been forced to rely on anecdotal and situational evidence (Ellis et al., 2005).

Despite this, the sociological approach to the concept of OCs represents only a fraction of the spectrum of analysis. For example, many other implications of OCs can be highlighted from a managerial point of view. Among the various prominent authors who have addressed the topic, we recall the contribution of Hagel and Armstrong (1997), who defined virtual communities as "*computer-mediated spaces where there is a potential for an integration of content and communication with an emphasis on member-generated content*". They ensured that the content published in online forums and contexts is beneficial to businesses. The following are key points emerging from their definition:

- When accessed by technology, *computer-mediated spaces* possess a similar understanding to internet and cyber space.

- *Member-generated content* firmly outline the importance of data, information, discussion, expression, and feelings generated in discussions within OCs. This allows OCs to be distinguished from traditional online information services.

Furthermore, from a psychological point of view, OCs are an interesting topic if related to the so-called “sense of community”. Here, Blanchard (2004) and Blanchard and Markus (2004) referred to OCS as “*groups of people who interact primarily through computer-mediated communication and who identify with and have developed feelings of belonging and attachment to each other*”. In addition, the origins of the sense of community could be traced back to feelings of membership, feelings of influence, integration and fulfillment of needs and shared emotional connections (Blanchard & Markus, 2004). They tested the presence of these characteristics on physical communities too, while the differences between physical and virtual communities regards the ways these characteristics arise.

Other features have been stressed by the definition developed by Jones and Rafaeli (2000, p. 216), who refers to OCs as “*virtual publics are symbolically delineated computer-mediated spaces whose existence is relatively transparent and open, that allow groups of individuals to attend and contribute to a similar set of computer-mediated interpersonal interactions*”. However, it is necessary to divide the transparency and openness of the community itself from that relating to membership. In actual fact, if openness is a strong point of communities in general, today-researchers and scholars have been able to confirm that there could be disparate levels of categorization for membership openness in OCs (Plant, 2004). Hence, OCs are not necessarily transparent and open, considering their membership.

Each of these meanings is based on a specific discipline’s viewpoint (sociology, management and psychology), while Lee et al. (2003), driven by the ambition to create a more concentrated and monitored investigation in the information system field, took it many steps further, combining a total of nine definitions and achieving the following results: OCs are “*cyberspaces supported by computer-based information technology, centered upon communication and interaction of participants to generate member-driven content, resulting in a relationship being built*”. The process of creating and developing, according to Iriberry and Leroy (2008), corroborates the complex entanglements surrounding the contexts of OCs.

Other authors, on the other hand, trying to avoid the main problem of definition, have preferred to concentrate on highlighting the main characteristics of OCs. Moreover, here Whittaker et al. (1997, p. 27) claim that the main attributes of OCs can be summarized as:

- *Members have a shared goal, interest, need, or activity that provides the primary reason for belonging to the community.*
- *Members engage in repeated, active participation and there are often intense interactions, strong emotional ties and shared activities occurring between participants.*
- *Members have access to shared resources and there are policies for determining access to those resources.*
- *Reciprocity of information, support and services between members is important.*
- *There is a shared context of social conventions, language, and protocols.*

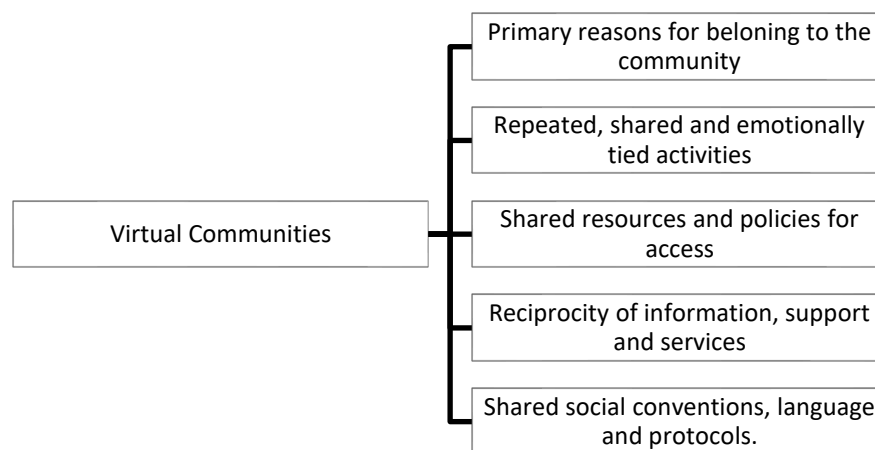


Figure 1 - OC Attributes (Whittaker et al., 1997)

Following the same logic, but more interested in the marketing implications of OCs once they enter into relationships with companies and business organizations, Porter (2004) has identified five essential parameters for the detection of these phenomena, which he called the “5Ps”:

- **Purpose:** the content of the interaction is the center of the entangled network of relationships emerging in OC contexts. This concept shares significant overlaps with the reference to “*discourse focus*” (Jones & Rafaeli, 2000, p. 218) but it also recalls the strong

emphasis that Preece and Maloney-Krichmar (2003) place in defining the purpose as key component for designing the sociability of OCs.

- **Place:** the extent to which interactions are mediated through technology. Here, the author exploits the contribution to distinguish at least two different categories of OCs, namely virtual communities, referring to groups existing only in virtual spaces, and hybrid communities, referring to groups that utilize technology to enrich their physical relationship. Actually, many authors recognized the convergence (or blurring) between the two definitions (Lazar et al., 1999).
- **Platform:** the interactions can be designed as either synchronous or asynchronous. The first design method recalls features of face-to-face interaction, which is the most recognizable form of synchronous communication, while the second is worth when simultaneous participation cannot be guaranteed or when it is necessary for members to take some time to understand and formulate the interactions (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003).
- **Population interaction structure:** despite many taxonomies have been developed to outline the pattern of interaction among participants to OCs, three research streams have attempted to address such complex task. The first treats OCs as “computer-supported social network” supporting social ties among members (Garton et al., 1997). The second treats OCs as small groups, where interactions need to be encouraged by a sponsor. The third treat OCs as virtual publics, as mentioned before (Jones & Rafaeli, 2000).
- **Profit model:** this feature highlights whether an OC is able to provide economic return on interactions or not, which is based on Krishnamurthy’s (2003) categorization of OCs as enablers, trading/sharing and website feature of corporations.

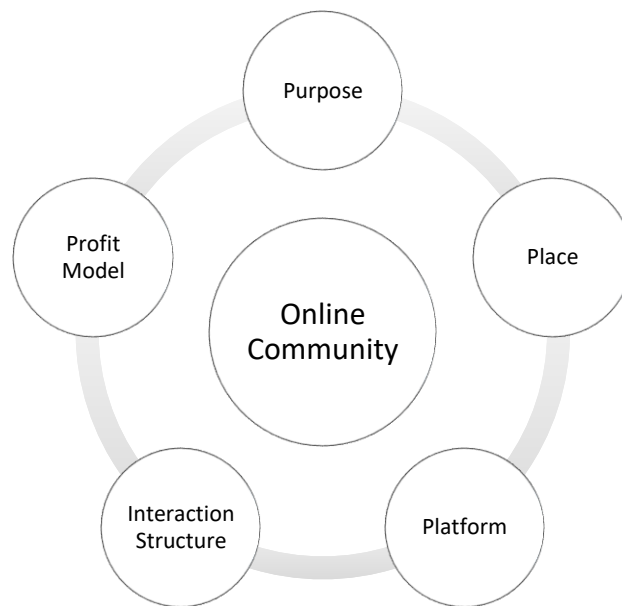


Figure 2 - 5Ps of OCs (Porter, 2004)

Among the various minor definitions that have been developed by the authors during the 2000s, it will be necessary to mention that of Sproull and Arriaga (2007), which defines OCs as “*voluntary members whose primary goal is member and collective welfare, whose members share a common interest, experience, or conviction and positive regard for other members, and who interact with one another and contribute to the collectivity primarily over the Net*”, stressing the members’ intentions and motivations joining in OCs.

Differently, Wenger (1998), who is considered the father of the stream of research about communities of practices and many knowledge management theories, stated that the process of learning strengthens the ties that bind individuals together, defining OCs as “*people with a shared interest who engage in collective learning that creates bonds between them*”.

From a philosophical and purely cognitive point of view, the issue of OCs has only recently been addressed by Arfini et al. (2019), who defined the OCs as “*digitally-encoded collaborative distribution of diverse types of information into an environment performed by agents to aid thinking and reasoning about a target domain*”, where the target domain is split between virtual domain, referring to the set of tools and methods people utilized to participate in OCs, and actual external domain, referring to offline agents exploiting online platforms.

Generalizing all these definitions listed above is certainly necessary to understand and facilitate the recurring attributes of OCs. Until now, the formulation of more or less precise, accurate and accredited definitions has not produced the desired results, only creating redundancy between authors and attributes. Instead, what was profitable in the development of different definitions was that they were able to highlight different disciplinary implications the central topic implies and proposes. It will be therefore useful to simplify and recall all the fundamental characteristics and pillars of OCs that have been stressed in all the definitions analyzed before:

- **People:** individuals are the first pillars that support OCs (Preece, 2000). There would be no content to debate or share if there were no community members. While not a particularly exhaustive feature to describe OCs, as people are also one of the basic components of groups in general (George & Jones, 2012), individuals and participants are the foundations on which every community, whether physical or virtual, is founded.
- **Interaction:** the second component is inextricably tied to the incentive that drives members and people to connect in the network, which entails sharing of interests, cultivating passions, eagerness of knowledge, and much more (Porter, 2004; Koh et al., 2003). Members' ties should be strong enough to support and sustain the formation of exchanges and relationships (Wenger, 1998).
The object of these transactions is extremely arbitrary, completely manageable by the participants, as they decide which community to participate in.
- **Technology:** on the other hand, the third component implies a clear boundary between OCs and physical communities, where connectedness is maintained by more or less advanced technologies, methodologies and tools (Rheingold, 1993; Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; Jones & Rafaeli, 2000). Mere technology, moreover, would not be a factor capable of distinguishing between traditional groups and communities. In fact, nowadays, every type of group must rely on some forms of digital communication in order to be successful.

2.2 Types of OCs

Immediately after the confusing search for a common and exhaustive definition of OCs, scholars coming from the most disparate backgrounds tried to develop models and classifications capable of differentiating different types of OCs from each other (Iriberri & Leroy, 2008).

According to Äkkinen (2005), OCs can be divided into two macro areas:

- Content-based classifications: where the OCs are categorized on the basis of the characteristics of the members and their interactions
- Revenue-based classifications: where OCs are categorized according to the revenue model from which they are sustained.

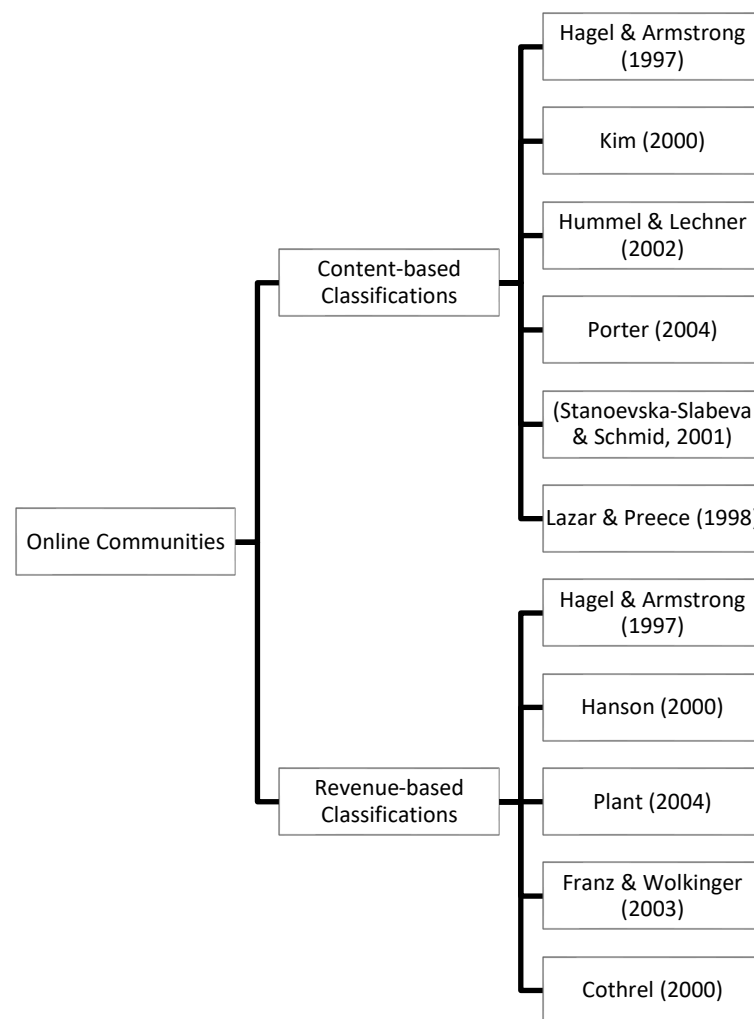


Figure 3 - Literature Review for Community Types

2.2.1 Content-based classifications

Starting from the content-based classifications, Hagel and Armstrong (1997) identified the presence of a distinction between consumer-focused communities and B2B communities. In a consumer context, OCs may form around three dimensions: *geographic*, considering physical places surrounding the commonalities of interests, *demographic*, focusing on participants' individual characteristics, and *topical*, including the variety of objects of interests shared among members. In a B2B context, instead, OCs may develop as four categories: *vertical industry*, for software developers, *functional*, where members share functional occupation (such as marketing or HR), *geographic* OCs, supporting the satisfaction of locals' needs, and *business category*, where the orientation is towards the satisfactions of specific company's types.

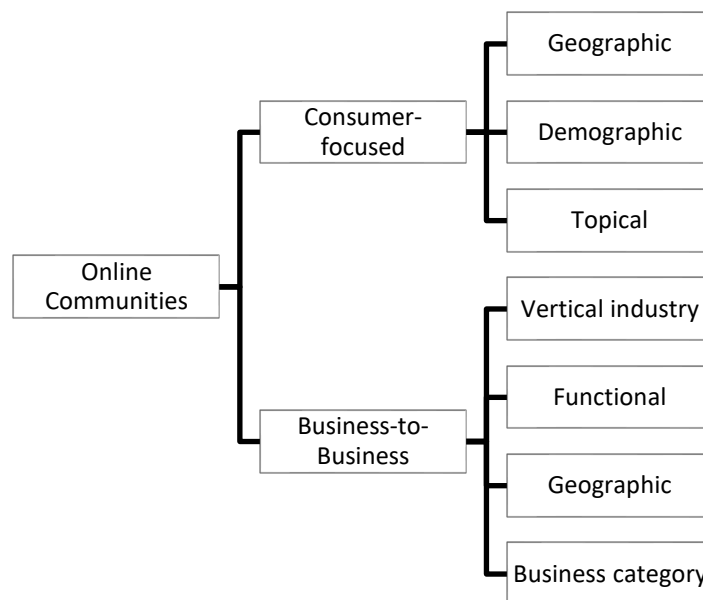


Figure 4 - Community Types (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997)

The four categories mentioned are partially recalled by Kim (2000), stating that OC types may vary in terms of geographic, demographic, topical *characteristics*, or in terms of *activities*.

At the same time, Hagel & Armstrong (1997) recognized the existence of four additional non-exclusives typologies, namely: *interest*, *relationship*, *fantasy* and *transaction*.

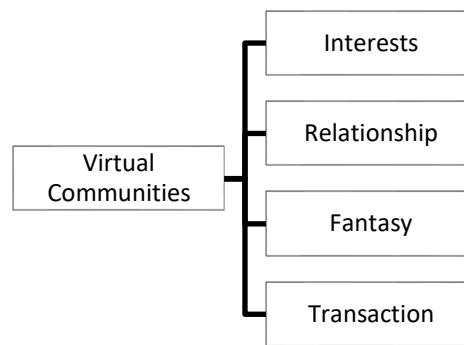


Figure 5 - Community Types (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997)

This classification shares significant attributes with the one developed by Hummel and Lechner (2002) few years later thanks to a review of 50 OCs, where different genres were outlined as *games or interests, knowledge, B2B, B2C and C2C*.

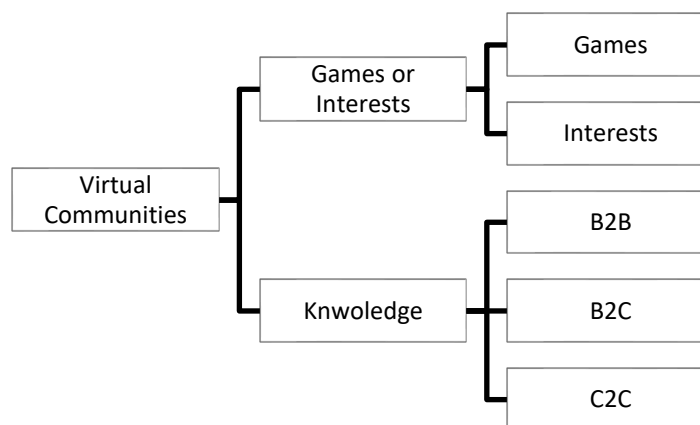


Figure 6 - Community Types (Hummel & Lechner, 2002)

Porter (2004) instead distinguished OCs primarily based on their establishment. On a first level, OCs can differ as *member-initiated* and *organization-sponsored*. Secondly, OCs are characterized by different orientation of the relationship occurring within the OC. In fact, member-initiated OCs are usually associated with the fostering of *social* or *professional* relations among participants, while within organization-sponsored OCs *commercial, nonprofit* and *governmental* relationships may occur.

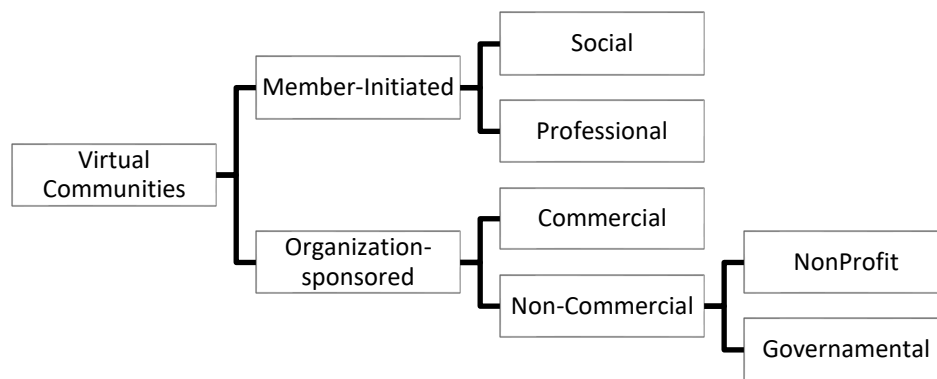


Figure 7 - Community Types (Porter, 2004)

Another content-based classification that will be addressed was developed by Stanoevska-Slabeva and Schmid (2001), and this is perhaps the most complete and comprehensive. Here, the authors grouped OCs in four categories: *discussion*, posing emphasis on the sharing of information; *task oriented*, concerning the intrinsic level of cooperation to achieve mutual goals; *virtual worlds*, replicating reality in virtual and digital contexts; *hybrid*, which may result as a mix or coexistence of the prior categories. Within these first level categories, few sub-communities might be outlined. Within the discussion on OCs, the authors recognized at least four classes, namely: *P2P communication*, where many relationships are sustained to receive social support, *topic oriented*, where discussions are governed by central arguments, *communities of practices*, emerging in business organization through the process of learning and creating specific know-hows, and *indirect discussion*, where interaction happen in an indirect way (ie. Amazon's reviews). Within task/goal-oriented OCs, the authors evidenced three subgroups: *design communities*, where members can cooperate for the development of new products, *learning communities*, and *transaction communities*, through e-commerce platforms. For virtual worlds, instead, they just added that virtual worlds consist in the method of interaction experienced by gamers, often represented by avatars.

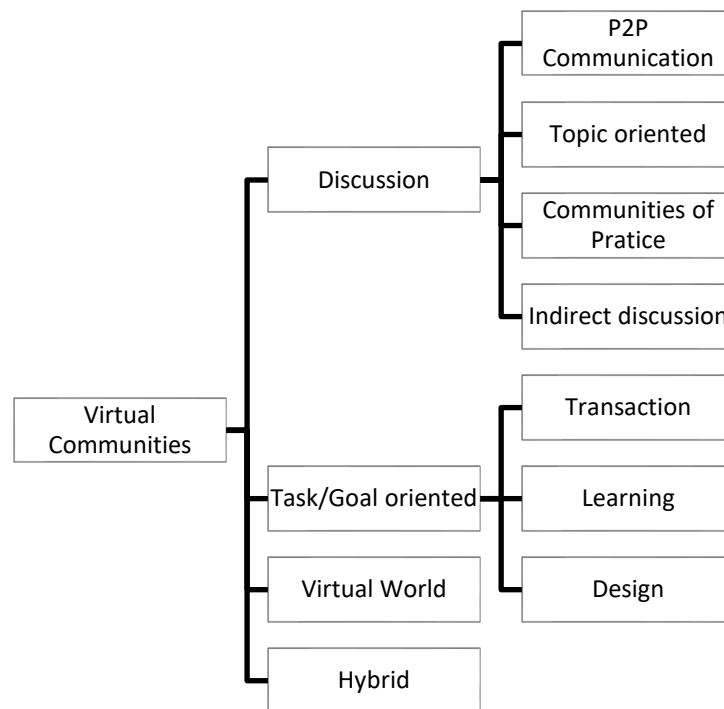


Figure 8 - Community Types (Stanoevska-Slabeva & Schmid, 2001)

Differently, Lazar & Preece (1998, p. 85-86) contributed within this research stream by identifying four useful dimensions for the categorization of OCs: attributes, supporting software, relation to physical communities and boundedness. These factors certainly share some overlaps with the aforementioned 5Ps by Porter (2004). OC *attributes* refer to typologies of objectives, activities and interactions an OC may display, but to the set of norms and procedures adopted for social regulation. Concerning the *supporting software*, the authors evidenced a multiplicity of methods for the application of software, which causes the distinction between e-mail lists, newsgroups, chats or meeting rooms. The *relationship with physical communities* can vary from OCs that require instant interaction to those that still require face-to-face interaction, which affect consistently *the level of boundedness* required by sustaining inter-communitarian interactions, ranging from tight to loose bounds.

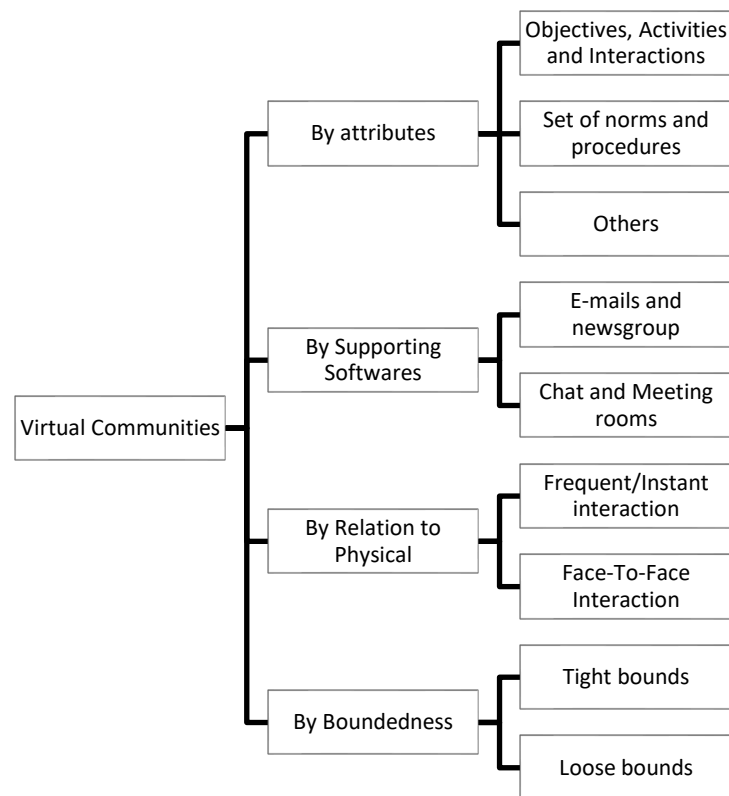


Figure 9 - Community Types (Lazar & Preece, 1998)

2.2.2 Revenue-based classifications

The classification of OCs based on their content is useful, as it is able to give a perception of the activities and characteristics carried out within the different categories of OCs.

However, this is not enough. The OCs, in fact, must support themselves in some way, and it is for this reason that an analysis on the revenue models that support the OC's structure is certainly necessary.

As a matter of fact, Hagel and Armstrong themselves (1997) expand on their own contribution to the research stream, categorizing the OCs based on the sustaining method chosen by community's organizers and managers. Here, different techniques could be adopted: *subscription fees* consist in the periodic payment in exchange of the participation in the OC; *usage fees* refer to the connection between utilization and payment, in which the more a member consumes, the greater the payment required; while *members fees* are exploited by organizers in order to price

particularly rare or elaborate contents, rather than when members perform particularly sensitive actions.

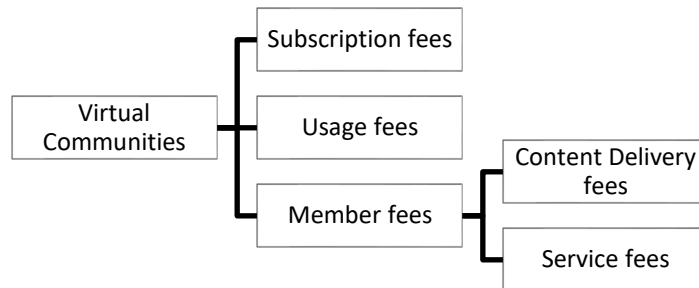


Figure 10 - Community Types (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997)

A further division of the OCs was developed by Hanson (2000) based on their profit generation, distinguishing primarily between *provider-based* communities, supported by *sponsorship, retail alliances, exclusive deals* or *advertised banners*, and *user-based* communities, supported thanks to the conversion of participation in *products and sales, subscription fees* or *pay-per-view* transactions.

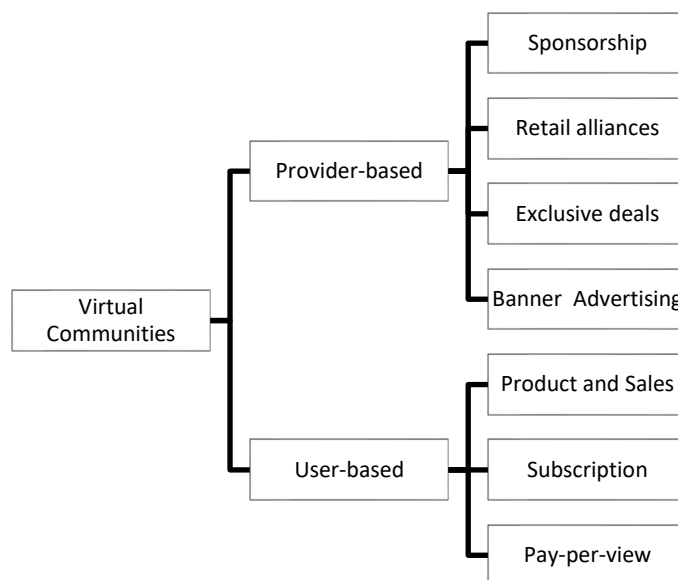


Figure 11 - Community Types (Hanson, 2000)

An additional taxonomy to mention is the one developed by Plant (2004), in which OCs are classified according to three different variables, namely, the level of regulation, the profit orientation, and the openness of the OC. The *level of regulation* of the OCs concerns the social control within OCs. If participants are required to follow codes of conduct within the common spaces, the OC is *regulated*. By contrast, if the participants are free to display their behavior, the OC is *unregulated*. The *profit orientation* explains whether a *for-profit* or *not-for-profit* business model sustains a specific OC. Instead, the *level of openness* within an OC is defined based on how members access it, varying from *open* to *private* OCs.

From the combination of these three dimensions, despite not providing examples for every single class, Plant (2004) highlighted five different categories of OC.

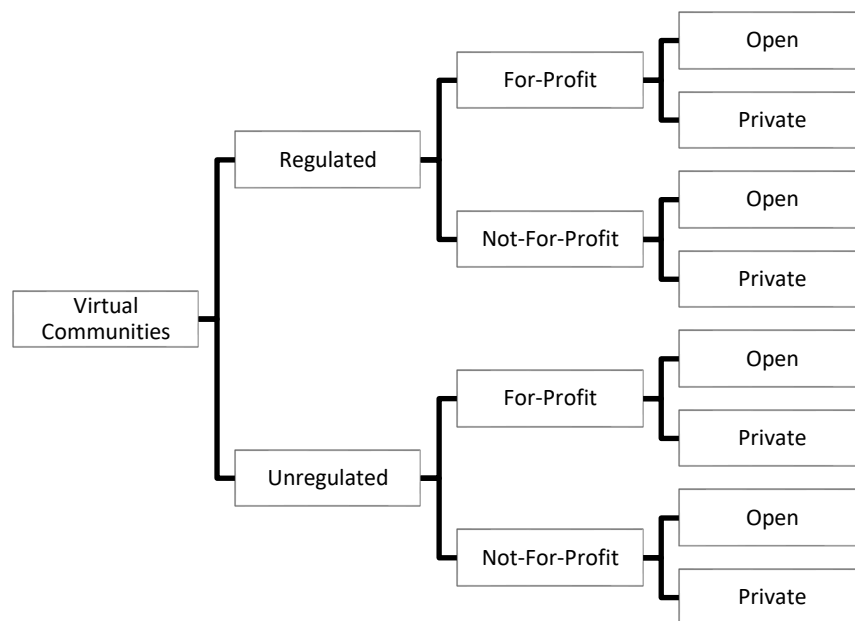


Figure 12 - Community Types (Plant, 2004)

Furthermore, Franz and Wolkingner (2003) focused their research on dividing revenue models for OCs in *standalone* or *add-on*. The first typology is characterized by OCs utilizing *advertising*, *subscriptions*, *e-commerce* or *other sources* to generate financial resources internally and autonomously, while the second typology usually exploits *integrating customers* to detect innovation and ideas, *marketing research* to collect data from surveys and questionnaires about

usage and consumption within the OC, and *developing products*, achieving a mass customization strategy, in order to generate indirect revenues for the company organizing the community.

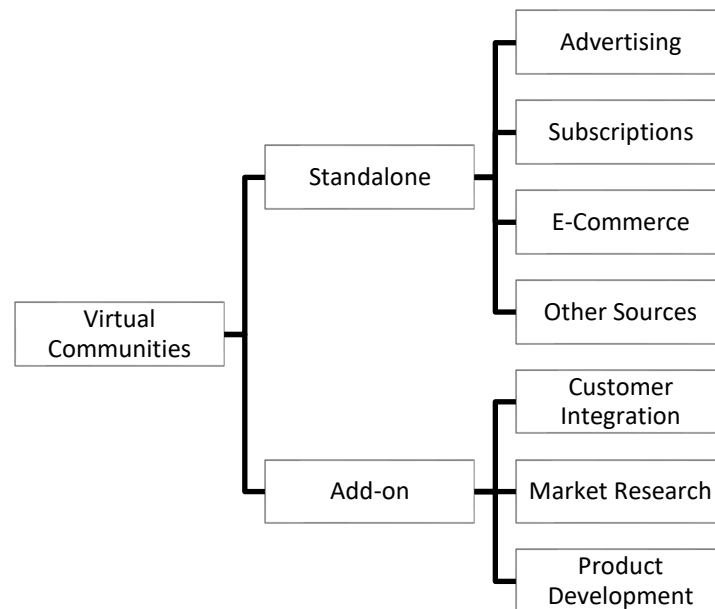


Figure 13 - Community Types (Franz & Wolking, 2003)

The model just described shares the primary subdivision with the classes of objectives theorized by Cothrel (2000) for OCs, who however analyzes different goals for standalone and add-on OCs. In particular, build relationship, increase efficiency, innovation and attempt to acquire new customers are orientation, which may be associated to *add-on* OCs, while the direct revenue models are usually applied in *standalone* OCs.

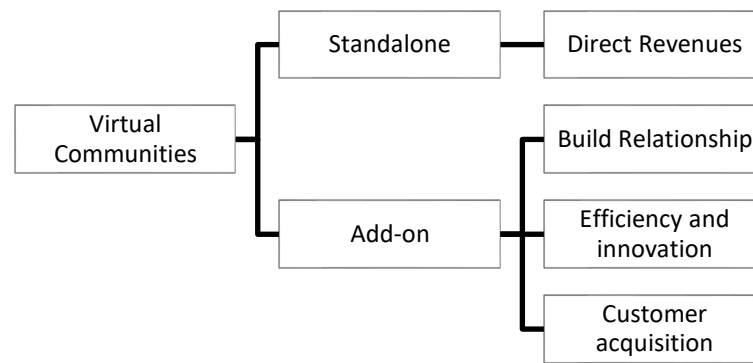


Figure 14 - Community Types (Cothrel, 2000)

To conclude the discussion on the types and classifications of OCs, it is necessary to highlight that, once again, the vastness of models theorized by different authors does not facilitate the understanding of the OCs phenomenon. Despite this, however, some simple and exhaustive concepts may be recalled here, allowing a more fluid comprehension of the types of OCs.

- Several classifications of a specific OC can coexist or overlap at the same time (Äkkinen, 2005).
- A first distinction between content-based and revenue-based classification represents a valid alternative to approximate the complexity of literature (Äkkinen, 2005).
- OCs can be distinguished between those that contain relationships between consumers, or those that contain relationships between companies and consumers (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; Hummel & Lechner, 2002; Porter, 2004).
- OCs may differ in the type of access they allow their members (Plant, 2004; Lazar & Preece, 1998).
- OCs may differ based on the payments required from their members for participation, access or consumption of content, as well as in the revenue model by which they are sustained (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; Hanson, 2000; Cothrel, 2000; Franz & Wolking, 2003).
- OCs evolve over time, adapting to a variety of conditions. For this reason, during its life, the same OC could be classified differently (Plant, 2004).

2.3 OCs life cycles

OCs, as well as products, companies and traditional groups, evolve in stages (Iriberry & Leroy, 2008), as the needs of the members change over time. Thus, those who manage the structure of the OCs must consider such dynamic (Preece, 2000).

Torres (2020), whose research focused on shared leisure activities in online-to-offline interactions, intelligently suggested applying the five stages theory of group development outlined by Tuckman and Jensen (1977), where groups seem to form, storm, norm and perform. *Forming* refers to the phase when an OC is established and created, while *storming* concerns the arising of conflict within the community, which is initially solved during the *norming* stage thanks to the formation of common ground to manage and finally in the *performing* phase, when OCs achieve mutual comprehension, working efficiently.

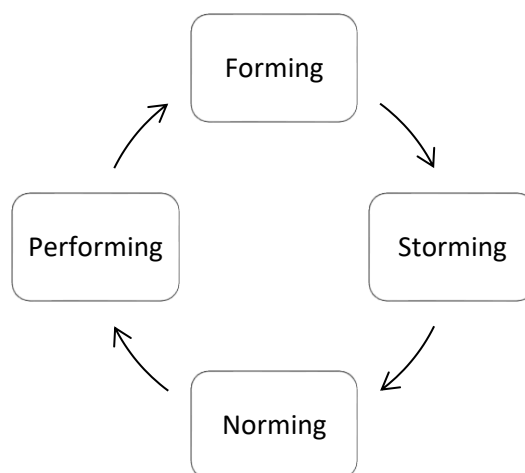


Figure 15 - Community Life Cycle (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Torres, 2020)

A slight deviation from the more classical classifications that have been proposed so far is represented by the research stream about knowledge management, began by Wenger's definition of community of practice (1998), which is used to treat OCs as an intermediate step in the evolution from commonplaces to communities of practice (Zhang & Watts, 2008, p. 67), where OCs represents "*commonplaces with some additional characteristics, particularly in terms of supporting interactions and a minimal level of identity development*". These scholars sustained

that, as a pyramid, knowledge is created only in *online communities of practices*, while in traditional *online communities* knowledge is just shared through ongoing discussions, which differentiate such communities from *online commonplaces*, given that they are not built to sustain relationships between participants.

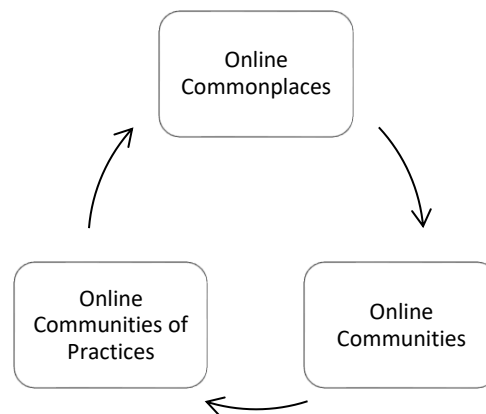


Figure 16 - Community Life Cycle (Zhang & Watts, 2008)

Differently, *potential*, *coalescing*, *maturing*, *stewardship*, and *transformation* represent the five stages outlined by Wegner et al. (2002) in the development of OCs, while *starting* the OC, *encouraging* early online contact, and *moving* to a self-sustaining interactive environment are the three steps suggested by Andrews (2002).

In the first step, OCs organizers attempt to build reputation through alliances, deliver focused contents and implement outreach transitional events. In the second step, OCs managers are required to carefully construct policies and guarantee privacy to members, while intertwining contents and discussions, understanding member search directories, and utilizing meetings to incentivize volunteerism. In the last step, managers should facilitate member's autonomy through private discussion and information sharing, while ensuring an appropriate reward for the contribution.

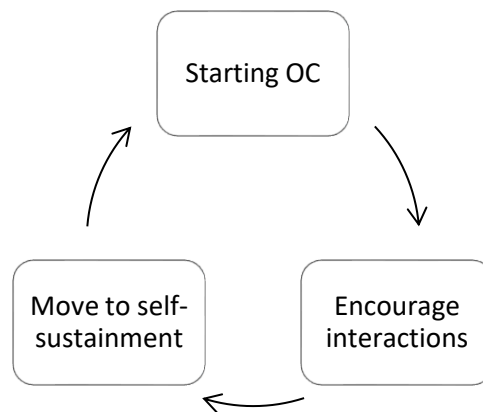


Figure 17 - Community Life Cycle (Andrews, 2002)

Iriberry & Leroy (2008) labelled many life cycles models, exploiting one of the most renowned formulations, that of Ahituv and Neumann (1982), which divides the life cycle of OCs into five phases in order to show how each stage has its own set of success indicators.

During the first phase, namely *inception*, people's desires for knowledge, contribution, entertainment, or interaction inspire the construction of an OC. Then, once all the technological components are in site, the *creation* of the online community can start, and the initial set of users begin to engage and raise awareness inviting new members to join the OC (Malhotra et al., 1997). When participants begin to utilize common languages, to appoint and self-select members to different roles, where some members may lead conversations and other may dispense support, it means that the OC has entered the *growth* stage. The necessity for a more direct and involved structure with regulations, moderations, procedures, rewards for contents, and discussion becomes apparent when the OC reaches its *maturity*. Within this phase, the renewal of members may cause modifications in the organizational structure of the OC (Nonnecke & Preece, 2001). Unfortunately, OCs that do not adapt to these changes or do not maintain members' interests over time may rush toward *death*.

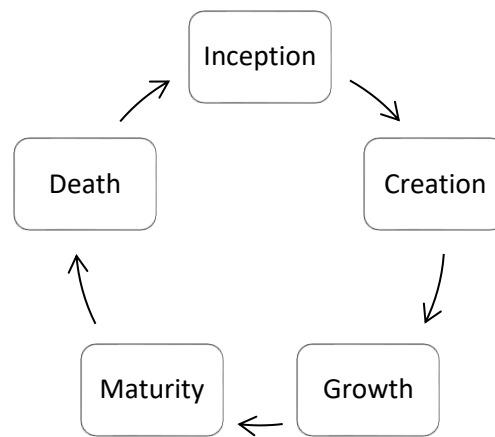


Figure 18 - Community Life Cycle (Iriberry & Leroy, 2008)

It is impossible, however, to untie the changes of the social communities from those of the entire network, as they appear, disappear, merge and divide thanks to the turnover of members by which they are characterized (Saganowski et al., 2015). However, it is recognized that an OC needs a minimum number of contributions and contributors, called *critical mass*, to survive (Markus, 1990; Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003). The power to decide which steps are necessary to reach critical mass is retained by the organizers and managers of the OCs, as well as by the members themselves who define OC's identity. Certainly, the critical mass, capable of predicting the success and failure of an OC, is reached only if precedent factors are satisfied. These factors are different for every single stage, as in each of them the wishes, desires and needs of the members change significantly (Iriberry & Leroy, 2008).

3 PARTICIPATING IN OCs

As previously stated, the theories and models that enrich our comprehension of online OCs derived from a wide number of disciplines. As a result, there is a big body of pertinent material. Hence, this master thesis needs to be focused on topics considered relevant from a managerial point of view, which may influence the identification of a set of best practices for community management.

First and foremost, the participation of members in the OCs will need to be examined in order to find answers to the following questions:

- What are the motivational drivers that induce the participation of members in OCs?
- How does social control occur within the digital contexts surrounding OCs?
- To what extent and how do members of the OC affect its success or failure?

First of all, not surprisingly, the basic reasons why individuals enter OCs are embedded in the very definition of OC, which is the possibility of sharing experiences, opinions, thoughts exploitation of technologies as a method of mediation of interactions (Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; Rheingold, 1993; Lee et al., 2003).

Secondly, OCs are usually composed of a wide range of consumers possessing divergent interests and goals. To proficiently handle these difficulties, arising from heterogeneity, triggers a batch of activities that many authors defined as “*social control*”, which occurs through the adoption of disparate governance structures within OCs (Sibai et al., 2015). However, these activities are partially inspired and fairly reflected in social control practices within traditional groups, in which it is exercised through the formulation of rules, roles and procedures (George & Jones, 2012).

Finally, the definition of success or failure of an OCs is determined by multiple factors, often inconsistent and incoherent with each other. According to this point of view, it is possible to highlight different possibilities of growth and success for an OC, which depend on - and vary according to - the phase of the life cycle the OC is experiencing (Iriberry & Leroy, 2008). In fact, several attempts, more or less exhaustive, have been conducted to identify the factors capable of predicting and influencing the effectiveness of an OC (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003), as well as of developing concrete measures (Preece J. , 2000; Matthews et al., 2013; Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003; Cunha et al., 2019).

3.1 The role of members

Before discussing how members can rank within OCs, it is useful to provide a general overview of role theory. Turner (1990, p. 87), one of the first scholars to deal with the subject, defined roles as "*comprehensive pattern of behaviors and attitudes constituting a strategy for coping with a recurrent set of social situations*", therefore they strongly highlight their substantial contribution in the management and organization of social contexts. Among the various authors who have elaborated on this definition, Lynch (2007) is among the first to clarify the matter of expectations in the application of the role concept, which emerges as a set of normative and predictable behaviors. As a result, the exploitation of role theories in OCs is strongly consistent with the application of theories to traditional, social and organizational groups that literature has dealt with in recent years.

In defining the contribution of members, this research will remain consistent with the three research streams characterized by Veloutsou & Black (2020), which appear to be the most comprehensive among those developed by scholars, with an intent to expand the range of application from brand OCs to generalized OCs.

- The first and largest stream simplifies the responsibilities that members play by classifying brand community members as either passive (the ones who lurk), or active (the ones who contribute on a regular basis). Although this first difference is simple, it is still useful to differentiate between these two types of behavior within the contexts of OCs. For example, strategies and metrics have been developed to estimate how to stimulate the active contribution of lurkers, or how a large number of lurkers does not permit success for OCs (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003).
- According to the second research stream, OCs possess power structure (sort of hierarchy), where members perform a variety of activities attributable not only to their general participation level, but also to specific interests and areas (Kozinets, 1999). Unfortunately, harmony between these interests has not yet been achieved among the various authors who individually stress a different categorization, as previously discussed in the argumentation concerning OCs typologies.
- According to the latest studies, these functions may be even more complicated and varied, and they cannot be defined using a small number of parameters. As a result, a very

populated batch of roles are characterized, differing from each other in the smallest details, but making an empirical analysis extremely complex.

3.1.1 Activity-based Classifications

A key parameter for the harmonization of those different definitions and classifications, which has been adopted by a variety of authors, is the categorization of OC members based on their contribution activity. According to this logic, Lurkers were initially defined as “*members that prefer not to participate publicly*” (Preece J. , 2007, p. 148). In practice, lurkers read messages, but do not respond or publicly share their opinions. Actually, the dichotomy between active members and lurkers had already been developed by Preece et al. (2001), comparing the latter to “good for nothing free-riders”. It remains necessary to highlight how lurking is normal, representing a valuable behavior in online contexts (Edelmann, 2013).

Anyway, despite recognizing the problem of OCs when it comes to the conversion of lurkers into active contributors, other authors are convinced that the mass of individuals lurking in OCs, which are estimated to be up to the 90% of the whole online population (Katz, 1999), empirically consists in what the common sense considers “the community” (Beaudouin & Velkovska, 1999). Furthermore, according to Arthur (2006), the “*1% rule*” describes the proportion of lurkers on the total amount of users within an OC as around 90%, while the remaining portion is split between the 9% of those who edit and interact with the contents and the 1% of those who actively and creatively produce content.

In addition to that, Preece et al. (2001) have identified five plausible reasons behind lurkers' tendency to avoid contribution:

- *Lurkers do not need to post.* Many of them just look for information, avoiding being engaged into reciprocal communication.
- *Lurkers are still learning about the group.* It might seem reassuring, assuming that some members may change attitude over time.
- *Lurkers thought they are helpful.* Many lurkers perceive their activity as contributory as the others who post and share, mainly because they have nothing to say, or they just prefer to avoid replication and redundancy of information.

- *Lurkers cannot make the software work.* There was evidence about technical problems associated with posting, including situations in which members receive too many messages and notification to respond, they do not possess the capability to post or they do not have enough time to respond.
- *Lurkers do not like the group.* This may happen when groups are closed, treating new members poorly in respect to the seniors, but also when the members are closed, considering embarrassments and discomforts emerging from posting, but also the desire to maintain anonymity.

Lai and Chen (2014) clarify more substantial and basic difference between *posters*, who mainly produce contents within an OC (Ridings et al., 2006), and *lurkers*, especially in the field of knowledge sharing.

However, lurking is also relevant beyond the sphere of individuals. In fact, this phenomenon concerns companies and business organizations eager of receiving feedback from their community, where messages coming from the OC may be translated into suggestions for fostering innovation, without activating a direct communication channel with the community members. (Tietz & Herstatt, 2002; Moon & Sproull, 2001). If members are lurkers, this translates into a passive community, which is counter-productive from a company's perspective.

Sun et al. (2014), stressing the possibility of a change in attitude of members over time, developed some best practices capable of inducing lurkers to contribute publicly. This research proposal has been defined as "de-lurking", and it concerns four steps:

- *External stimuli and rewards* through both tangible and intangible assets, exploiting the findings deriving from the social exchange theory (Constant et al., 1994).
- Follow-up with *usability improvements* to guarantee the most efficient user experience and user-friendly interface while interacting with other members (Nonnecke et al., 2004).
- *Provide information* to community leaders that encourages them to participate in-group activities, which helps to establish a pro-sharing attitude and strengthens users' dedication (Sun et al., 2014).
- *Provide guidance for newcomers*, exploiting the directions from senior members, allowing newbies to achieve familiarity with the OC as rapid as possible (Du, 2006).

Furthermore, Franz and Wolking (2003) examined the behavior of active users with *lead users*, who are regarded as "*on the leading edge*" of technology, demanding high advantages from innovations that meet their needs. They discovered disparities in the conduct of standard and lead users. For instance, lead users are more likely to pay for common community applications and features, since they are keener on pleasure, entertainment and enjoyment than content *per se*.

The distinction between these two types of members takes on particular relevance in the context of business organizations, especially during the process of developing an Online Competitive Advantage, where lead users may generate and support innovation for companies, providing valuable insights on the market and the industry not yet perceived by the firms themselves (Fisher, 2018).

This happens because lead users are traditionally recognized as having an extraordinary ability to live experiences in a highly competent way, albeit carrying their interests independently, while at the same time, allowing them, unlike standard users, to develop a strong problem-solving orientation (Pitta & Fowler, 2005). The effectiveness of this collaborative approach between companies and lead users translates into innovations, which averagely possess a higher level of acceptance by the marketplace (Herstatt & von Hippel, 1992), mainly because the interaction with OCs enables business organizations to better screen ideas before actually developing and implementing them, or to sponsor an OC by communicating through lead users.

To conclude the section on activity-based classifications of OCs members, the following scheme can be useful for understanding the discussed distinctions and features.

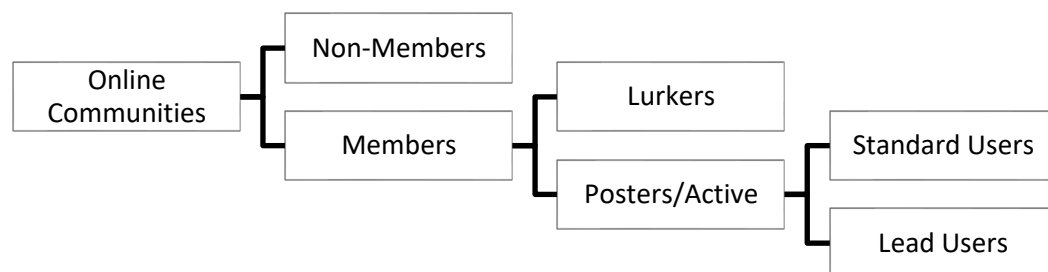


Figure 19 - Activity-based classification of OC members

3.1.2 Engagement-based Classification

The criterion with which Veloutsou and Black (2020) suggest the presence of this second research stream regards the assumption that the level of engagement impacts the activities and the role of OCs members. In practical terms, members who are engaged differently act differently.

This is an extremely important and compelling concept drawing from the field of psychological marketing, which has found wide acceptance among authors, who have indulged in categorizing the roles of members according to their level of interest or engagement.

Based on the extent of self-centrality of consumer interaction and social connection, theoretical analysis suggests that members might be classified as *devotees*, *insiders*, *tourists*, or *minglers* (Kozinets, 1999). *Tourists* are those who do not have strong social connection to the community and are just interested in the carried activities in a casual or passing way. *Minglers*, on the other hand, embed strong social links but are only tangentially involved in the major or focal consumption activity. *Devotees*, instead, are the polar opposite: they possess a significant interest and excitement for the focal activity, but they have weak social ties to the OC. *Insiders*, then, are people who sustain deep individual and interpersonal ties to the consumption experience.

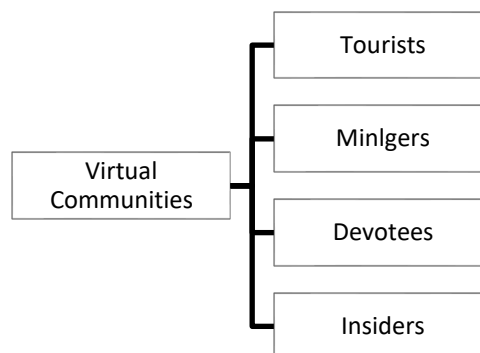


Figure 20 - Engagement-based classification of OC members (Kozinets, 1999)

A similar approach with a partially consistent classification was theorized by Pongsakornrungsilp (2010), who investigated OCs from the point of view of the resources invested, provided and received by members in the online co-consuming brand community. Anyway, this classification may have slightly interesting implications if applied to the general OC

context. According to this model, *arrivals* are characterized by low investment and low engagement, which results in being “anonymous”, while *strangers* are “nobodies” who invest intensely but rarely, in terms of frequency. Complementarily, *players* maintain a high level of engagement without bonding to intensive resource application, passing to be “someone”. Mature membership is represented by the *resident’s* category, which contains “insiders” embedding high levels of both engagement and resource intensity.

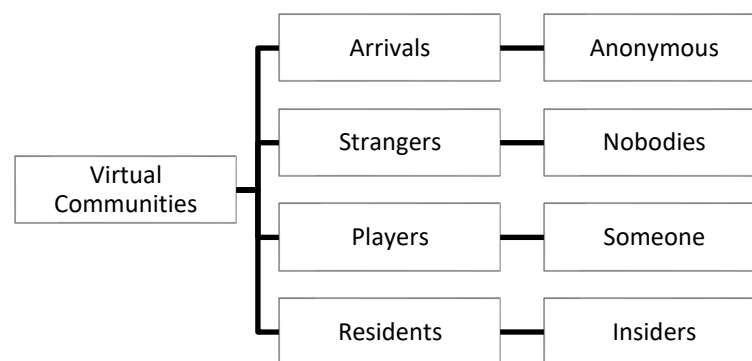


Figure 21 - Engagement-based classification of OC members (Pongsakornrunsilp, 2010)

Another model adapted from the literature on online brand communities that could be stimulating to discuss is the one theorized by Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder (2008), who analyzed the relationship of the participants to the companies, products or brands covered by the community goals. They grouped participants as *enthusiasts*, *users*, *behind-the-scenes*, *not-me* and *community members*. The *behind-the-scenes* members are different from lurkers because they actually contribute, but in a more private way of sharing. In addition, it is interesting to highlight how communication inside an OC may not necessarily reflect the behavior adopted outside the online contexts, as evidenced by the category of *not-me*.

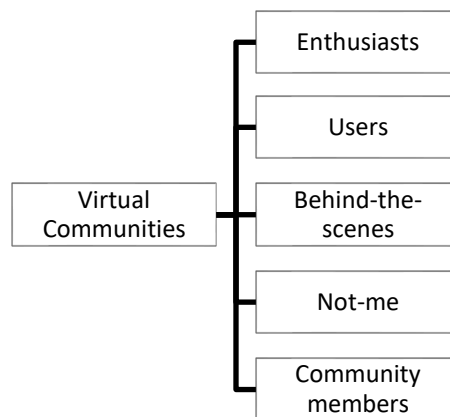


Figure 22 - Engagement-based classification of OC members (Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schröder, 2008)

Furthermore, based on their overall level of involvement, measured in terms of responsiveness to invitations and messages on Facebook through likes, shares and comments, members were fully classified, approximating the category names, to *detachers*, *profiteers*, *companions* and *reliants* (Azar et al., 2016). *Detachers* are found to be associated with “voyeuristic” behaviors, which slightly confirms the distinction between posters and lurkers discussed before. Representing the majority of the population analyzed, *Profiteers* are instead firmly stimulated by reward and information, focusing on promotions and boosts. *Companions*, on the other hand, seemed to respond to invitations rarely, which is coherent with the finding explaining that their prior motivators for joining OCs are personal fun and entertainment. Finally, *reliants* are highly excited and involved within the OC, while they are most likely to become “ambassadors” for the community outside its boundaries.

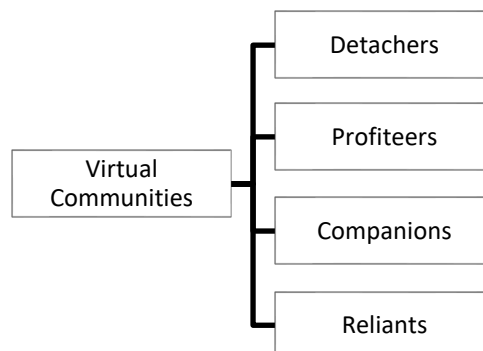


Figure 23 - Engagement-based classification of OC members (Azar et al., 2016)

3.1.3 Multi-dimensional Classifications

According to the latest research, these roles' functions are likely to be even more complicated, numerous and intrinsically diverse. Hence, classifications and definitions exploiting few variables or parameters are inappropriate (Veloutsou & Black, 2020).

Among the main referents of this flow are Fournier and Lee (2009) although they did not examine directly OCs, as was the case with previously described examples, they developed an online tool called "Community readiness Audit" for the massive estimation of the behavior of members of physical communities also applicable to online interaction contexts.

Their analysis assumes particular relevance since the authors were able to predict, as in the case of Harley Davidson, a success based on communities stimulated via Internet. Hence, starting from many similar relevant case studies, they were able to identify 18 different types of activities carried out by members of the communities.

Mentors are those who teach and share their experiences, which are useful to *learners*, who usually enjoy the teachings, exploiting them in their self-improvement process. Mentors are similar to *partners*, who are often involved in activities of encouragement and motivation, without necessarily having the need to teach. The members in charge of spreading the values inside and outside the OC are defined as *storytellers* or *historians*, where the latter deal with the management of memory and heritage, but also with the creation of organizational rites and rituals. A similar function, capable of promoting the contents and interests of the community even outside the members-only network, is certainly the ambassador. *Back-ups* serve as a protective network for members who try new things, entering or exiting the OC. *Heroes* often take responsibility within communitarian contexts, playing the role model, while *celebrities*, who embody all the positive values associated with the OC, act as icons. A *decision-maker* is a member who takes credit for relevant decisions capable of influencing the form, shape and composition of the community. Then there is a large set of activities related to hosting and caring for other members, namely the *providers*, as well as the members in charge of welcoming new ones, namely the *greeters*. The more general driving role around the organizational culture contained in the OC perimeter is played by the *guides*, in collaboration with the *catalysts*, who promote and enable the connection between people and ideas. The traditional distinction between active members and lurkers is translated in this model in the separation between *performers*, who take the spotlight as center of attention doing activities, and *supporters*, who passively participate

in-group activities, as if they were part of an audience. Finally, the activities carried out by all members are recorded and tracked by the *accountants* while the function of recruiting the correct and suitable members for a positive evolution of the community is in charge of the *talent scouts*.



Figure 24 - Multi-dimensional classification of OC members (Fournier & Lee, 2009)

Following the same logic of the aforementioned model, Veloutsou and Black (2020) themselves propose an even more sophisticated categorization of members, which actually results in an elaboration and adjustment of the model proposed by Fournier and Lee (2009). The authors present the role categories according to what they defined as “primary recipient” and the main function members perform within a community context. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that, as previously exposed, the need for the presence of certain activities performed by the members is closely linked to the life cycle of the community itself. That is why, while the community needs mechanisms to manage the recruitment of new members during its creation, the need for control over existing members becomes significant for the preservation of the community itself once it grows and stabilizes. The observations of the analyses were collected measuring interactions of members through notes, interviews, multimedia formats, such as videos and photos, e-mails, Facebook pages, Twitter and websites.

A first primordial distinction adopted by the authors is that between "brand community management roles" and "brand management roles". Within the set of activities carried out under the umbrella of the first category, we find the need to *set up the brand community, manage new members* and *manage existing members*.

Veloutsou and Black (2020) recognized the following roles as being in charge of setting up the community, which emerges in collaboration with the brand’s authority:

- *Pathfinders* initiate the process of converting the brand's vision within the boundaries of emerging communities. At the operational level, their activities are oriented towards encouraging participation, contributing to the stabilization of the organizational and cultural structure of the OC.
- *Corporate liaisons* work with the center to acquire authorization for the community to operate, as well as to provide support, direction, and criticism. The feedback component gradually disappears overtime, as communities independently create value through the online interaction of their members, without requiring authorization from the brand center.
- *Cultural agents* are responsible for developing the scalability as well as for the localization of culture. They select the appropriate set of resources (languages, meanings, symbols and routines) in order to lead participation of the main stakeholders.

- *Storekeepers* are practically controllers who monitor activities by organizing the allocation of resources, capabilities and permissions, from the center to the boundaries of the community, ensuring an adequate and fluent informational flow.

Once the organizational culture is established, translating the brand's vision into resources and meanings specific to the community, a strong desire and need for expansion usually emerges within the group. However, this makes it necessary to appoint roles intended for the pure management of new members.

- *Talent scouts* find, screen and recruit new members with the aim of helping the OC growing under specific areas, carrying out particular tasks or supplying valuable resources. It would not be surprising to observe the attempt to recruit members across different OCs.
- *Greeters* are likely to welcome new joiners, but this may be not so trivial. As a matter of fact, there could be confusion both in the definition of who should host, and in the definition of the new members, in the absence of a tool or parameters allowing them to be easily recognized.
- *Catalysts* act as developers, affirming interactions and linking new joiners to existing members through their necessities. This is a crucial role in achieving a satisfactory level of confidence and effectiveness among the relationships within the OC.
- *Guides* assist members in interpreting the community's structure and culture by offering counsel, translating ideals into particular concepts and behaviors. They are likely to serve as role models, positive examples or influencers for individuals willing to self-control themselves and their own attitude.

On the other hand, after having coordinated a successful integration of new members into the community, the management and development activity of existing members still remains a priority for the long-term survival of the community, sustaining its willingness to make transactions and contributions within it. The following roles are therefore useful for this purpose.

- *Accountants* retain the duties of tracking users' involvement and roles, maintaining an adequate intensity of resources available for the community's purpose. This role often results into a pure information flow maintainer.
- *Mentors* coach and share their knowledge both internally, concerning people management, organization and structure within the OC boundaries, and externally, concerning

efficient methods to advertise and promote the OC, trying to gain credibility and trust for sustaining the long-term growth.

- In approaches aiming at enhancing the engagement and sense of social responsibility between OC members, *partners* are used to offer mutual emotional and motivational assistance.
- It has been chosen to collapse *storytellers and historians*' roles within the same category, because it was not possible to differentiate the two habits of preserving OC memories through organizational rites and rituals or telling stories in online contexts.

The second macro-category of roles oriented to pure brand management is detached from the logic of managing and coordinating the structure and the participants of the OC, in order to embrace issues relating to the strategic development, ranging from the creation of the brand's meaning to the exploitation of internal skills and capabilities.

- *Professional working consumers* apply their education and work experience to manage groups rationally and technically, as well as coordinating institutional communications and public relations. Examples may be graphic designers, IT managers, marketing and communication specialists or copywriters.
- The community's mission is directed by *strategists*, who work on both the internal ties between users and the outward connections via brand identity creation.
- Members who intentionally establish themselves to administer community's spaces and areas play the role of *facilities managers*. For example, they are in charge of selecting tactical platform and investments for achieving the goals set by strategists.

Besides those identified within companies, an additional set of roles dedicated to governing specific interests of some other key external stakeholders have been identified:

- *Boundary spanners* advance proposals on linked community or organizations, ensuring the consistency and coherency between other stakeholders' and internal management's perceptions.
- *Brand liaisons* serve as a bridge for guidance, direction and feedback between OC management and outside stakeholders, operationally leading the flow of materials (information, graphics, icons and advertisings).

- By exposing the OC to various stakeholders, *ambassadors* are likely to contribute to the development of the brand's image and reputation. Although they may obtain personal rewards from such position, the role is limited to promotions and advertises.
- *Celebrities* are external functionaries who are championed by the community, facing the challenging task of representing the OC's culture and values to the external environment.

Finally, the last category developed by Black and Veloutsou (2020) contains roles defined as "self-focused", which concerns those who pursue personal goals, rather than community ones.

- *Performers* are keen on attention from the media, avoiding putting too much effort in sharing and producing contributions.
- *Entourages* usually do not participate during the workflow but show up in social events, joining and gaining benefits from the community's network.

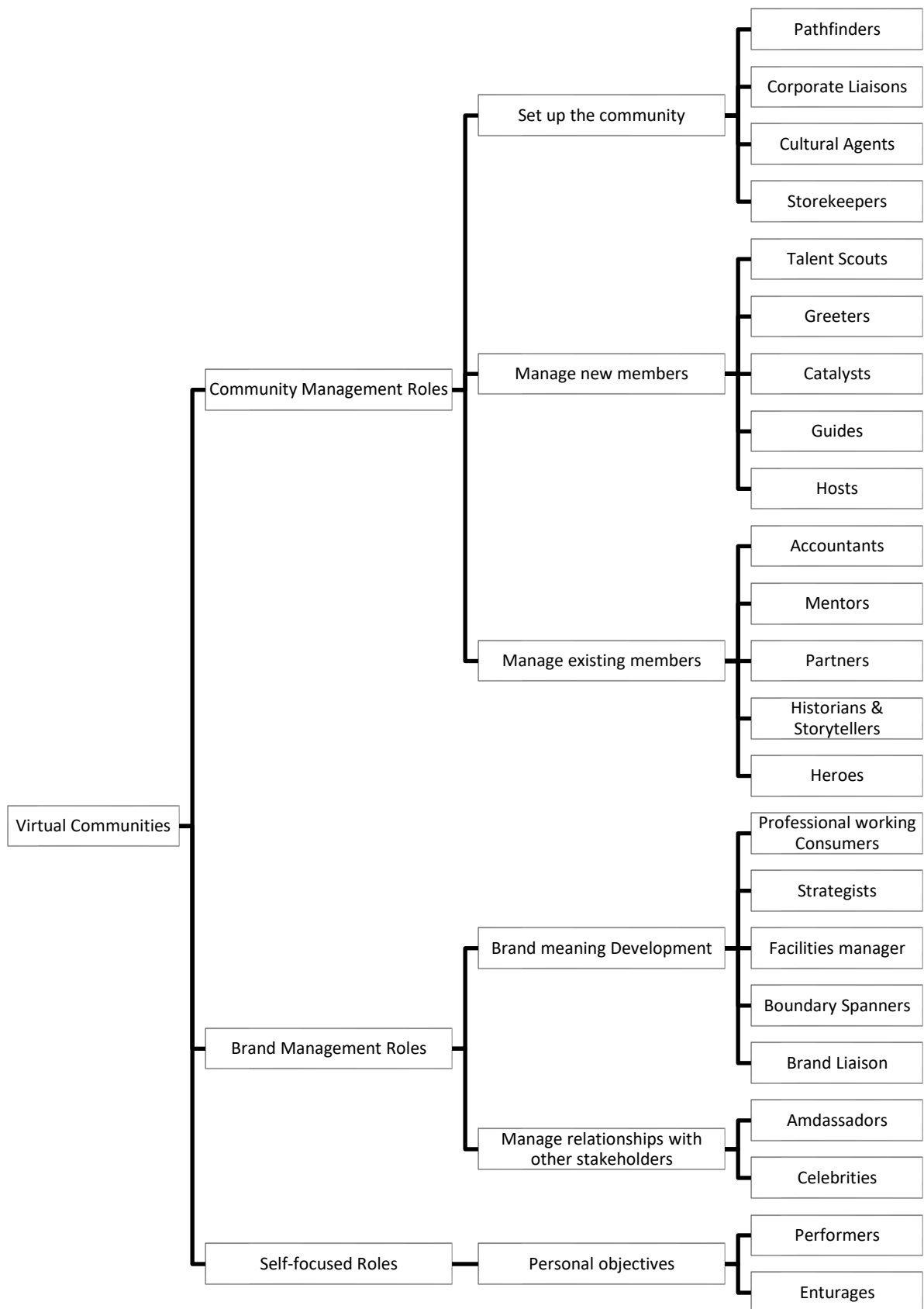


Figure 25 - Multi-dimensional classification of OC members (Black & Veloutsou, 2020)

In addition to the aforementioned classifications, there are several versions developed by the most disparate authors, which, once again, when combined together, allow a more complete understanding of the phenomenon of roles within OCs.

Researchers like Yang et al. (2019), through a loop assessment and appraisal, clustering roles according to their goal, interaction level required, expectation, and contexts, identified the presence of at least 11 types of roles capable of stressing many different characteristics rather than the ones previously analyzed. To simplify, it was decided to create a sub-category that could explain the inclination of the single role to interact privately, publicly, or both.

- Individuals who react to others with sympathy, support, and care are known as *emotional support providers*. In contrast to most users, they are likely to engage in many discussions, participating in a large number of interactions between members.
- *Welcomers* are in charge of responding to newbies, usually exploiting their senior status to help others feeling engaged, assisted or empathized.
- Roles like *informational support provider* are used to offer their knowledge and guidance to others within the forum.
- Many members, as a primary goal for their participation within OCs, choose to disclose their confidential and private information, looking for receiving help and emotional assist. They have been defined *story sharer*. They are the center and the essence of many types of OC, including those related to health.
- Likewise, *informational support seekers* are the ones who are willing to expose themselves in public, asking questions and starting threads and conversations.
- People who utilize private and separate conversations and contacts, avoiding expressing themselves in public in order to keep being engaged and appreciated by other members, are called *private support providers*.
- For many members, defined as *private communicators*, the protection of their personal details is so relevant that they are only willing to converse and maintain relationships privately.
- *All-round experts* participate in a wide range of supportive exchanges, both publicly and privately. They feel empowered by their knowledge or seniority to embed the OC values and to transmit them to the whole OC.
- A *newcomer member* is someone who joins the community and immediately asks questions and seek help. This attitude represents a significant deviation from the standard

behavior of many participants, who are likely to lurk before actively joining conversations and discussions.

- Many users, instead, promote themselves as experts in a specific field, gathering and sharing external information to stimulate discussions or arguments. Because of this, they have been categorized as *knowledge promoters*.
- In private contexts, a person who appears to be the center of the network is known as *private networker*. Despite the fact that they occasionally participate in the discussion board, private networkers talk to a higher number of people in private conversations and communications than other members share.

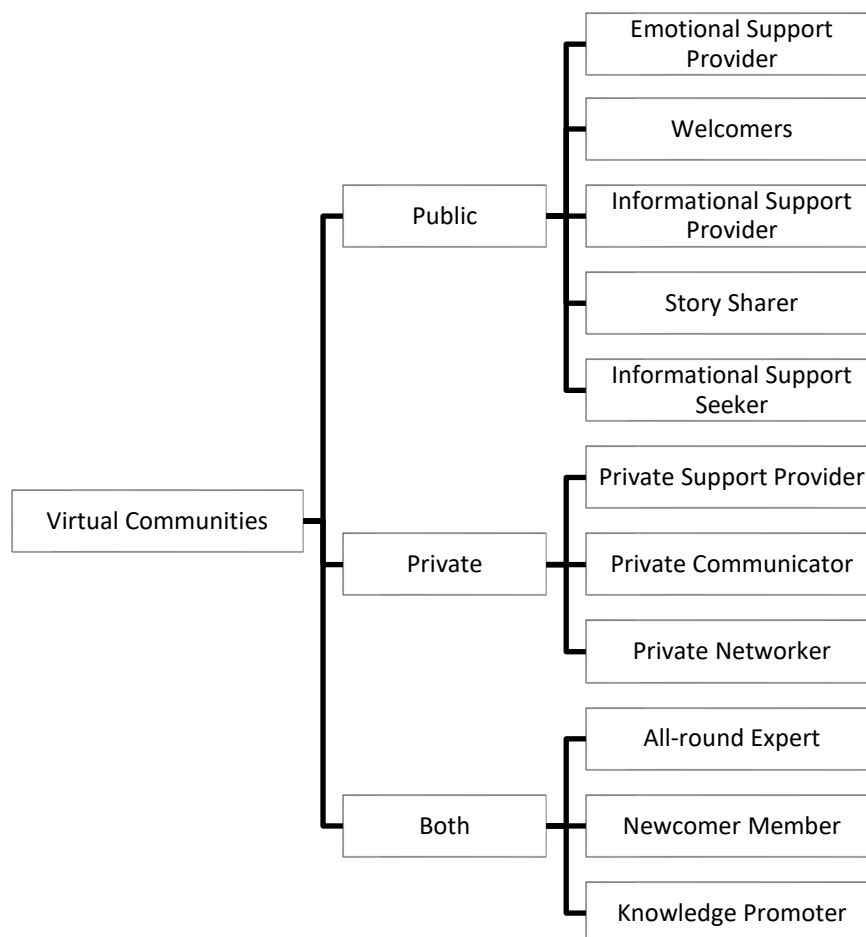


Figure 26 - Multi-dimensional classification of OC members (Yang et al., 2019)

Groenewegen and Moser (2014), on the other hand, have combined attitudinal variables with communicative ones to create a categorization formed into four groups of roles. The most important aspect of their research is represented by the fact that not all members, even within a community, seem to be willing to play as a team. The creation of a special category, called *team players*, therefore, confirms this thesis, presenting a high frequency of friendly interactions and information exchanges, unlike *utility posters* or *storytellers*, who have found to visit the OC assiduously, but with more egoistic intents. Rarely, there are members able to support any high-quality activity, called *all-round talents*, which remember the specification proposed by Yang et al. few years later.

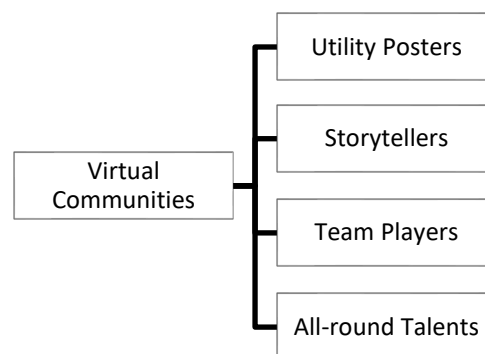


Figure 27 - Multi-dimensional classification of OC members (Groenewegen & Moser, 2014)

However, OCs may also lead to the appearance of negative relationships, as highlighted by the role model developed by Golder and Donath (2004). As a matter of fact, according to the authors, some categories of OCs - such as social media and social networks - could trigger conflictual dynamics among people, with the risk of leading to what is defined as trolling, flaming, or renting (Herring et al., 2002).

- *Flamers* have been noted for their ferocity, using intimidation as their main tactic. Often, it is possible to recognize flamers from their first post, even though they do not possess a reputation in the OC yet. Although they do not have the desire to enter the community as participants, they often visit it with the aim of looking for ways to sustain and fuel controversial conversations, especially by deploying aggressive rhetoric and speech.

- *Trolls* are experts in the art of “identity deception” (Donath, 1998). They are likely to try to blend in with the OC by subtly agitating other individuals, starting and directing conversations in a way that seems genuine, but in fact is not. Thus, a valid set of communicational skills represent a relevant trait for them, permitting to disguise themselves within the OC, avoiding looking like an outsider.
- *Renters* are recognizable from their extensive articles about a single aspect of the community or a single problem, exploiting their innate ability to prolifically write elaborated essays. Frictions can be created between renters and other members who perceive their presence as a threat for the community. Unfortunately, this attitude often falls into a static never-ending debate.
- *Celebrities* reflect the archetypal protagonists, posting frequently and fascinatingly. They have been compared to “central figures in every neighborhood” (Labov, 1997), since it would be difficult for lurkers no to come across the celebrity’s domain or influence. However, they are not always untouchable. Their opinions, in fact, may reflect a minority party of the community. However, as long as they keep expressing themselves in an acceptable manner, their status will always be recognized.
- *Newbies* and *lurkers* represent the remaining categories identified by Golder and Donath (2004), thanks to the contribution of the literature that have been already analyzed in the previous sections.

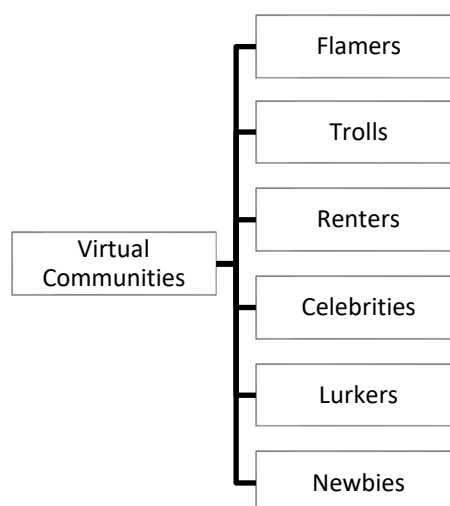


Figure 28 - Multi-dimensional classification of OC members (Golder & Donath, 2004)

3.2 Governance as social control in OCs

As shown in the two previous sections, it seems that OCs have an inherent criticality, concerning the possibility (and necessity) of including different groups of members within the OC. As a matter of fact, each of them may follow complementary or conflicting interests (Sibai et al., 2015), as well as the ability of members to be both appointed or self-selected in different roles, each of them possessing different priorities and objectives (Kozinets, 1999).

Therefore, Sibai et al. (2015) contribute to this argumentation by combining literature between different segments, to create a harmonized vision of the methods for managing social control as moderation of interactions between members. Indeed, a lack of or an inefficient management and moderation of OCs seems to be one of the major causes of implosion and failure of the community itself. In communities where this happens, there is a high probability that *“members will fail to return to the community and the community itself will implode”* (Celestre et al., 2013, p. 3). Moreover, by addressing social issues, OCs monitoring mechanisms maintain participants' continuing involvement and engagement, ensuring its survival (Ren et al., 2007). Advanced behavioral control procedures are now even more crucial given that social media marketers' and community managers' MBO includes a deep commitment to deliver positive returns from the interaction with the communities in online contexts (Reiss-Davis et al., 2013).

Furthermore, disparate concepts have been highlighted, resulting in stagnant research streams, due to the fragmentation of each moderating principle theorized, including:

- *Authority*, which through a four-step development of authority-based governance (de-facto governance phase, designing-governance phase, implementing-governance phase and stabilizing-governance phase) has been demonstrated as a clear and efficient mechanism for social control in OCs (O'Mahoney & Ferraro, 2007).
- *Self-control*, identified through multiple interviews with contributors on the very famous Wikipedia page, which, although seemingly free from the outside, proved to be *“an organization with highly refined policies, norms, and a technological architecture that supports organizational ideals of consensus building and discussion”* (Forte et al., 2009, p. 49).

- *Contracts*, intended as both formal (end-user certificate agreements or terms of services) and informal (codes of conduct), that have been identified as a crucial method for regulating interactions within the vast, mobile and mutable population present in OCs (Fairfield, 2008).
- *Coercion*, which is made possible by members' power asymmetry, stemming from disparities in access and control to the information systems that drives OC sociability (Reid, 1999).
- *Merit*, achieved through online feedback and non-economic rewards or procedures capable of developing status group, which combined result in deep transformations in social dynamics within the OCs (Wiertz et al., 2010).
- *Fairness, equality or reciprocity*, identified through an in-depth analysis on open-source communities and platforms (Shah, 2006).

Thus, the contribution from Sibai et al. (2015) permitted a first harmonization of all these principles and concepts, to provide a unified view on social control within OCs. As a matter of fact, moderation techniques are used in interactions that operate under a variety of governing frameworks (market, hierarchy, and clan), classified under a variety of determinants (interaction initiation, maintenance, and termination). Crucial possible directions for future study and research questions result from this approach. Each governance structure analyzed will be now described and commented in detail.

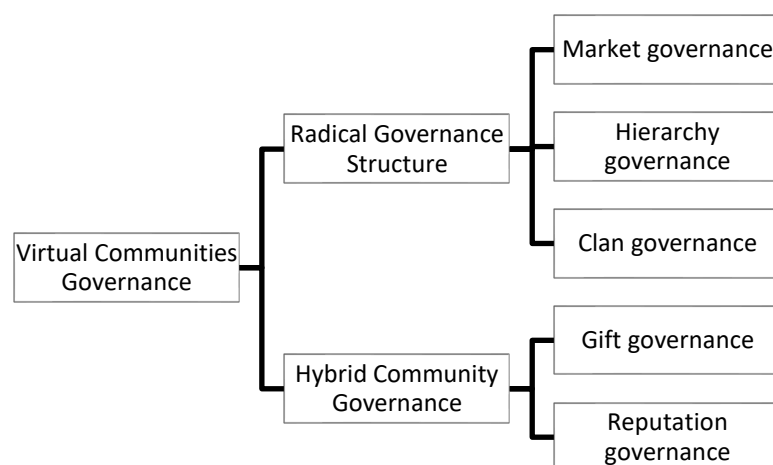


Figure 29 - Governance structures for OCs (Sibai et al., 2015)

3.2.1 Radical Governance – Market, Hierarchy and Clan

Sibai et al. (2015) have applied and adapted Williamson's (1975) *market governance* literature through a series of case studies, such as eBay and Amazon. Starting from Ronald Coase's theory of the firm (1937), Williamson argues that every economic organization arises from the attempt to minimize transaction costs in contexts characterized by incomplete contracts, specific investments, limited rationality, and opportunism. This circumstance implies that every economic organization suffers from a problem of incomplete bargaining.

Hence, identifying “money” as the object of transactions in OCs, the social control mechanism seems to reside in what is defined as the exchange rate, meaning how much individuals in OCs evaluate specific transactions in relation to other available options or resources and comparing them (Sibai et al., 2015). The definition of the term "exchange rate" does not have to be limited to the financial sector because transactions, particularly inside OCs, can take many various forms as technology improves and allows for a greater number of transactions.

As a result, the authors propose an intriguing analogy between OCs and markets, where both appear to self-stabilize through the process of managing internal transactions through a price mechanism.

By contrast, social control may take the form of *hierarchy* or *hierarchical governance*, which is based on the principle of power asymmetry. Exploiting the contribution from Reid (1999) - who suggests that differential access to information systems provides distinct “physical” capacities in online environment resulting in social disparity, - authoritarian norms, according to the authors, are internal rules that are unilaterally enforced through pressure or coercion to distinguish good from inappropriate behavior within online shared spaces, as well as sufficient or poor performances of members (Sibai et al., 2015).

However, when the availability of technological resources is asymmetrical among members, this social control mechanism may risk collapsing into autocratic or despotic leadership. Different researchers have recognized these members' traits, albeit with different names, such as:

- “*Autocratic leaders*” (O'Mahoney & Ferraro, 2007, p. 1088), emerging in the early de-facto governance phase of OCs and resulting as a substantial misinterpretation of the boundaries of positional authority.

- “*Gods*” (Reid, 1999, p. 109), who may partially delegate their authority to chosen elite of individuals, often referred to as “wizards”.
- “*Leviathans*” (Kollock & Smith, 1996, p. 126), whose origin may be found on Hobbes’ famous political essay where State power is compared to the devastating force of the creature of the sea, which is necessary for the maintenance of peace and order (Hobbes, 2010).
- “*Dictators*” (De Zwart & Lindsay, 2009, p. 5), evidencing problems related to the feasibility of democracy, issues of consensus and agreement, as well as accountability of decision-making power in online contexts.

Furthermore, *clan governance* emerges where social control is based on principles of sharing, controlling frequent and public interactions through tradition, built on recurring group behaviors, such as rites, ceremonies or rituals. Sibai et al. (2015) confirmed that traditions are preserved in a logic of peer influence and pressure towards conformity, aiming at a shared sense of belonging. The authors themselves do not even exclude that this sentiment may be experienced not only in the community as a whole, but also in smaller or minor groups within it. This organizational form for OCs has been recognized by disparate authors, but with many denominations:

- “*Democratic governance*” (O’Mahoney & Ferraro, 2007, p. 1082), blended to bureaucracy, which seems to be a proficient method for adapting the community’s governance structure to changing feelings or perceptions of authority within the group.
- “*Self-governance*” (Forte et al., 2009, p. 49), theorized thanks to the Wikipedia case study, which represents an institution with finely tuned regulations, conventions, and a technical infrastructure that promotes organizational goals through consensus building and dialogue.
- “*Player-to-Player control*” (Humphreys, 2008, p. 161), highlighted in Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMO), utilizing famous case studies such as World of Warcraft (WoW).

This last theory concerning radical structural forms of governance seems to give rise to modern views, in which OCs are often compared to tribes or tribal communities organized and interacting through new digital technologies.

3.2.2 Hybrid Governance – Gift and Reputation

According to Sibai et al. (2015), the combination of the radical governance structures, namely market, clan and hierarchy, may consist in the development on new archetypes for the governance structures of OCs. Actually, each of their newly proposed structure, namely gift and reputation governance, shares features from each of the hybridized structures participating in the combination. This may result in some progress for the research stream, but it is still limited if compared to multiple phenomena and influences that OCs contain in reality.

To begin, *gift governance* is conceptualized by integrating market and clan governance. This first hybrid governance framework reflects the altruism and generosity concepts spread as social control within an OC. It uses self-enforced social exchange rates to govern gift-counter-gift transaction sequences and depends on broad mutual obligations.

The result of this hybridization is that gifting appears to be a purposeful, intentional transfer of resources towards another, based on the sharing logic. On the other hand, gifting entails an implied responsibility to recompense with a counter-gift at some unspecified subsequent time (Belk, 2014); hence, it works on the principle of exchange. Nonetheless, because the gift's significance is symbolic instead of monetary, community customs, rituals and traditions establish a proper rate of exchange (Hollenbeck et al., 2006).

As a result, gift governance regulates relationships through shared exchange patterns, meaning that if a counter-gift is deemed insufficient, it is hard for users to explicitly object, as this affects the primary offering gesture (Belk, 2010). Therefore, social conditioning, coercion or persuasion are inefficient controlling mechanisms in this framework, making communal exchange rate compliance self-enforced. Finally, gift governance is based on the principle of social solidarity, which states that the beneficiaries must return something, not exclusively to the original donator: they may respond back to any part of the community (Kollock, 1999).

By contrast, *reputation governance* embraces the rationale of popularity, where individuals aim to be the “top” or “greatest” at anything in the group, whether it is charisma, humor, knowledge, competence, inventiveness, number of activities, or something else. Popularity seems to be really linked to power, with popular OC members gaining significant influence and authority over those who are not. What is attractive, funny, skilled, or innovative, on the other hand, is established by shared, socially defined norms and customs.

As a result, the logics of dominance, coming from the archetype of hierarchy, and sharing, coming from the archetype of clan, are entwined in the rationale of popularity. Thus, connections among unequal OC participants that blend communal and hierarchical elements are governed by notoriety.

3.2.3 Moderating in OCs

After having characterized the differences between the various control and governance mechanisms of OCs, Sibai et al. (2015) proceed in an interesting study on what is called "moderation". The term shares several traits with the definition of "community management".

Several authors have dealt with the subject in literature, but often, as in the case of Fournier and Lee (2009), they limit themselves to provide a list of activities to be carried out and to be avoided in order to better manage and control their community, without highlighting or deepening the theory underlying this statement. Moreover, although the "governance mechanisms" are a great starting point when defining moderation practices, they are not enough because there is no direct correlation between the whole set of behaviors reported in literature and the multiple systems of governance theorized (Sibai et al., 2015). For this reason, the authors have chosen to use a second dimension, to be observed together with the first, which is defined as "*moderation purpose*", meaning the function that the moderation activity aims at achieving.

- Moderation aiming at *initiating the interaction* is focused on finding members with whom others can relate and enjoy satisfying relationships.
- Moderation aiming at *maintaining the interaction* is focused on increasing the desire and motivation of members to continue relating within the OC. Maintenance, in the context of OCs, encompasses a wide range of diverse procedures that can be broken down into sub-activities, described below.
- Moderation aiming at *clarifying roles* establishes predetermined positions or tasks during the conversation, each owning certain goals, rights and obligations.
- Moderation aiming at *formalizing norms* defines duties and liabilities for setting the standard within current and future interactions.
- Moderation aiming at *monitoring interactions* captures members' actions in order to assess whether or not a societal conflict or issue is manifesting.

- Moderation aiming at *rewarding* or *punishing* OC's members provide motivations towards adequate behaviors while sanctioning inappropriate attitudes.
- When relationship can no longer be maintained owing to natural or dysfunctional matters, moderation aiming at *terminating interactions* is put in place to manage the disruption, ensuring the lowest possible level of conflict.

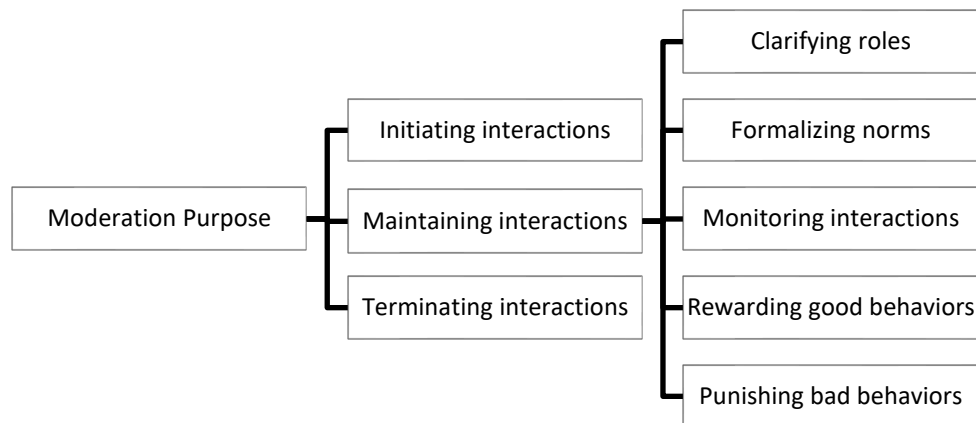


Figure 30 - Moderation activities in OCs (Sibai et al., 2015)

Within a *market governance* context, choosing a reliable trade counterpart as user eager to supply or purchase the item of concern, who is judged fair and honest, consists in the first step for starting an interaction. It entails lurking on the OC webpage for proposals or requests, as well as screening profiles of potential parties to verify their suitability and trustworthiness, then choosing the best and getting in touch with the selected parties. This is confirmed by the fact that many OC platforms include a specific area for market, where users can disclose their offers and receive feedback about the feasibility of the trade directly from the community. Actually, there are also many communities' business models, such as Clubby, where Sibai et al. (2015) performed their analysis, based on this principle. There, the platform allows the connection between intermediaries, acting as both a community building mechanism and a profit center.

The same pattern of reviewing, determining, and accepting would be used to initiate an interaction within a *hierarchical structure*, especially between a candidate requesting to join the community and a supervisor retaining the power to approve or reject such demand, as well as between a supervisor and a person wanting to obtain positions in the OC.

Moreover, an identical procedure might happen if a *clan governance* governs an OC, in the situation where two equal members of the community start a collective conversation.

Maintaining interactions in *hierarchy governance* context, instead, entails a variety of intertwined activities involving participants and managers, including defining the role of admin staff and the administered users, legitimizing roles, tasks and associated functions, while also tracking members' habits and attitudes, rewarding adequate behaviors and penalizing harmful ones. For example, if a member's comments or contributions are getting too inadequate, starting to disturb others' pleasure to join the conversations within an OC, the appointed moderator might choose to censor the inappropriate activities. This transaction often occurs, for example, on Twitch, where streamers appoint moderators to monitor their chat and the content it produces. Of course, it represents a form of punishment for inadequate behavior.

In OC governed by the *market governance*, given that appointed members do not retain the power to personally monitor such transactions, the regulation is usually entailed in the "Terms and Conditions", while in *clan governance* the regulation is contained and expressed in the "User guideline" which binds members to act properly.

Concerning interaction termination in environments governed by *clan structure*, it consists in making the conclusion of the relationship with another fellow player as painless as possible. Other members are usually and often ignored or, more formally, blocked by personal accounts. For example, many members in OC platforms are used to disregard trolls, individuals who enjoy disturbing others. However, if the trolls do not stop to spam, they may seriously risk being included in the "blacklist", which consists in public shames for bad behaviors.

Finally, interaction termination has been commonly referred as "banning" in *hierarchy governance*, since it entails permanently removing a person from the OC, while, given that the interaction is not designed to persist after the agreement is concluded, in OCs utilizing the *market governance* structure, such termination is more organic. Generally, the parties will keep chatting to verify that a settlement has been reached.

With these studies, Sibai et al. (2015) contribute to a number of managerial ramifications, in addition to their theoretical foundations. The moderation framework has been recognized as a valuable screening and operational resource for community managers, assisting members in selecting the appropriate moderation technique based on the social situation to be handled and governed.

Community managers can design their communities' social management system given the circumstances outlined, meaning the governance structure and moderation purpose, by determining which sorts of moderating activities must operate in their community and how these practices may play either a primary or an auxiliary function. As a consequence, this decision may act as a template for community managers to construct social control systems in the case of further expansion or development. In reality, social control system acts as a culture-change monitoring tool.

The figure below summarizes the process that community managers or leaders may follow in order to troubleshoot the social control issues within OCs.

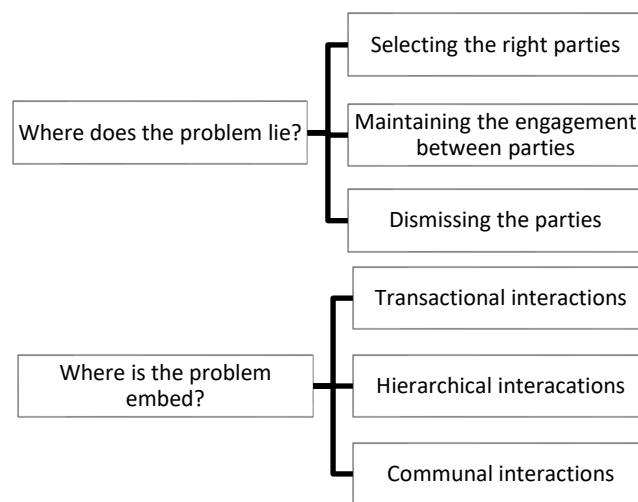


Figure 31 - Recap on OCs moderation (Sibai et al., 2015)

Members who join a community become a part of a complex organizational control mechanism, which is a key component of OCs. However, thanks to the contribution coming from Sibai et al. (2015), even though with many limitations, researchers and OC managers may now differentiate governance structure, understanding their influence in moderation activities, and how different social control mechanism affects interactions among individuals within OCs.

Members need to be aware of these differences, comprehending their necessities and joining the OC they evaluated as the most adequate, in terms of social control mechanism and governance. By contrast, of course, business organizations may adopt a social mechanism control

which is capable of both attracting participants with a fitting behavior, and departing from participants with less-fitting behaviors.

3.3 Motivations to Participate, Loyalty and Engagement in OCs

Multi-community engagement requires a high level of commitment. As consumers possess the option to interact with a multitude of distinct groups, they frequently develop a devotion to a particular one, ignoring some of the others. Nevertheless, it is questionable how loyalty manifests itself in consumer behaviors, or whether specific community qualities inspire loyalty.

Hamilton et al. (2017, p. 540) define loyalty as a user-community relationship in their paper, establishing that “*users who are loyal to a community prefer it over all others; loyal communities keep their loyal users over time*”. They conduct their analysis through a large batch of data on Reddit communities, which is one of the most famous platforms for users to self-select themselves into emergent communities around threads and topics. Their findings reveal that a participant's tendency towards becoming loyal may be seen in their first encounters with a community, implying that certain individuals are naturally committed from the start of their interaction with the OC. These statements have a great impact in the research OC members' loyalty, because it allows OC leaders to trace a path of best practices capable of simultaneously influencing and predicting the degree of loyalty of their members.

3.3.1 Community-level Loyalty

Starting by looking at the kinds of OCs producing higher levels of loyalty, Hamilton et al. (2017) discovered that across communities with drastically different thematic interests, loyal communities seem to possess constant structural elements in their user-user interaction systems, and therefore these architectural traits are indicative of commitment.

First of all, the most loyal communities seem to be significantly smaller in size (i.e. the number of participants) than all the others, despite maintaining an extremely high degree of activity, even if they do not necessarily grow that quickly. Indeed, these communities are much more likely to form around niche topics with a highly vertical structure, where unique contributors are eager for the maintenance of the dynamicity within their conversations.

Secondly, certain conversational themes, like sports, tend to create significant concentrations of engagement, whereas other thematic genres do not have as many ardent followers. These

loyal communities appear to have distinct, targeted pursuits, such as a favorite football team, in this case. Vast topically diffuse OCs, on the other hand, frequently struggle to maintain and sustain the commitment for their loyal users. Not surprisingly, this indicates that external psyche connection (for example, to a strong mutual interest, including a football team) may be a primary factor of loyalty, which has been already addressed in the definition of the OCs described at the beginning of this work.

Moreover, Hamilton et al. (2017) discovered that loyalty is significantly represented in sequences of user-user interactions, and therefore acts as an organizational and informative indicator beyond controlling for the thematic focus of a community. They showed that loyal OCs have tighter relationship networks, less regionally or locally clustered, resulting in less assortative activity level than other communities. This finding implies that loyal communities are tighter and more cohesive, meaning that they might perform through less fragmented subgroups, acting like a unique central body, independently from the topic. Loyal OCs have far greater rates of engagement disparity, resulting in asymmetrical participation distributions, although they are nonetheless democratic considering that their extremely active leaders adopt a focal communication aimed at committing the entire group.

3.3.2 User-level Loyalty

Now, given that it has been proven that some types of communities are more likely to inspire loyalty, and therefore loyal communities display distinctive differences in their user-user interaction networks, this subsection will deal with the concept of trust and commitment at the micro scale, meaning how to predict loyalty at the user-level. It has been demonstrated that loyalty may be exhibited in stable ways across a broad range of networks, and that these personal loyalty indicators may be found even in participants' first contributions to a community.

First, Hamilton et al. (2017) assessed the amount of community response given to postings, distinguishing between the ones selected by loyals and those selected by vagrants, that is, members who are not loyal to the OC. It has been showed that the interests possessed by loyal users go far beyond the current trend or what it is popular when members are scrolling the contents. This means that loyal users invest time in deeply analyzing contents beyond the popular ones

or those within their field of competence or interests. Furthermore, it has been found that members who eventually become loyal are the ones willing to initiate new conversations in less popular and more specific threads.

In terms of content preference, instead, loyal members are attracted to esoteric contents, where Hamilton et al. (2017) have quantified the condition of esotericity concerning the topic variance in respect to the average standard contributions.

After comparing how loyal and vagrants choose which postings to remark on, the authors focused on looking at how members write their opinions technically. They tested a batch of indicators, including features related to comment length (verbosity), frequency of pronoun like *I*, *We* or *They*, and emotional words, slangs or any other specificities. In reality, it seems that loyal users are likely to write verbose sentences containing *we* pronouns, in contrast with vagrants who are likely to utilize *I* pronouns. Still, not surprisingly, this confirms that loyalty affects group-identity at an individual and personal level, too.

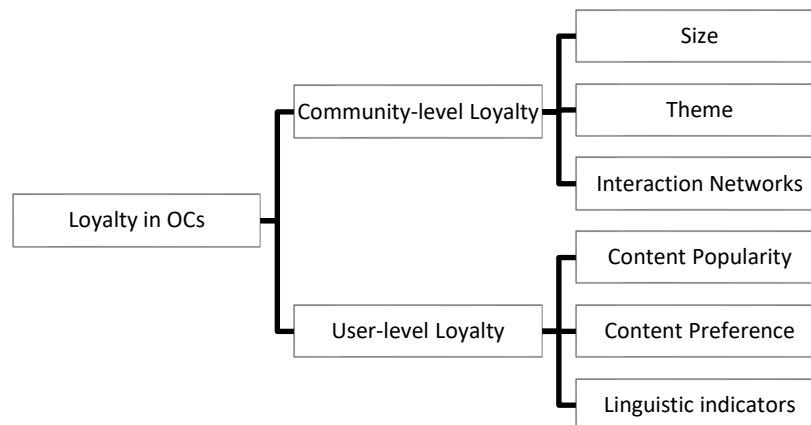


Figure 32 - Loyalty predictors in OCs (Hamilton et al., 2017)

Although the studies on loyalty developed by Hamilton et al. (2017) have received a great success among researchers, they still possess large limits. First of all, the authors focused on understanding why some OCs are more loyal than others, while defining a unique and consistent measure for loyalty in community's contexts. However, they did not concentrate their efforts on comprehending how to achieve such loyalty for the external environment that is, evidencing methods for attracting new members and cultivating their potential loyalty.

To analyze this phenomenon, a further step will be needed. This will be based on the contribution of Kozinets (2010), who highlighted WOMM (word-of-mouth marketing) and networked narrative strategies as the main marketing tools capable of influencing C2C communication in OCs.

3.4 Development of WOMM Marketing in OCs

Word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM) is the deliberate utilization of commercial promotional strategies to influence user interactions. Digital marketing, social media marketing, viral marketing, buzz or guerilla marketing are all terms used to describe this type of activities. Because of the spread of World Wide Web availability, range, and openness, advertisers engaged in affecting and tracking WOMM have more potential than ever before.

WOM was initially recognized as an effective social phenomenon by early academics, which influenced early marketing theory and applications. Kozinets et al. (2010) referred to this primordial form of WOMM as “*organic inter-consumer influence model*”, where exchange patterns concerned mainly goods or actions capable of influencing brand meanings. According to the authors, the definition of “organic” stresses that the phenomenon occurs naturally without the direct influence or impact of marketers, where consumers are guided by their desire to communicate and express themselves, activating the fundamental WOMM principle: sharing.

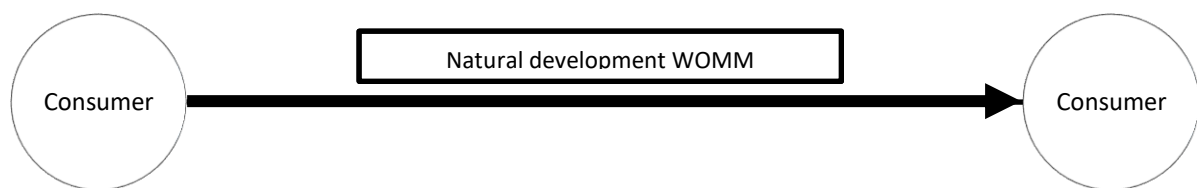


Figure 33 - Organic inter-consumer influence model (Kozinets et al., 2010)

Therefore, WOM models tended to recognize the relevance of particularly important users in the WOM procedure as marketing researchers and practitioners improved. Kozinets et al. (2010, p. 72) described these consumers as “*influential, respected, credible, WOM-spreading*”.

Such view currently includes the marketer's deliberate endeavor to influence customer WOM by conventional methods, which of course include advertisements and promotions. As a result,

Kozinets et al. (2010) referred to this round as a *linear influence model*. Marketers might now deal with "a buddy who suggests a tried and trusted product" rather than "a salesman who seeks to get rid of stuff" (Dichter, 1966, p. 165).

This phenomenon is evidently consistent with at least two major argumentations among researchers. First, as analyzed in the previous sections, few members may start acting like VIPs or opinion leaders within OCs. Hence, it is quite trivial to understand how power balance spread among the different membership within OCs may influence WOMM in an asymmetric way. For example, for the supporters of Tesla's projects, the word of its leader Elon Musk is worth far more than any criticism that may have been leveled by his haters. This happens because Musk is effectively a VIP, the leader and information center of the community itself.

The secondary evident association is the one between the central figure to be influenced in this linear model, and the research conducted on lead users. More specifically, lead user is a marketing term coined referring to an outstandingly competent and sophisticated consumer, typically more innovative than the average ones, who develops new solutions for businesses in complete autonomy (von Hippel, 1986).

Marketers benefit from collaborating with lead users as they anticipate the future needs of their market, or, adapting to this topic, of their OC. In this way, marketers can anticipate market moves and emerging trends. According to von Hippel (1986), they have three characteristics:

- They have an evident economic benefit deriving from the introduction of innovation and, precisely for this reason, they are highly motivated and incentivized.
- They have a strong degree of expertise and therefore can "have their say" with clear knowledge of the facts.
- They are able to anticipate the need in the market months or sometimes years before it becomes evident, expressing their forecasting ability.

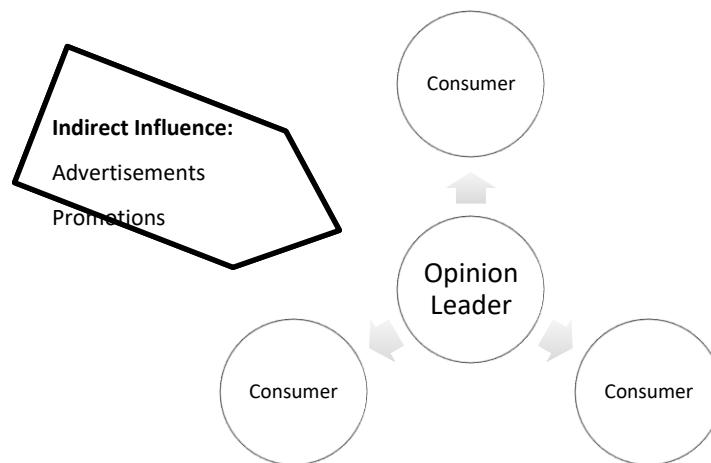


Figure 34 - Linear marketer influence model (Kozinets et al., 2010)

The next level of comprehension is perhaps the most contemporary, and while it correlates with the growth and acknowledgement of the Web's relevance, it is just not restricted to it. Marketers were becoming responsible in improving WOM activity directly through targeted one-to-one seeding and interactions initiatives, with the Web letting incredible new rates of advertising analysis and assessment, while new business organizations acted as facilitators in order to allow the effective emergence and spread of WOMM. Kozinets et al. (2010) referred to this framework as “*network coproduction model*”.

Here, the focus of marketing research has shifted from transactions to interactions or relationships. Hence, WOM connections are co-developed in consumer networks because users are seen as proactive co-producers of meaning and importance. Such stream of literature is mainly represented by Vargo and Lusch (2004; 2008; 2014), treats WOMM from a so-called service-dominant logic, initiating a debate which is currently widely open.

There are at least two principal implications for this new conceptualization of C2C interactions. The first is advertisers' utilization of new approaches and analytics to reach and interact with customers and influencers in a purposeful and straightforward manner. The second concerns the acknowledgment that marketplace signals and connotations are not transmitted in a one-way fashion but are rather shared among participants of the consumer network or community. Something that is not evidenced by Kozinets et al. (2010) is that the real effect of WOMM is to create a chain of contacts and relations capable of transmitting the initial marketing messages seeded by marketers, exponentially augmenting their reach and coverage.

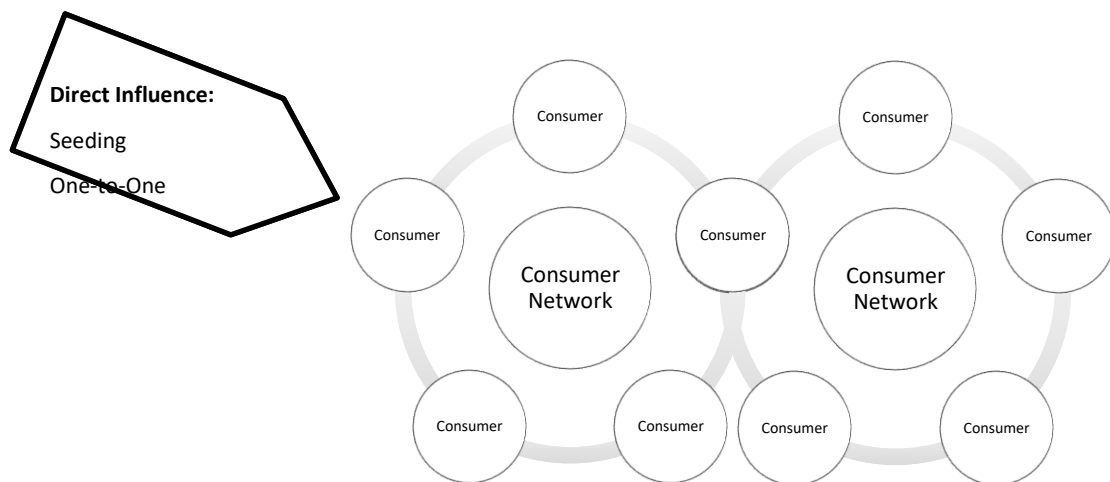


Figure 35 – Extension of the Network coproduction model (Kozinets et al., 2010)

3.4.1 Influencing the Expression of WOMM Narratives

At a first glance, WOMM's aim to guide bloggers' debates may tend to share significant parallels with public affairs or other types of sponsored marketing. The WOMM approach, on the other hand, is injected towards less settled, less regulated, and more complicated cultural forms due to a variety of unexpected situational and structural variables, which are not often present in professional marketing campaigns or commercial interactions. These aspects are contained in the networked coproduction model. Kozinets et al. (2010) obtained these recommended aspects by using an empirical, ground-up data processing, surveying different bloggers' website, seeding them with marketing messages, and trying to activate WOMM.

What emerged was that four crucial aspects in OCs are capable of determining the WOMM communication, specified as the “market-based message and its associated meanings”, but also “its reception by an intended audience” (Kozinets et al., 2010, p. 74).

- Lasting individual tales or experiences, which may be interpreted as tied to particular personality traits or types are collected under *character narratives*. Narratives naturally differ, yet there seems to be common recurrent structures concerning how individuals share their opinions across time. For example, many people may feel connected to the character of the Estetista Cinica, resulting in a story that emphasizes witness and frankness. In light of this, her inclusion in the set of case studies that will be examined during

the following sections is not a coincidence. By contrast, others may find themselves more related to careful and helpful characters, whereas others may relate to professional or clinical personalities, even around the same interest for cosmetics.

- WOMM conversations occur within the context of a specific *forum*. Kozinets et al. (2010) limited their analysis on blogs, but additional settings might have been extended to videogames, social media networks, if they were to maintain the digital connotation. Moreover, the forum, which is nothing more than the communication channel chosen for the development of OC, differs in terms of its topic of interest.
- Furthermore, *communal norms*, which control social articulation, propagation, as well as interpretation of a message or its implications, have an impact upon WOM communication. The OC size, the age range of participants, their hobbies, customers and habits, their ethnicity or sexual orientation, as well as their socioeconomic status or the level of common ground, among many other features, will all concur to influence these standards.
- Finally, the *promotional characteristics* of campaigns may influence the spread of the marketing messages. Product categories, company's corporate reputation, aims and terms, all these factors deserve attention by marketers when planning innovative campaigns looking at seeding WOOM.

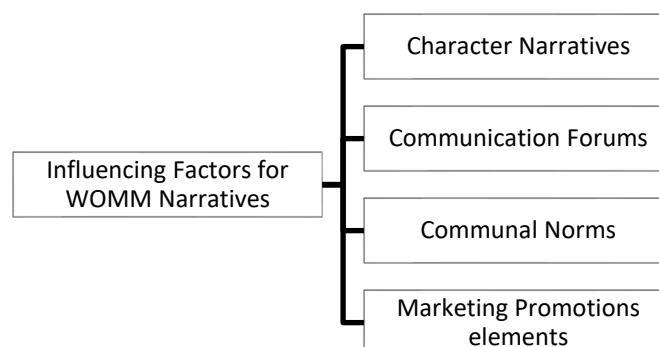


Figure 36 - Influencing factors for WOMM narratives (Kozinets et al., 2010)

This view on the WOMM is deeply fundamental to understand the new trends of marketing dynamics. Every business should always keep in mind the activation mechanism of the WOMM, which takes place within a complicated and entangled framework like that of relations

within the OC. These mechanisms allow the development and success of viral marketing campaigns, both within social media networks and beyond. This is why Kozinets et al. (2010) pushed their analysis deeply, evidencing different WOMM activation strategies, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses within the context of OCs

3.4.2 WOMM Strategies for OCs

Every blog's character narrative analyzed by Kozinets et al. (2010) comprises a distinct identity and point of view, while this narration draws a specific community and helps to shape their expectations. Crucially, the personality story alters the WOMM campaign's content and structure in each situation. Furthermore, the study noticed clear disparities in how individuals of the OCs react to the WOMM campaign. This shows that a broader discussion regarding WOMM initiatives in general, such as their regulations and ethical consequences, is actually occurring.

The concept behind word-of-mouth marketing is whether marketers can leverage the trustworthiness of C2C WOMM. Modern online community forums, such as social media sites, place a greater emphasis on continual engagement with recognizable individuals, even though, according to Rettberg (2008), blogs are a type of social platform that is used to develop trust, friendships, and coalitions in addition to information exchange. The behaviors that emerge to standardize knowledge transfer, such as the size of postings or the usage of images, become the foundation of increasingly widespread and tacit social standards over time. Bloggers are supposed to follow these social conventions and write content that are suitable for their respective communities (Kozinets, 2002).

Communicators, or, to borrow the term employed in Kozinets et al. (2010)'s examination, bloggers, are expected to serve as both OC members and marketing agents, but this is still true even in social media networks for influencers. With WOMM network coproduction model, where the customer is obliged to be a mix of consumer and marketer, the conventional social compact that keeps marketplace connections apart from communities is broken, causing significant friction. Hence, members in charge of spreading words usually take WOMM messages and concepts and adapt them to produce more credible, pertinent, or acceptable directives to the OC.

Kozinets et al. (2010) have finally been able to answer the question about how to activate WOMM, and why different narrative strategies shape as they do. Forum, character narratives,

norms and promotional elements are not enough to comprehend the dynamics of this phenomenon. In fact, they need to be intended in combination with two additional narrative features:

- The *interpersonal orientation* of the WOMM interactions, which may vary from orientation to *communal* norms rather than orientation to *individual* values.
- The acceptance or adaption of the *commercial-communal friction* caused by WOMM, which may vary from an *implicit* tension to an *explicit* tension.

Discussing the meaning of this segmentation will permit managers, marketers as well as members to comprehend in detail the key dynamics that govern the profit interaction, creation and coproduction within OCs.

In this context authors found that, despite the emergence of complicated or unpredictable consequences, commercial versus communal conflict necessitates a reaction at the interpersonal scale of character narrative, and yet this counteraction takes on a certain form relying on some other significant intermediate features. As a matter of fact, WOMM marketers must match advertising materials with the requirement to keep a steady character narrative and adhere to community guidelines and social norms in order to build a credible connection with other participants. Because WOMM is predicated on the premise that marketers can use the inherent trust between user and OC leaders, comprehending this relationship, and especially the need to strike a balance, is critical.

First, WOMM campaign emphasis is brought on the advertised product or benefit rather than the marketing plan, which is how the *evaluation* technique handles social anxiety derived by the introduction of the marketing message within OCs interactions. Such technique focuses on maintaining bloggers' audiences engaged by acknowledging the needs and interests of their OC. Communicators try to establish their authority by demonstrating that their messages and ideas are reliable, exploiting data analysis and objective performances. However, by neglecting the intrinsic moral conflict in WOMM, the evaluative technique risks backfiring, resulting in viewer-leader conflict. The community tries to incorporate the message, wondering how one of its participants might downplay or disguise their own interests, while the source may be interpreted as carrying secondary motivations. This imbalance, along with the seeming inconsistency of the author profiting personally while claiming a social purpose, might lead to open resentment.

The secondary strategy has been called *embracing* method and consists in a situation in which narratives attempt to manage social worry in the background, although mentioning the presence of a WOMM campaign in joyful tones. These stories provide a strong, self-serving rationale for their unreserved embrace of the joint responsibilities of customer and marketer. The embracing strategy uses advertising jargon and terminology, and it frequently involves demands for more opportunity to cross-sell other items. It has been showed that this method may divide community reactions.

Some OC members may actually enjoy sincerity and personality, especially when it is pertinent with the established WOMM features, meaning the existing narrative, the forum, and the norms. Nevertheless, this may cause negative reactions, especially if components of WOMM promotions, (e.g. exclusivity), are not perceived as suitable with previous narrative principles, like kindness and inclusivity. As a consequence, the WOMM activator's credibility may be frequently questioned.

In a further approach classified as *endorsement*, OC leaders highlight and recognize the commercial-communal conflict in this marketing strategy, the WOMM effort is disclosed by communicating personal involvement in it. Additionally, this tactic not only implies participants' full awareness concerning advertisers' goals, but it is also intended to inform receivers that it could not represent the community's best interests. However, leaders might try to alleviate these worries with a need-based justification. Assertiveness, intended as positive individualism, is embraced, with communicators advocating for their self-interest, frequently through a social appeal for help, sympathy, respect and tolerance.

Hence, for bloggers putting an endorsement strategy into place, it is common to utilize more formal promotional terminology, serving as a signal to indicate their openness to further advertisement initiatives. This tactic does not really appear to provoke antagonism in blogs that are able to link emotionally with community members. However, these arguments have been significantly less efficient than other blogs, because this narrative has been often perceived as less persuasive and disregarding towards communal standards.

Finally, other narratives - which Kozinets et al. (2010, p. 85) refer to as *explanation* - demonstrate the most transparent and democratic WOMM communication technique. In such approach, narratives freely reveal the existence of the WOMM initiative, evaluating the numerous effects due to the involvement in it. OC leaders recognize and explain the possible conflict of

interest connected with WOMM, but they do so through emphasizing the significance and interests of their communities in a way that confirms their own worth to the OC as a secure or trusted source of information.

Thanks to this technique, communicators exhibit continuing shared connection with other community members, while the WOMM promotion is proposed in a way that may even contribute to the building of communal relationships. As a result, the WOMM initiative's qualities, merits and implications had previously been properly evaluated and publicly debated, receiving a positive or indifferent feedback from the OC participants.

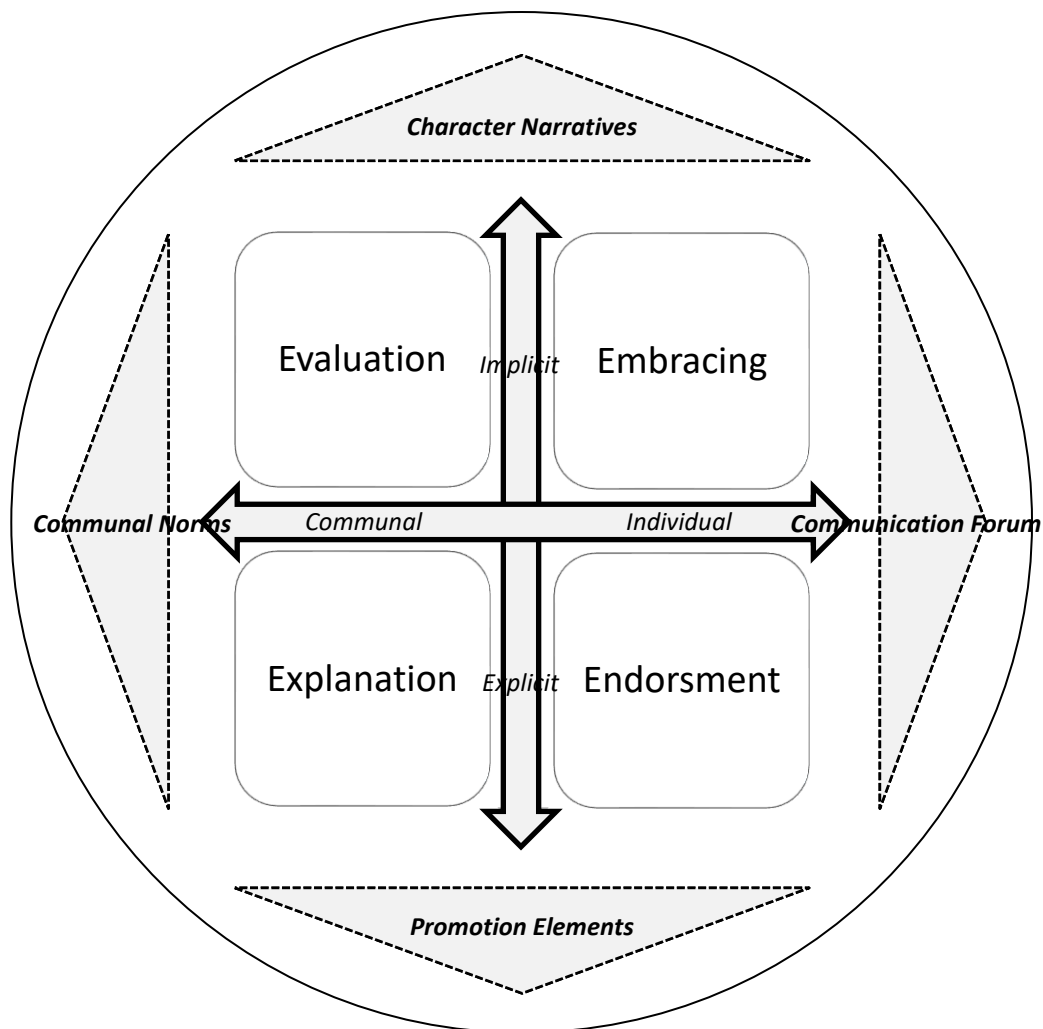


Figure 37 - WOMM Strategies in OCs (Kozinets et al., 2010)

A vital preliminary approach in putting this insight into practice is to evaluate and classify the many varieties of character narratives and communication platforms accessible as marketers. However, it is also crucial to consider and observe communal rules. In fact, although this Kozinets et al. (2010)'s contribution deepened the resistance or acceptance of communal OC values, a variety of additional standards and beliefs, such as fairness, confidence, and the significance of leadership, may be investigated, categorized, and linked to other specific results.

3.5 Success Factors in OC

The current number of OC studies is enormous, yet success-related discoveries are rare, isolated or scarce. Designers of online community platforms are confronted with a plethora of design concepts and features, with no direction on how to incorporate them. In terms of optimizing success, a one-time attempt to incorporate all of these aspects is costly and ineffective. It is vital to combine all disparate data into a system of regulations focusing on the community's growth and demands. Iriberry ad Leroy (2008) main contribution is related to the development of a summary of existing research on criteria for success, along with an estimate of when they are most important to community growth based on the community's life cycle.

During the *inception* phase, when small groups unite together in a primordial organization exploiting virtual and digital software, the success factors examined by the authors are:

- *Purpose*: the definition of the intent of the OC, during the developing phase, is vital for the satisfaction of users' needs (Andrews, 2002; Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003).
- *Focus*: the specification of OC areas of interests may be useful in quickly targeting audience and participants (Wenger et al., 2002).
- *Codes of conduct*: administrators must explicitly set policies in order to avoid potential disputes and ensure effective supervision of participants' activity and behavior (Kim, 2000; Preece J. , 2000).
- *Trademark*: choosing an attractive tag would pique the interest of targeted audiences to join, participate and contribute (Kim, 2000).
- *Founding and Revenues*: as it has been already mentioned, there are several ways to support OCs, including private sponsorship, memberships, cost per usage, and advertising. However, deciding them at an early stage seems crucial for the success of the OC (Leimeister & Krcmar, 2003).

During the *creation* phase, developers must maintain a constant attention on the demands of users, ensuring that the instruments are applicable, but also that the underlying infrastructure is dependable in many terms (Iriberry & Leroy, 2008). Hence, underlined success factors are:

- *User-centered design and evolution*: the community's progression should reflect its members' views, expressing their preferences so that they may get the most out of their engagement and contribution (Andrews, 2002; Kollock, 1999; Cothrel, 2000).
- *Interface usability*: providing a complete, dynamic, exhaustive user interface, which guarantees simplicity of use is one of the most crucial challenges for the platforms in which the OCs come together (Preece, 2000; Nonnecke & Preece, 2001).
- *Security and Privacy*: in order to responsibly handle confidential members' data, safety, and permissions, it may be necessary to build a complex access-rights infrastructure (Andrews, 2002; Hummel & Lechner, 2002).
- *Anonymity*: especially in peers OCs, flexible degrees of identity should be preferred over total anonymity, since they enable relationship development, togetherness, and more personal and physical engagement for individuals who prefer to meet face to face (Leimeister et al., 2005).
- *Performance and Reliability*: of course, internet integrity, responsiveness, and performance are all important factors, where even a few moments of waiting could undermine the participation and satisfaction of the OC members (Andrews, 2001; Maloney-Krichmar & Preece, 2005).

During the *growing* stage, awareness of the OC expands, and more participants join, while subculture begins to emerge, completing with an identification, common terminology, shared heritage, responsibilities, and routines. Here, integrated critical success factors identified by Iriberry & Leroy (2008) are:

- *Attracting and integrating members*: Having an offline user association as a reference point may have an influence on real-life prestige, consistently enticing new members to participate and providing members with benefits or incentive programs (Ginsburg & Weisband, 2004).

- *Growth management*: Monitoring the quantity of members in the community on an ongoing basis is fundamental to guarantee an organic growth, reminding people to contribute, establishing monetary donations targets and defining the differing viewpoints and the originality of such multiple contributions (Ludford et al., 2004).
- *Update content quality*: the hosts need to generate interest and appealing information, through the acknowledgment of custodians to enhance, disseminate, provide and share high-quality material among members (Leimeister & Krcmar, 2003; Andrews, 2001).
- *Interaction support, transparency and trust building*: the increase in trust and fidelity are the ones crucial for the interactions between individuals. This may be achieved through enhancing organizational transparency, providing an exhaustive specification of operators, profiles and roles within the OC (Kim, 2000; Kollock & Smith, 1996; Andrews, 2002).
- *Customization of portals and offers*: this is vital in order to permit members to enjoy a personalized experience, according to their needs and preferences (Leimester & Sidiras, 2004).

OCs evolve into official-formal organizations if they have been effective in previous phases. Hence, developers and administrators must concentrate on their long-term viability and performance, when the critical mass of individuals and member-generated material is reached at the *maturity* phase. Finally, the critical success factors are represented by:

- *Regularity of online and offline events, sales and offers*: keeping members engaged represents a successful tactic as well as managing prices and extensions of new offerings (Andrews, 2001; Leimester & Sidiras, 2004).
- *User tools, management and control*: administrators should offer tools for interacting with shared resources, user-profile-matching, reinforcement learning, discussion systems, search engines, but also file storing and retrieving (Andrews, 2001). However, anything would be possible without volunteers, since OCs contexts are sustained mainly by distributed delegation (Cothrel, 2000; Maloney-Krichmar & Preece, 2005).
- *Recognition of contributions and loyalty*: explicit rewarding programs should always be in place, such as gift, social recognition and feedbacks. Visible contributions may enhance the level of satisfactions gained by members while carrying on their activities within the boundary of the OC (Andrews, 2001). Tracking the number of transactions

is needed to identify loyal participants, ensuring an adequate treatment for experts or mentors (Ginsburg & Weisband, 2004).

- *Subgroup management*: the utilization of channels to segment and diversify communication is crucial for nurturing subgroups within OCs, while restricting concentrated discussion forums and assembling them in flexible locations (Kim, 2000; Jones & Rafaeli, 2000; Maloney-Krichmar & Preece, 2005; Chan, 2004).

3.5.1 Indices for predicting OC success

The first, and perhaps most important contribution relating to metrics capable of measuring, and in some way predicting the success of OCs, is due to Preece (2001). They identified two complementary frameworks for determining the success of virtual communities. The development of software, regulations, and practices that facilitate online socialization is referred to as *sociability*, while *usability* refers to how simple and straightforward it is for community members to study and utilize the technology on which the OC is supported, keeping engaged with it. Sociability was then divided into three different sub-categories, namely *purpose*, *people* and *policies*, while usability was split into *dialogue and social interaction support*, *information design*, *navigation* and *access* (Preece, 2001). This further classification was fundamental, since the authors theorized the existence of separate determinants of success in relation to the specific issue to be stressed.

Measures related to purpose are often computed as the number of activities (messages, likes, shares) per participant, indicating how engaged are people within the OC. This a reliable predictor for the distinction between posters and lurkers. Furthermore, the depth and breadth of threads represents useful indicators for evidencing the degree of empathy entrusted among interactions, but also how rapidly new content emerges from the conversations.

Key parameters for people consist in the number of participants. However, this definition may be slightly refined by including the members' type. For example, for a community developer, dealing with a high number of lurkers combined with a small-sized critical mass of an OC may be really complex, while, by contrast, users may not even note a high number of lurkers diluted in a big-sized critical mass.

Introducing a quantitative rating system for policies has been a substantial challenge. Labeling and tracking incidences of antisocial behavior would help to determine compliance to a guideline, the effectiveness of mods, and statistics about a community's health.

Usability-related metrics often recalled the velocity of learning (i.e. recording the amount of time for users to perform an error-free task), degree of productivity (i.e. testing the amount of tasks performable with different platform settings), user satisfaction (i.e. tracking the satisfaction level with periodic yet simple questionnaire), retention (i.e. comparing an action undertaken today against the same tasks performed few times later) and amount of errors.

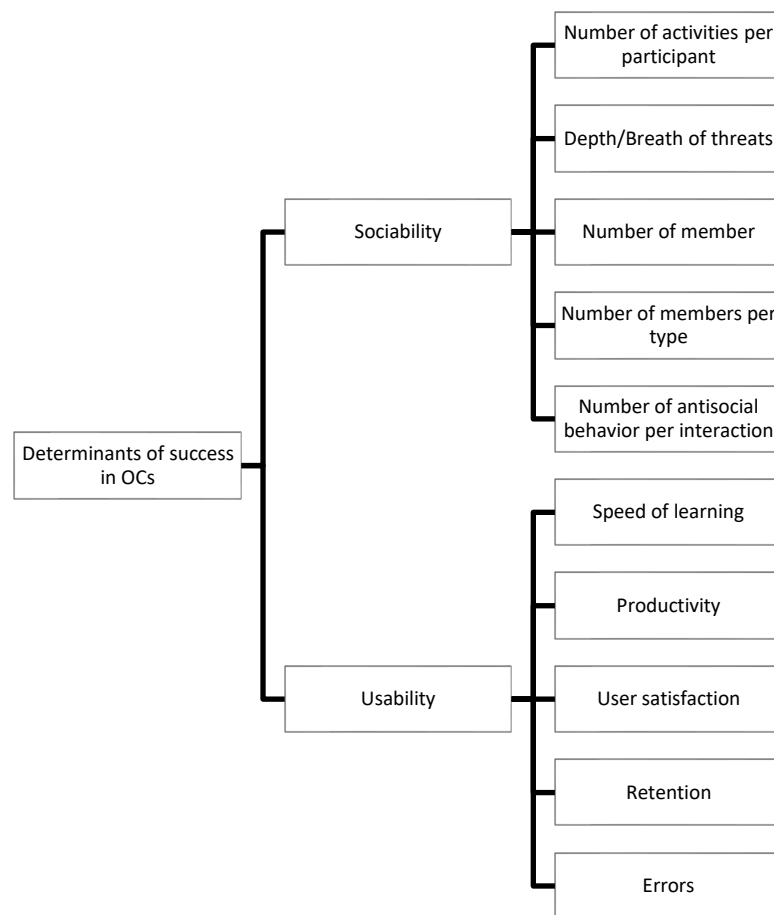


Figure 38 - Determinants of OC success (Preece, 2001)

Following the same logic, Cunha et al. (2019) proposed a comprehensive analysis to investigate the relationship between the many categories of success factors theorized within the stream of

research and the forecasted success achieved by the community. They developed four different success metrics, which represent compatible methods and tactics to guarantee the expansion of OCs, while also summarizing and testing the multiplicity of critical success factors developed during the early 2000s.

Firstly, *growth index* in general is usually associated with measuring the number of new participants joining a community in a predefined amount of time, which is usually a year. For clarity, the authors split such index in growth of commenters, and growth of posters, while carrying on their investigation on Reddit OCs. Secondly, *user retention* concerns the average retention rate in a specific period of time. This measure has been widely correlated with the engagement and loyalty rate. Thirdly, the *long-term survival* of an OC goes far beyond the dataset available for Cunha et al. (2019), given that they look at whether the community died or stopped after the in-scope years. The assumption for this metric was that the OC was considering as dying depending on the *volume of activities*, meaning that the average number of posts and comments as the fourth factors was overall decreasing or low.

Interestingly, Cunha et al. (2019) discover that these metrics have weak correlation, indicating they may reflect many sorts of success. Furthermore, they discover that distinct qualities of OCs explain and stress various success metrics, implying that positive performances may be obtained through a variety of activities, behaviors, tactics and managerial tasks. Hence, their research contributes to understand that success is complex and cannot be evaluated or predicted using a single metric per time, at least within the contexts of OCs.

This understanding has ramifications for the establishment of digital communities as well as the design of systems that support them. For example, tiny communities can flourish by posting often but never getting huge, whereas other communities may grow to tens of thousands of users, whereas just a few core members participate.

These findings indicate to the complicated roles that communities play online: each group is formed for a specific goal, and the group's success is predicated in part on nurturing the necessary habits. Finally, these findings also give practical guidance for anyone who wishes to build, manage or maintain an OC.

4 ONLINE COMMUNITY-BASED CASE STUDIES

The definition and use of online communities have never been so fashionable among companies and marketers, even though it has been largely under-estimated among researchers. This examination aims at refreshing and summarizing the vast and intricate literature produced between the initial development of the internet, at the end of the 90s, and the boom in the diffusion of digital technologies that took place since the beginning of the 2000s. Some companies, which were also mentioned in the course of this study, were able to ride the phenomenon of the moment and exploit it in their favor to increase their contact with customers or users, while others resist without actually having obtained this outstanding connection.

The previous theoretical sections dissected the different definitions and categorization of OCs as well as the role of the different members within them or the factors capable of influencing the behavior of the OCs participants, now become a substantial pillar to understand how different companies can build a profitable and healthy relationship by stimulating the OCs that populate their market or industry. To do this, it will therefore be necessary to observe a sample of successful companies that are popularly recognized as being based on the contact with OCs, regardless of whether it is direct or indirect.

Discretionally, it was decided to analyze four different case studies coming from different industries and having disparate business models. This will allow to highlight at least as many different strategies and methods to stimulate and positively exploit the contact with the OCs.

The first case, enclosed in the category called "Community Incubators", is that of Twitch Inc., which joined the Amazon ecosystem in 2016 Twitch Inc. propones itself towards the new generations as a substitute for traditional entertainment sources, while it simultaneously allows the streamers broadcasting their live to monetize the contents, and the members of the OC, who follow the streamer, to achieve outstanding levels of interaction, never achievable before in other entertainment contexts. As a matter of fact, the success of this type of business model lies precisely in allowing the monetization of the interaction between participants in the same OC. The platform, in this case, contains an indefinite number of OCs intersected in a large and entangled network of interactions and connections, where Twitch acts as an intermediary and incubator, ensuring their sanity and growth.

Secondly, enclosed in the "Influenced OCs" category, the analysis will move to one of the most famous case studies of recent years in the cosmetics sector, namely the Estetista Cinica After having achieved this success, contrasting the standard of perfect beauty and high communication proposed by the major labels in the cosmetics sector, this influencer has exploited her OC developed through years of investments in more traditional social networks. The results have been so exciting for the markets and customers that his business has seen an impressive growth in just a few years, capturing the attention of the Harvard University, among many, which developed a dedicated case study within their lectures. Once again, the power of this example derives from the proximity to the creator perceived by the customers, who enter an OC that has evolved around the personality of the owner Cristina Fogazzi, reflecting her narrative character to customers who may empathize with.

The third case study, enclosed in the category of "OC as target Customer", concerns the revolutionary OneDay Group developed thanks to the growth of the ScuolaZoo, founded in the early 2000 as a start-up. In building the OneDay Group ecosystem, founder Paolo de Nadai, who is now President had the formidable intuition of meeting the needs of the OC managed and engaged through social networks, meaning the students. The result translates into one of the largest and most promising scale-ups in the Italian sphere, capable of becoming a point of reference for new generations, both for schools, with ScuolaZoo, and for the road trips, with WeRoad. The ability to identify the needs and desires of its customers through the contact with the OC and to develop a business around them has allowed the group to continue the transformation from a simple Facebook page to a real business company.

Finally, defined as "All-around OC", the chapter will address the most recent application of communities on digital technologies that is the current visionary plan developed by Mark Zuckerberg. As a matter of fact, Facebook, now rebranded as Meta, recently presented its hypothesis of an extended virtual world, explaining its users how it will be possible to invite friends at home, play, surf, meet colleagues or attend a concert without leaving the living room. However, this represents only the tip of the iceberg, since there is a large variety of companies in the tech, digital and videogame industry who have invested heavily in the new virtual environment, hoping to reap the results over the next few years. The discussion on this topic is more animated than ever, while the advantages and implications of this direction for companies and people are probably not yet clear.

4.1 The Twitch case: Community Incubator

As previously exposed, the involvement of OCs in their business model is fundamental for companies, start-ups and marketers. In addition to that, some companies also make the management and development of communities in digital contexts the center of their success. Actually, some platforms favor the approach of people linked to the same interests, same hobbies or same desires.

For example, among the various organizations that include such goal in their mission, Twitch seems to be among the ones to have best internalized the relevance of this phenomenon in societies and markets. This is strongly confirmed by the presence of this platform among the top sources of web traffic in the US, after the acquisition of Amazon in 2016.

Reductively defined by many as "interactive TV", Twitch's business model, born in 2011 as a spin-off of Justin TV (Wire, 2021), seems to hide much more. In fact, this platform represents the center of the relationship between members and leaders of different OCs, providing users with an intuitive and multidimensional set of tools that facilitate their interaction. This has allowed Twitch to play a focal role as a community booster for content creators and innovative mass communication, while inducing dozens and dozens of companies and broadcasters to participate in the formation of their communities, both as contributors and as advertisers. Although Twitch remains less popular than other mainstream social medias, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok, it has rapidly gained audiences (Johnson & Woodcock, 2018). According to Woodcock & Johnson (2019), these outstanding results are firmly correlated with the *transformation of the creation, broadcast, and profitability of user-made content*.

The Twitch case is therefore exemplary to understand space and opportunities for companies to grow, keep in touch or create their own OC, regardless of their business area. Other extremely interesting examples that follow the same logic, which cannot be analyzed here due to the limits of the present dissertation, can be represented by Roblox, as the most popular platform among Gen Z teenagers for the creation of independent video games.

Furthermore, the analysis of the Twitch case will certainly allow highlighting the criticalities and limits of this platform, which in many ways struggles with the management of OCs as much as their development allows its success.

4.1.1 Business model and analysis

A preliminary consideration is that, at least in terms of competition, a single player predominantly governs online entertainment. As a matter of fact, YouTube has over 2 billion global users while Twitch - according to eMarketer (2021) - should only reach 40 million by the end of 2021. However, users are not the statistic and they do not pay attention to these dynamics.

Twitch's model differs from YouTube's one because it is not focused on advertisements (adv), which always require larger numbers of viewers. In practical terms, YouTube earns based on the amount of adv displayed to users before each sponsored content, whereas Twitch earns on engagement. Hence, Twitch partners are encouraged to sell paid subscriptions to their channel, ask for donations via PayPal or via Bits - a sort of crypto currency created specifically by Amazon for the transactions within Twitch - and only as a third option can they earn a percentage of advertising revenues.

This model led to a massive success for the platform, evidencing the reasons why eSports streamers, variety content creators and social media influencers continue to prefer Twitch over YouTube, that is, because they can monetize largely. To provide an example, the most followed streamers directly collect over \$ 100,000 per month through subscriptions. Achieving such figures through traditional advertising is very difficult, if not almost impossible for content creators.

According to Twitchtracker.com (2021), a provider of statistics related to viewership and usership within Twitch, an average of 2.5 billion unique accounts have been watching content within the Platform during 2021, achieving a maximum coverage of nearly 6.0 billion viewers, in conjunction with particular sponsored events or important occasions. The business tremendously grew during the pandemic starting in March 2020, as it offered a way to keep in touch with people and streamers while respecting the “stay-home” prescription, thereby confirming the potential of the platform in reaching the masses.

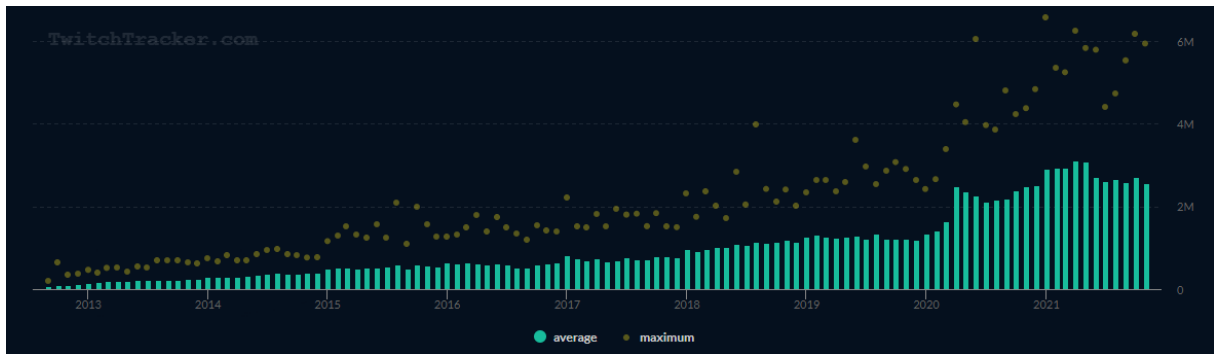


Figure 39 - Twitch Viewership per Year/Month (Twitchtraker, 2021)

Moreover, the diffusion of the platform among content creators and users had caused a large impact on the number of channels, which skyrocketed in early 2020. As a result, the ratio between the number of users and the amount of broadcasting channels has been slowly decreasing over time. This means that Twitch is not gaining viewers and streamers proportionally, but more viewers have been approached the platform, rather than streamers.

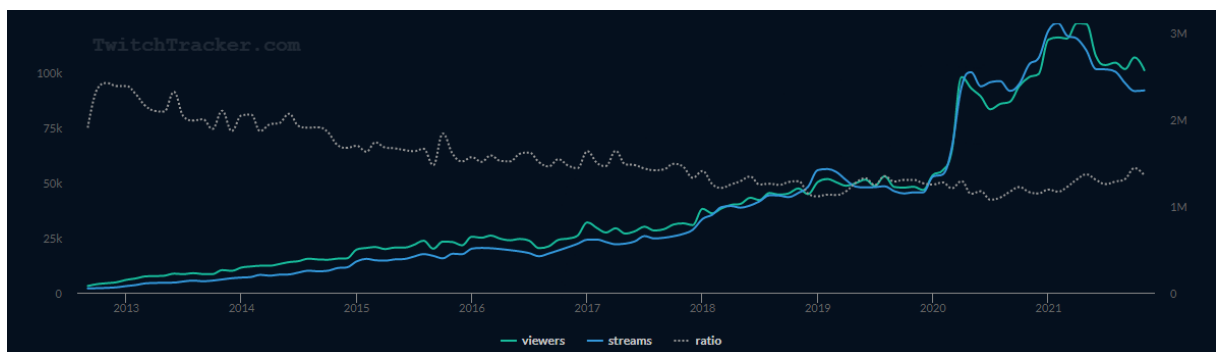


Figure 40 - Avg Number of Twitch User per Channel (Twitchtraker, 2021)

The trend of growth has been recapped in the graph below. Here, the explosion in the number of users between 2019 and 2021 has produced a multiplicative effect on the number of Twitch partners, meaning all those streamers who produce content professionally, on a regular basis. They have been selected to guarantee their ability to meet certain standards to the platform in qualitative terms, such as the compliance with Twitch Terms of Service, and quantitative terms, such as engagement rate, coverage and subscriptions. Given that the number of partners has remained constant between 2020 and 2021, the percentage of professional streamers on the total

mass of broadcasters has decreased from 0.0075% in 2020 to 0.0059%, meaning that the company had to review its policy for signing new partners, making it stricter.

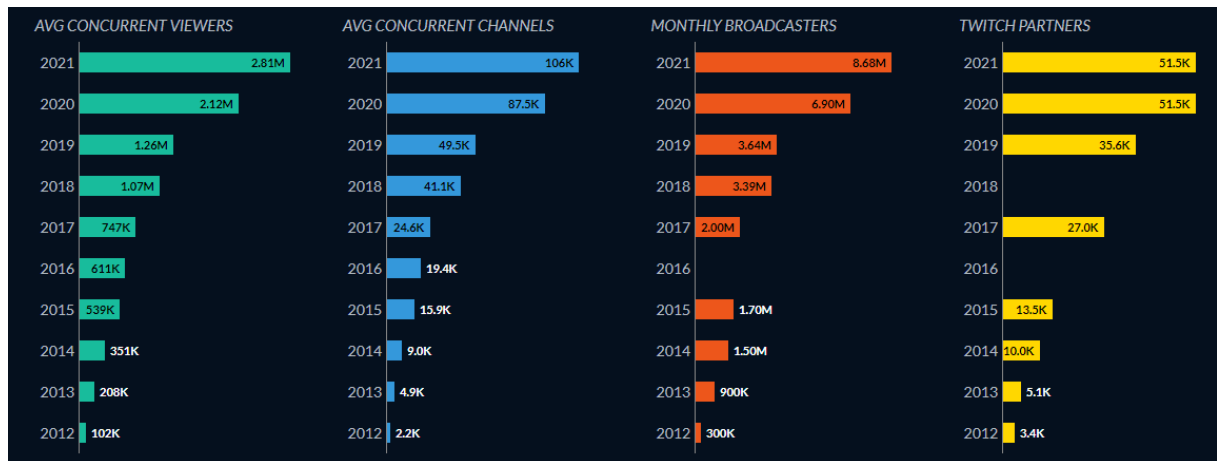


Figure 41 - Twitch growth recap (Twitchtraker, 2021)

The heart of Twitch consists in the OC revolving around each Partner, who possessed some additional instruments and tools to keep its community engaged, ensuring an adequate monetization of the content produced for both the streamer and the platform. In particular, the agreement to achieve the status of partner involve three different features (Twitch, 2021):

- Channel subscriptions and emoticons: Twitch Partners can earn money by accepting monthly subscription requests to their channels. The subscription options available are \$ 4.99 (Tier 1), \$ 9.99 (Tier 2), \$ 24.99 (Tier 3), or the subscription included with Prime. Additionally, partners can unlock up to 60 channel emoticons.
- Bits: bits are a virtual good that viewers can purchase to cheer on your channel, and that allows them to support you without having to rely on external sites or third parties. Twitch offers participating partners a share of the revenue they receive from bits equal to 1 cent per bit used to cheer them on. As a partner, you can also customize your emojis and bit badges.
- Advertisements: Partners earn a share of the revenue generated from advertisements played on their channels. In the dashboard, they can determine the duration and frequency of "mid-roll" ads that are placed while a video is playing.

Twitch offers an affiliate program, in which each user can find out more about the criteria and possibilities of achieving partner status, which results in the creation of a virtual Academy for streamers and content creators (Twitch, 2021). The necessary, but not sufficient, requirements that the platform fixes to the contract signature are the following:

- Unlock some specific achievement within your channel, in order to demonstrate that you possess a sufficient amount of followers or viewers to justify the investment.
- Post content that complies with Community Guidelines, Terms of Service, and DMCA instructions, to avoid the risk of inadequate behaviors.
- Guarantee the capability to meet the mentioned criteria on a consistent basis.

However, despite these rules applied to the partners, it seems that traditional media, meaning TV news and newspapers, are firmly reluctant to accept these professions as works born on digital contexts. A recent leak, in fact, has generated a widespread hype, concerning the earnings of streamers on the platform, according to some traditional medias, too excessive for the level of professionalism required (Il Sole 24Ore, 2021; Il Corriere della Sera, 2021; La Gazzetta dello Sport, 2021).

What is still not clear to these newspapers is that what is happening represents a factual migration from traditional media to new frontiers of entertainment, in which Twitch acts as a co-protagonist, where the crowd, meaning the OC, can physically perceive its participation.

The pandemic has speeded up the change, bringing a platform that is different from both traditional and more recent media such as Facebook and YouTube to the attention of the public. In fact, at the beginning of the decade everybody was convinced that YouTube would have replaced television and that it would have monopolized the web streaming industry. Today we are witnessing a transformation from that approach in favor of the direct relationship within OCs involved in live streaming.

4.1.2 Definition and classification

From a descriptive point of view, the analysis of the business model and the characteristics of this platform must be carried out in two directions. The first sees the Partners network as an OC controlled directly by Twitch and its appointed moderators, according to a hierarchical perspective. The second, on the other hand, sees every single Partner at the lead of an OC, which is found around him as through the interest shared among other participants. It is precisely for this

multitude of nuances that Twitch, rather than representing a single large community, has been defined as an incubator.

All the requirements presented by Whittaker et al. (1997) are respected, in a more or less rigorous way, by the business model and the characteristics of the platform.

Concerning the *primary reasons for belonging to the community*, viewers are evidently attracted to different channels in respect to their interests and the content provided within the broadcast. A large majority of content is developed around videogames, which turn out to be the first form of entertainment sought on the platform. Despite this, the category that has been developing in a powerful way in recent times is that of "Just Chatting", which means for Partners to be focused into maintaining an active conversation or discussion with and through the chat. This category today amounts to the 13% of the total time spent by users on the platform, representing more than 54mln hours viewed per week (Twitchtraker, 2021)

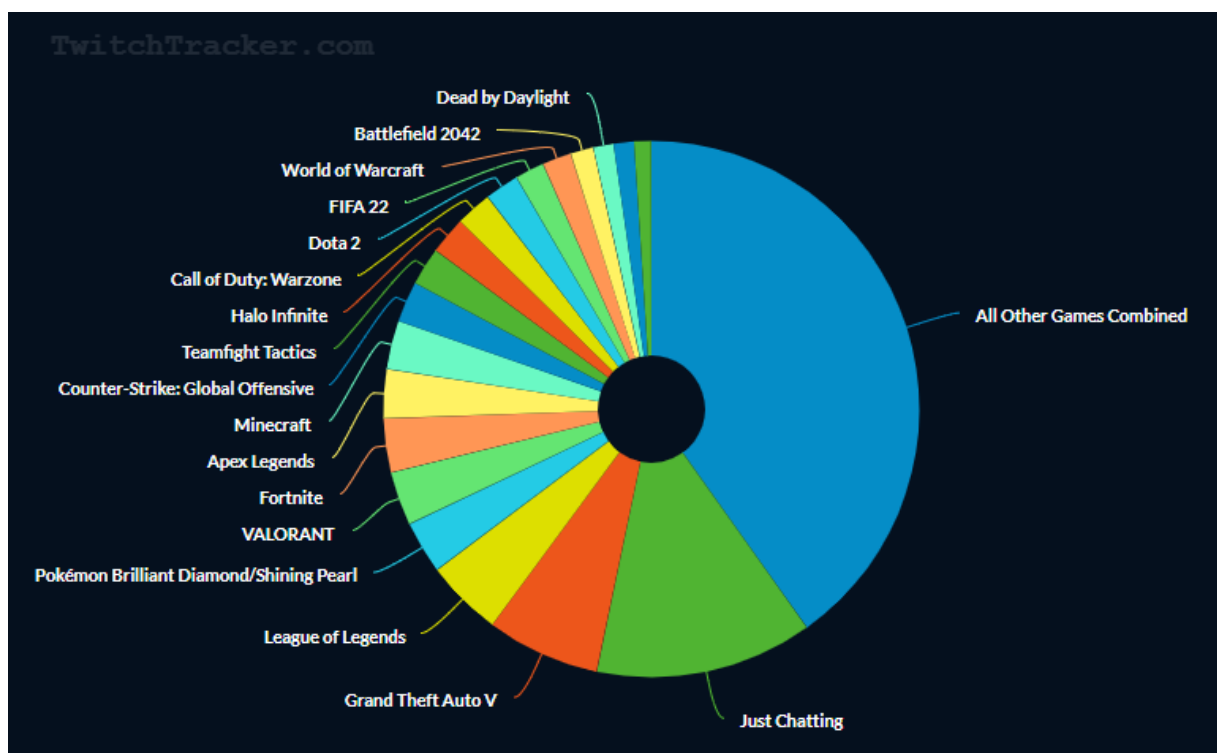


Figure 42 - Top Twitch categories (Twitchtraker, 2021)

Within the platform, *Repeated, shared and engaged activities* are on place, since everything is built to induce viewers to interact as much as possible in the chat and the content, through

different resources. There are tools for collecting channel points, accumulated through watching time, which can be used to unlock premium content, such as emotes or highlighted messages. Alternatively, the points can be wagered, betting on the outcome of the most disparate actions performed by the streamer. Polls have recently been introduced with the intent of letting the chat democratically declare his opinion. Just like a best practice, each Partner usually connects a speaker to Twitch, where a robotic voice reads the donations received from the subscribers.

Below, an example of Twitch interface is presented. Buttons for following and subscribing are well evident for users right under the video broadcasted, while the chat is displayed just above the norms to join the community (in this case, not particularly strict). At the top right of the screen, there are public achievement or milestones fulfilled by users, which ensure collective gratification.

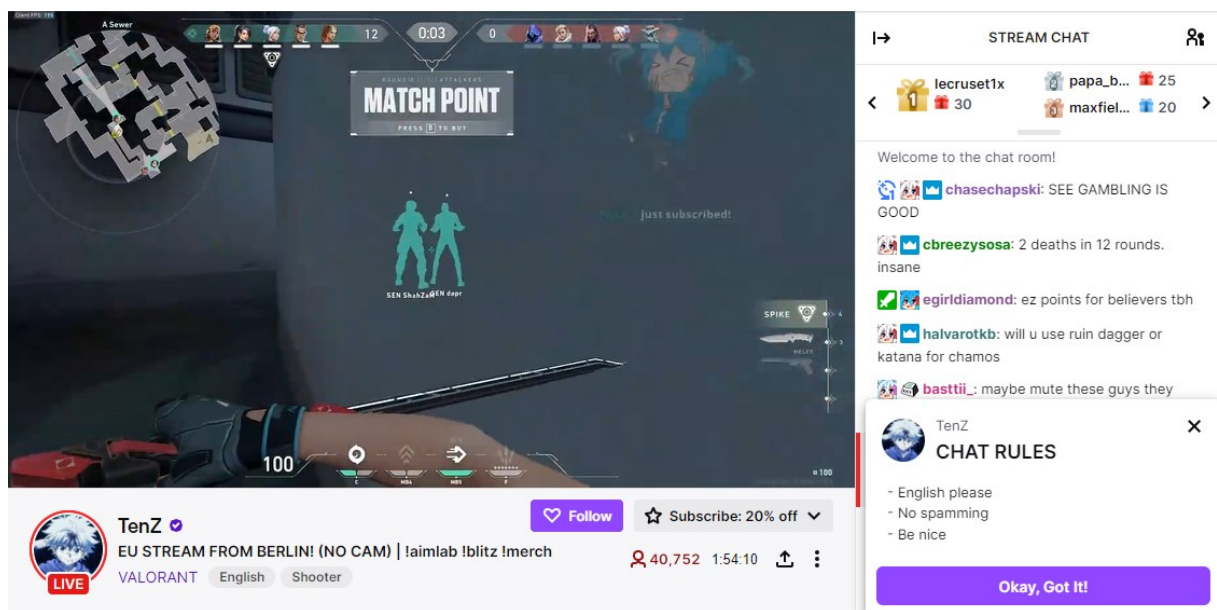


Figure 43 - Twitch interface (Twitch/Tenz.com, 2021)

The requirement of *shared resources and policies* is satisfied since all the aforementioned tools are available to users only after compiling and digitally signing a document, which contains specific rules and norms. Each partner is free to personally manage how to moderate their chat, but in general, rules are used to determine a correct and respectful conduct of the live, avoiding insults, spam or inappropriate behavior. The infringement of these rules can cause a ban or a

suspension, depending on the seriousness of the crime. At the same time, as already mentioned Partners are also required to comply with Twitch's ToS, avoiding the risk of incurring bans or suspensions (Twitch, 2021).

Reciprocity of information, support and services among members is always guaranteed, since all members can join different OCs and channels, depending on the level of subscription they purchased. This is also possible when viewers want to follow the live without actively contributing. In terms of user experience, however, the form of communication through private chat is discouraged, in favor of a public chat in which anyone can read, due to the innate nature of the platform. The possibility of contributing, on the other hand, remains at the discretion of the channel owner, who can choose whether to leave the chat free or whether to dedicate it only to subscribers.

Shared social conventions, language and protocols: language is one of the key points of OCs, as it allows characterizing and distinguishing participants, especially within Twitch. As a matter of fact, within each channel the Partner promotes a set of memes, repeated jokes and specifically codified language capable of influencing the chat members themselves. Since the chat is often displayed on the screen scrolling the messages very quickly, users usually utilize stickers and emotes made available by the Partner to communicate their opinions and interact with other users.

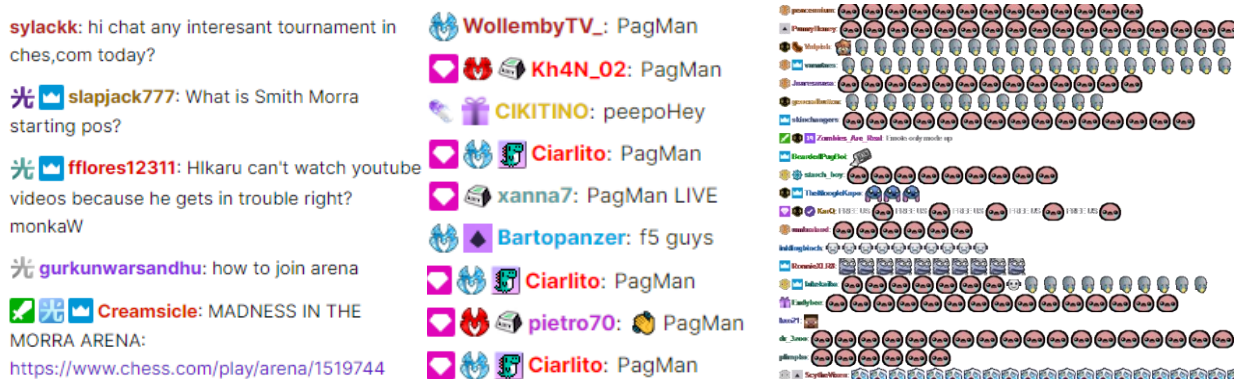


Figure 44 - Different types of Twitch chat (Twitch.com, 2021)

From the content-based point of view, the OCs surrounding and composing the environment of Twitch can be categorized as *topical communities* (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997), given that viewers are induced to self-select themselves into different channels, evaluating their own interest, passions and what they are looking for entertainment. Instead, according to the classification proposed by Hummel and Lechner (2002), few further considerations need to be taken into account. In fact, OCs as described within the platform of Twitch may be considered as both *C2C*, posing the attention the interactions and sharing activities occurring within the crowd, and *B2C/B2B*, evidencing that Partners lead the content, making profit over viewers and consumers.

The same kind of consideration is also reflected in the distinction proposed by Porter (2004), which considers *member-initiated* OCs as opposed to *organization-sponsored* ones. Here, what emerges from this simple scan of these two models is that perhaps both can coexist together within a business model like Twitch's, driven by the ambivalent role of partners as both user and sponsor.

From a revenue point of view, Twitch undoubtedly represent an entangled form of *members-fee* based OC (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997), where specific rare activities are priced, such as donations, and other ones are not, such as the contribution within the chat. Even though the business model is largely based on subscriptions, it would be incorrect to classify the communities within the platform as *subscription-fee* based or *pay-per-view* (Hanson, 2000), because practically viewers can often participate and enjoy streaming even without being subscribed to the channel. The subscription, as explained, only allows viewers to unlock additional features, which upgrade their accounts to the premium status.

Regarding the classification proposed by Plant (2004), OCs are firmly *regulated* contemporarily by Twitch Terms of Service and by norms viewers needs to comply with before joining the common chats. Both Twitch partners and the company pursue the *profit*, through donations and subscriptions, which is actually more efficient when the community permits *public* access.

Furthermore, each community in the platform is certainly *standalone* (Cothrel, 2000), as it does not require interactions beyond its boundaries for survival and growth, relying mainly on *advertising*, *subscriptions*, or *other sources* to generate resources internally and autonomously (Franz & Wolkingner, 2003).

4.1.3 Governance, social control and members' participation

From a functional point of view, a healthy, optimal and pro-efficient management of each channel's OCs is the key to the success of the Twitch platform. This is why, just as there are tools to keep members engaged in continuous interaction, it is the platform itself that provides each Partner with self-control mechanisms for their community and chat.

As for the central structure of Twitch, it seems clear how management with content creators is managed according to a *market governance* logic (Sibai et al., 2015). In practical terms, this means that no Twitch member or employee can theoretically be in possession of the power to make decisions regarding individual communities, but instead that regulation is entrusted to a standard of conduct, which in the case of Twitch is that of ToS which has been previously described.

Actually, the management of this issue was more delicate than expected. As a matter of fact, some examples have caused a stir, which seem to prove that the administration of the comparison of behaviors against ToS can be "discretionary". Twitch has in fact accused a famous Italian streamer, called Sdrumox, and other international streamers, of acting through racist and inappropriate behavior. Such failure to comply with the platform's ToS, thus, caused the partner's permaban (Webboh, 2020). This condition is particularly severe and stringent as it forbids the accused streamer to participate in any live within the platform on a permanent basis. If the former Partner appears in the stream of some other content creator, the channel will be immediately banned in turn. The experience of Sdrumox and other streamers can therefore be considered a real censorship action, which is typical of OCs governed by a *clan logic*.

The news and the mismanagement of Twitch on this occasion created an uprising among Sdrumox's fans, considering the streamer guilty only of having used a particularly strong humor, not suitable for the platform. A petition was even created to have the streamer readmitted to the platform, which, however, has not sorted any effect so far (Wired, 2020).

Instead, viewers within each channel desire to be the "top" or "greatest", aiming at emerging from the crowd through means of personality, comedy, intelligence, competency, innovation, range of activities, or whatever else. These principles may incentivize to categorize Twitch OCs as *reputation governed*, a logic that is born from the hybridization between clan and hierarchical governance (Sibai et al., 2015). Celebrity appears to be inextricably tied to power, with popular OC members obtaining far more influence and authority than those who are not. On the other

side, shared, socially determined standards and practices decide what is charming, hilarious, talented, or creative.

Furthermore, within each single channel, where the true hierarchy is expressed, different moderation strategies are implemented, starting from the definition of the roles of the channel and of the chat.

The *Partner*, or the content creator, remains the one and only leader of the community, as well as the center of interest of all the OC participants. As a matter of fact, it often happens that viewers are not so much attracted to the content itself, but rather to the person in particular. For these influencers, therefore, especially in such highly interactive platforms, it their own personality becomes the object of interest and entertainment, which they bring to their audience by choosing an appropriate narrative.

This allows them not only to monetize through Twitch, but also through the inclusion of WOMM campaigns, sponsorships, product placement and collaboration with other companies in their streams. Factors like communal norms, narratives, communication forms and promotions will be very important for them to decide whether to implement a strategy of evaluation, explanation, endorsement or embracement (Kozinets et al., 2010).

Yet a single channel, especially if followed by hundreds of thousands of fans, needs a more structured organization, which has resulted in a strong professionalization of the streamer or content creator's work. It is for this reason that the platform allows to assign roles on the channel, starting from the editors, who actually have partial control over the content transmitted. It is a clear role of responsibility delegated directly by the leader, according to a hierarchical-functional perspective.

Editors can visit a channel's panel and assist broadcasters with channel management by doing the following tasks: changing the stream's information, launching in between commercial breaks, modifying video data, video uploading, rerunning past broadcasts which can be downloaded, managing clips which may be reviewed, searched, sorted, and deleted, even in bulk (Twitch, 2021). When creating an OC, they act as *storekeepers* (Veloutsou & Black, 2020), helping the partner, or the *strategist*, in the more technical aspects of the management and selection of the most appropriate resources for the involvement of the spectators, guaranteeing an always updated, coherent and fluent flow of information. In the expansion phase, however, they

may act as *guides* (Veloutsou & Black, 2020), offering advice in translating ideas into interesting and engaging content.

Furthermore, moderators are appointed to assist streamers in managing their conversation, ensuring to keep it safe, friendly, and enjoyable by completing the following tasks: users may be timed out or banned; slow, subscriber-only, or follower-only conversation modes can be enabled; polls can be started, managed, and ended; predictions and bets can be started, managed, and ended. For partners, the support from moderators is critical, as they act as the first deterrent in managing Twitch chat and channel compliance. During the creation phase of the community, they act as *cultural agents* (Veloutsou & Black, 2020), which define the standard of appropriateness of languages, symbols, personally taking care of banning dangerous or inadequate users, while when the community is mature and the standards are openly shared or disclosed among the members, they act as *accountants* (Veloutsou & Black, 2020), retaining the duties of tracking users' involvement, safety and satisfaction.

Continuing the analysis and leaving the organizational part of the channel to focus on actors, VIPs are prominent figures of a streamer's fanbase who receive a participation award. The following activities are available to VIPs: they are immune to slow and subscriber only chat modes, hence limitations are not an issue while they are chatting, and even if links are disabled, they are allowed to post them during conversations. VIPs are the factual representation of both *heroes* and *celebrities* for the OC of a channel (Fournier & Lee, 2009). Using a hyperbole, they performed actions and deeds so heroic, that they were recognized by the leader himself with a medal of valor. They are those who have completed and reached the end of the path of climbing within the social ranks, emerging from the crowd, prestigiously approaching the leader. Therefore, nothing prevents that based on the experience and seniority acquired over time and goals, VIPs may act as *mentors* towards new members (Veloutsou & Black, 2020), directing them and transferring them all the positive values that the community respects and rewards. Unfortunately, they rarely act as *ambassadors* (Veloutsou & Black, 2020), embedding the authority to promote and represent the community outside the platform, since such burden still remains in charge of the streamer-leader.

Subscribers represent the critical mass of each channel; the body of the OC. Memberships allow communities to support the Partner on a regular basis while receiving rewards. In addition to the positive vibes, subscribers receive personalized global emoticons to use across all Twitch

channels, subscriber badges, ad-free videos, and more, which of course strongly affect their perceived sense of belonging. There are many different types of subscription:

- The *regular subscription* allows a viewer to pay a minimum of \$ 4.99 each month to support a channel, either on a recurring or one-time basis. Subscribers gain access to emoticons and other perks the streamers set up. For subscribers who want to offer more support, various tiers are available, bringing the cost to \$ 9.99 or \$ 24.99 per month.
- *Gifted subscriptions* are exactly what they seem, representing a method to allow viewers to give another user a month's subscription to channels. The gift subscription supports your channel just like a traditional subscription, and gift receivers have the option to become a regular subscriber at the end of the first month. As the channel grows, membership gifts are perfect for letting the fanbase support the growing community.
- *Prime Gaming* is included with Amazon Prime and offers numerous viewer benefits, including a monthly one-channel subscription. Prime Gaming members, who exploit their membership to support the Partners have a non-recurring setting, hence often streamers need to remind them to renew their subscription on a monthly basis.

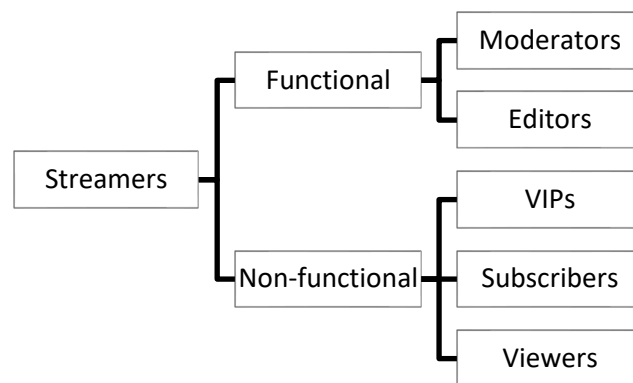


Figure 45 - Twitch channel structure (Twitch, 2021)

Within the subscribers, each member can interpret their relationship with the community in a different way, developing and assuming the most disparate roles.

The last category of agglomerated community participants on the Twitch platform is viewers. These represent what Preece (2001) describes as *lurkers*. They do not actively participate in the

chat, they do not donate, but they diligently follow the contents proposed by their reference streamer, freeriding on the interactions of the other members (Preece et al., 2001).

Unlike other social media, such as Instagram or Facebook, where most of the monetization is performed through partnerships and product placements between influencers and brands, the involvement of these viewers and their conversions from lurkers to contributors is essential for the growth and success of the OC in this platform. In fact, the only monetization implemented to lurkers is that relating to the vision of the ads, which however is extremely lower than donations and subscribers. It is for this particular reason that Twitch offers to partners and amateur streamers a school called "Twitch 101", suggesting all the tips to engage a community and maintaining a sufficient level of involvement for entertainment (Twitch, 2021).

These activities may certainly represent an application of the de-lurking strategies studied by Sun et al. (2014), resulting in the following tactics:

- *Make everyone feel welcome*: viewers come to Twitch because they want to bond with people who share their interests, interacting with partners and their audience. Authors, therefore, need to provide opportunities for viewers to get involved, helping them to feel like an important part of the streams, thanking them for their input, and calling them by name to make them feel part of the community.
- *Stand out from the crowd*: identify the unique elements of each stream, which grab viewers' attention.
- *Create a scene*: exploit chromatic keys, frames, decorations, or real scenography elements to create an environment that can attract the attention of the spectators.
- *Offline interactions*: the connection with the community must not be interrupted after the streaming is finished. Thanks to social networks, communication servers and websites streamers can stay connected with the OC even when offline.
- *Keep growing*: to keep the audience interested, always think of new ways to renew yourself, experimenting with new tools capable of attracting a completely new audience.
- *Appreciate silent spectators*: often silent viewers can represent a large chunk of the community. Partners should always try to make the chatter feel welcome and involve them in conversation.

4.1.4 Outlook

Twitch was one of the sites that most benefited from the pandemic, with over 17 billion hours spent on the site by users during 2020, as opposed to the 9 billion hours totaled in 2019 (TheVerge, 2021). The Amazon-owned platform surpassed even YouTube, totaling 10 billion hours, and pulverized Facebook Gaming with approximately 4 billion hours.

The pandemic allowed Twitch and live-streaming in general, to break away from the gaming industry thereby becoming a "mainstream" means of communication.

The "Just Chatting" category was the most successful during the pandemic, allowing many talk shows of scientific, political and current affairs debate to spread on the site, reaching hundreds of thousands of viewers. Even Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a representative of the 14th district of NY and a well-known figure of American politics landed on the platform with some programs dedicated to Among-Us that reached 450,000 spectators (Wired, 2020).

With the increase in the number of users, the problems related to the site and its community have also increased. During 2020, all streamers had to delete their clips and video archives due to a series of notifications for copyright infringement of music rights (TheVerge, 2020). As the platform did not have the intent to allow its content creators and partners to search and delete only the portions of content violating the rights of the majors, this caused the loss of years of broadcasting and work.

Furthermore, Twitch staff would also struggle to protect its community members, even during some events, from abuse and harassing behavior. More than 70 streamers, most of them girls, have publicly denounced on their social networks that they have been victims of gender discrimination and harassment (New York Times, 2020). Precisely for this reason, the company found itself having to suspend countless partners, even some notable ones such as Dr. Disrespect (BBC, 2020), one of the most popular streamers on emerged within the platform.

Twitch also revised its Harassment Policy at the end of 2020, making the words: *simp*, *incel* and *virgin* punishable (TheVerge, 2020). The first term became very popular on the platform to indicate men who are desperately seeking attention from a woman. Hence, "Incel" and "Virgin" will be words deemed punishable as they are considered as insults, causing many problems for the moderation staff who often suspend partners even indefinitely, due to the difficulty in interpreting these rules, which begin to become more and more complex as they vary according to

the context. In addition to that, the suspension of members also bears the consequence of dealing economic damage to each Partner's channel and to the overall Twitch structure.

Twitch must now share most of its earnings with more than 40,200 partners, given that the most substantial income for the company comes from subscriptions to paid subscriptions and bits purchased on the platform. As far back as 2018, the company did not reach its expected turnover targets, invoicing only 230 million dollars. According to experts' projections, Twitch should have reached 1 billion dollars in turnover in 2019. In fact, the company totalized barely half of the year's expected profits, even though the platform's partners counted "only" around 30,000, thereby eroding a smaller portion of Twitch's revenue if compared to the current situation. By comparison, YouTube generates \$ 15 billion a year in revenues from advertising alone, making it a much more economically founded platform than the Amazon's ones. This is the reason why Amazon was thinking of selling the technology behind Twitch by offering it to its AWS (Amazon Web Services) customers, for example to Netflix (Engadget, 2020). Adding to this the security problems happened at the end of 2021, which allowed a large leak of the streamers' earnings on the platform (TheVerge, 2021), it outlines a context that seems to appear tormented.

These, as already highlighted, are complexities that derive from the interaction between masses of users, and from the integration of a structured governance with local OCs. For the platform, the challenge of finding an adequate compliance standard for each of them still represents a goal to be achieved.

Despite this, it is quite evident that all the hype around Twitch is justified by a trend of interaction that, up until recent times, had never appeared among business organizations. The attention is very high, particularly on social and organizational issues, precisely because Twitch is the first support that allows a growth of OCs. Likewise, once users join Twitch, they are free to watch other streamers, potentially contacting other members and mixing with other communities, and so on. Twitch's role is therefore that of a *community incubator*, where a myriad of members rotates around partners, who mix their interests while participating in other communities at the same time. In fact, the phenomenon of spillover, which is typical of startups, cannot be excluded as in the context of the platform new Partners may emerge from existing communities, creating a considerable stream of revenues, both for content creators and for the platform.

4.2 Estetista Cinica: Influencing on Social communities

Starting from a physical beauty center, always telling her clients the truth about the results and effectiveness of treatments on cellulite, thermotherapies and other treatments, in 2015, when little attention was paid to the concept of body positivity, Cristina Fogazzi landed on social media as Estetista Cinica. She is a 47 years old woman from Brescia, representing not only a viral character, but one of the leading authors in Italy of the positive body change, opposed to the unrealistic aesthetic models of the past (Vanity Fair, 2019).

She writes on her Instagram profile that she has a belly, but it is not contagious, that she is *"slightly overweight (the nutritionist said so), short legs, hyper-lordosis and, if you witcher your butt, you can see the holes"*, but also *"stretch marks and sagging breasts"* (Instagram, 2021), but all this does not determine the quality of her life and her success.



Figure 46 - Estetista Cinica Instagram (Instagram/estetistacinica.com, 2021)

Cristina Fogazzi is not afraid to show herself in her underwear on Instagram: her goal is not to sensationalize those who do not have a model's body, but rather to give space to normality, to the representation of the diversity of bodies and people. It was precisely this honest way of talking about herself that appeared as a breath of fresh air in the beauty industry, inflated by images of glossy and perfect women, becoming the ingredient making her business flourish with the launch of a cosmetic line, VeraLab. This brand recalls the concept of some sort of cosmetic laboratory of truth, and it is specialized in the sale of beauty products both online and in physical stores, “real pink clouds” that have appeared all over Italy, from Milan, to the Rinascente in Rome, and recently at the Fondaco dei Tedeschi in Venice (Vanity Fair, 2021; Vanity Fair, 2019).

At the beginning of her career, she also published a book, which to date has already had several updated editions, “Cynical Guide to Cellulite”, which teaches how to recognize cellulite and accepting it, perhaps while sipping a gin tonic and enjoy life. During the pandemic, while the whole world was locked up at home, she transferred her expertise to social media by offering online consultations, virtual meetings and aperitifs, while exploiting her image to support charitable causes. Today she has new goals, but still the same mission.

4.2.1 Business model and analysis

“I did not want to go public, but maybe I have changed my mind. I would certainly like to go on because I still have so much fun” (Pambianco Beauty, 2020). With these words, Cristina Fogazzi collected the first Pambianco leQuotabili Award, won by Veralab in the small cap beauty category (companies with turnover of less than 50 million euros). *“This result once again demonstrates the success of our business model - says the founder - and based on a retail system that seamlessly integrates online and offline. We started in four and now we are 44! After an excellent 2019, archived with 22 million in revenues and 22% of EBITDA, we will close 2020 with a turnover of over 50 million euros with only 50 references in the range ”.*

Estetista Cinica alias Cristina Fogazzi was born with a blog, Estetistacinica.it, and soon became a promising start-up thanks to WOMM Marketing and the contribution of many followers, that is, the participants of its beauty OC, who have relied on the advice of her posts, on beauty therapy rituals of its BellaVera beauty center in Piazza Buonarroti in Milan and, above all, of its VeraLab beauty products, making this brand one of the most popular and purchased on the

market. Today the Veralab brand, beyond the e-commerce, is physically present at the Rinascite (Milan, Rome, Florence, Turin and Palermo), at the Pinalli sales points and in some Naïma stores. With over 900 thousand followers on Instagram and over 400 thousand on Facebook, a YouTube channel, a blog, a beauty institute, an e-commerce platform, a flagship store, and real corner shops, Estetista Cinica has defined a model of innovative company based on omnichannel: the secret of its success lies precisely in this hybrid formula.

Recently, she announced that she had become the Barbie Role Model for Italy, announced on Women's Day on March 8, 2021, unveiling an OOAK (One Of A Kind) doll with her likeness: *“Barbie celebrates Cristina for her strength, resourcefulness and determination, which allowed her to pursue her dream, realizing it with courage and seriousness. An innovative entrepreneur who has encouraged Italian women and girls to dream more, without being influenced by external factors. Her story continues to be a source of inspiration for future generations, encouraging them to believe in themselves and to make their dreams come true”* (Pambianco Beauty, 2021).

Brand value and awareness are the strengths of the entire business model. *“I think the discourse of values is now essential, it is becoming an important component of choice. If we talk about cosmetics, there is something for all tastes, all prices and for all women: knowing what the ethical value of a manufacturer is makes the difference”* (Corriere Economia, 2020). Cristina also shows strong awareness towards the entrepreneur's idea: *“I am a person who takes a stand on many issues. At one point, I wondered if it made sense or if it was not better to keep me more neutral. I answered no: I rather lose customers, but those who buy my products will always have a different relationship with me, because in addition to my creams they know that they are also buying part of my values”*. For this reason, asking her what she is most proud of in her entrepreneurial history, she answers *“The community. At a certain point, money becomes a number, a goal, but the people who believed in me and in my team when we vacuum-packed the creams is the thing that makes me prouder and still excites us”*.

In doing this, intercepting customers at multiple points of contact - starting from the various online social network platforms, from the blog to Facebook to Instagram, and ending up arriving at physical retailers - was really fundamental. A consistent omnichannel logic was therefore applied, allowing for coherent and integrated communication at each point of contact with the customer.

In fact, as Cristina reveals during an interview with Marco Montemagno (Youtube, 2021), initially the nature of the brand had to be purely online, without the support of a physical retail structure. The decision was made due to the strong perceived risk that online sales could have been cannibalized the stores business, which given the economic burden of positioning a brand in a physical store (in terms of catalogues, advertising, banners and exhibitors) it would have been counterproductive. Instead, after completing an Air Stream project, where the products were personally promoted in the squares of the major Italian cities, Cristina and her team realized that online sales increased from the same cities touched by her tour. Hence, retail was necessary for the growth of the online store, and vice versa.

Indeed, Cristina suggests the presence of a correlation between the followers of her social networks and the sales in the stores. The turnover seems to be higher in the cities where Cristina has the largest number of followers, tracked through Facebook and Google Analytics. Furthermore, this strategy of physically supporting the online business is particularly effective for more adult customers, in the age group from 45 to 55, where – Cristina confesses – there is *"still a strong resistance to online purchases"*. Thus, physically trying and testing the products makes the first purchase smoother.

As Cristina confirms, the ecommerce interface was the object deserving particular attention, as the user once entered the platform had to *"feel enveloped"* as *"part of the community"*, which drove the conversion rate into outstanding results, if compared to the average rate of the industry.

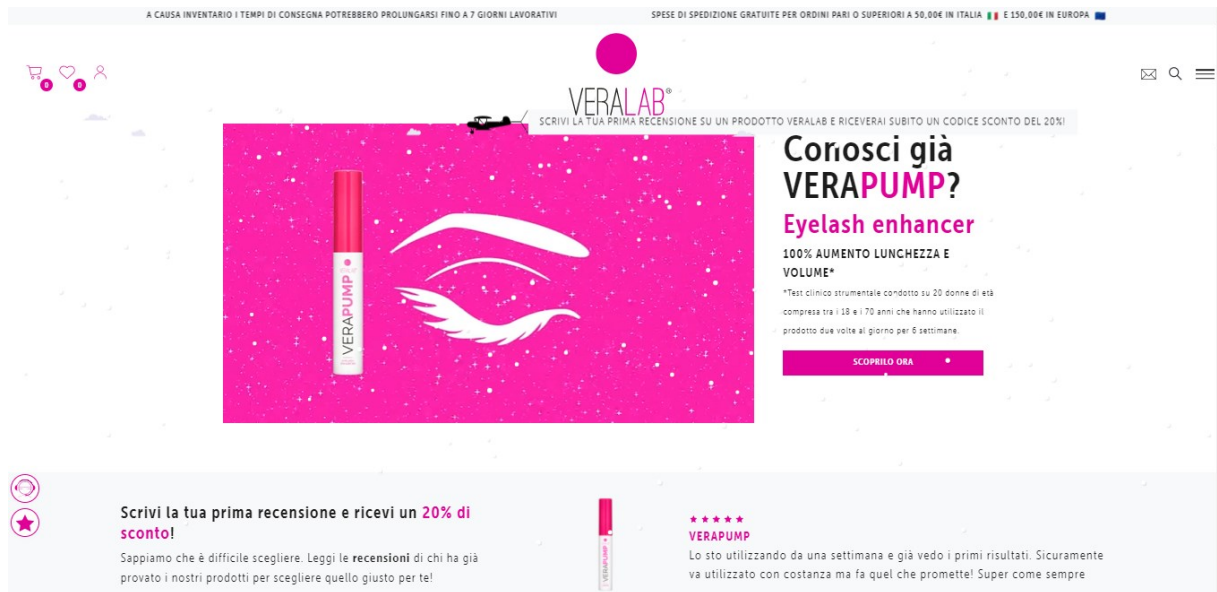


Figure 47 - VeraLab home page (Veralab.it, 2021)

Finally, Cristina commented: *"It is useless to remember how extraordinary and unusual it is to achieve such a result in just 5 years, leveraging only on social networks as the main communication channel"*.

4.2.2 Definition and classification

In the light of the previous considerations, the resulting question are: to what extent is it possible to attribute the success of VeraLab to Cristina? Are OC members attracted by Cristina's personality and character narrative, or rather by interest in the transparent cosmetics industry, as opposed to the mass distribution?

Probably, there is an ounce of truth in both these formulations. It is in fact undeniable how the OC built within the blog of the Estetista Cinica over the years represents a *community of interest* (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997), developed around one of the most complex and attractive industry ever, namely the cosmetics and beauty.

In tracing back Cristina's path, however, it can be seen that she has built her own blog starting as a small space for personal contribution to the world of cosmetics. According to this logic, therefore, the most suitable definition would be that of Porter (2004), as *member-organized OC*.

Consequently, the second definition that more adequately describes the success of the Estetista Cinica is that of an OC of *topic-oriented discussion* (Stanoevska-Slabeva & Schmid, 2001), where Cristina has compensated for the lack of transparency by the big cosmetics brands with an extremely direct and continuous narrative, opposing the standards of perfection that still govern the industry today.

Actually, especially at the beginning of her career, the blog had significantly captured the attention of beauticians like Cristina, interested and stimulated by the discussion about creams and treatments for skin imperfections or blemishes. This aspect, although not prevalent over the years, also brings the blog closer to a *community of practice* approach (Stanoevska-Slabeva & Schmid, 2001), where various professionals keep themselves updated on new practices on the market.

4.2.3 Governance, social control and members' participation

Cristina's relationship with her customers is the real basis of VeraLab's success. As a matter of fact, the entrepreneur has managed to carve out a growing space in the world of beauty through an attractive narrative. Personality, understood as influence, is the primary control mechanism of this OC. Cristina will always remain a point of reference for her customers, as she is confident, transparent, simple and realistic. She represents what women really are, rather than what society thinks they should be. As such, therefore, Cristina and the participants in her community feel free to communicate, free to defend their own body, even if not canonically perfect, perfectly embodying the values of body positivity.

For this reason, Cristina, as creator of the Estetista Cinica, is simultaneously holding the role of *mentor*, *hero* and *celebrity* within her OC (Fournier & Lee, 2009). The primary role of *mentor* is clearly expressed through each communication channel, in which Cristina undertakes to transparently transmit information regarding beauty products. She therefore directs participants or customers towards sustainable and guaranteed cosmetics, such as those developed in her VeraLab laboratory. The roles of *hero* and *celebrity* - which carry significant importance - are reflected in the fact that Cristina's narrative totally focuses on the clear acceptance of oneself, including her own flaws and imperfections. This activity stimulates thousands of women to embark on a hard path towards the confidence and acceptance of their own body.

The narrative behind every product is actually extremely personal. No customer is encouraged to buy without adequate information, which is produced and collected through numerous tests and questionnaires concerning, for example, the type of skin (as a combination of oily, dry, sensitive and aged skins), or through interviews aimed at understanding the type of cellulite, or the body shape (apple with adipose on stomach, back and arms, pear with adipose on hips, thighs and buttocks, or pepper with adipose on arms, thighs but thin waists).

The amount of information collected is then analyzed to offer each customer the type of product that best suits his or her needs. The experience, tested by hand, is totally immersive. In addition, the language with which these questionnaires are developed contributes to the idea within the customer's mind of being in a small piece of the internet in which everything is clear, transparent, and simply direct.



Figure 48 - Questionnaire on body shape (VeraLab, 2021)

This whole ecosystem attracts the participation of thousands of users, who enter the community of the Estetista Cinica. Therefore, on the part of the consumer there is a desire to communicate flaws in an environment and platform that guarantee inclusion. This approach exponentially increases Cristina's relatability towards the members of the community.

4.2.4 Outlook

VeraLab is undeniably one of the most appreciated and sold brands in Italy, with a turnover now comparable to the results achieved by the large traditional cosmetics brands, such as Lancôme and others. Probably, the flexibility and speed with which the influencer entered the Italian market did not allow these cosmetics giants to rapidly lose their market shares, who underestimated the possibility of managing a business emerging directly from social media.

Such results were derived from what can be called a *lovemark*, as a brand capable to build authentic and valuable relationships with users and, thanks to the strong emotional connection that distinguishes them, to influence and direct the purchasing actions of prosumers (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). The personification of the brand, the exponential growth of critical consumption and the growing need of consumers to identify themselves in the values of the brands they buy confirm the thesis exposed by Kevin Roberts, CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi, analyzing how brands are at the end of their rope, and only affection may rescue them (Roberts, 2004). In the age of social media, brands must make the community fall in love and become their best friend. In this context, Cristina was evidently shrewd.

VeraLab's next challenge, which is extremely ambitious, is to transform itself into an international brand, going beyond the borders of the Italian market. Beyond this, however, there is no community developed by Cristina during the years of the blog. It will therefore be necessary to adapt the narrative of the character to other languages and other cultures, which is far from being a trivial goal. Furthermore, the contents that initially made Cristina famous, such as the cynical cartoons and illustrations, are quite outdated. They worked in a precise way, place, and time.



Figure 49 - *Estetista Cinica* illustration (Elle, 2015)

In a recent interview, Cristina has revealed that the first key countries to be reached are France, Spain and England (YouTube, 2021). In particular, as she explains later, the positioning in France is necessary to achieve a leadership in the market where the culture of cosmetic was actually created and where communication based on the perfect standard still reigns supreme. Despite this, Cristina is well aware of the difficulties related to the expansion of her brand, even those of a purely structural and organizational nature.

4.3 OneDay Group: OCs as target Customers

OneDay Group is a company focused on services for Millennials and the Zeta Generation, from travel to school supplies. It currently counts 170 employees and its turnover amounts to around 20 million. It took off its start-up shirt a long time ago and today it aims to grow and expand its business outside the Italian borders. The founder, Paolo De Nadai, became president and a few months ago, Mattia Riva, creator of Dalani-Westwing Italia, was appointed CEO. During these years, OneDay has achieved an average annual growth of 40%.

The group is composed of different firms and brands, synergically collaborating toward a common goal: to create the largest community of students in Italy, as an agglomeration of the passions, hobbies and leisure of the new generation.

"At the time of high school, ScuolaZoo was born as a digital platform dedicated to the world of students, sometime later, given the shared passion for travel, we launched WeRoad" (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2021). This was the declaration by Paolo De Nadai in an interview, tracing the twelve

years of the group and its next steps, started with the construction of the new headquarters in Milan, called C-130, and with the opening of WeRoad in Spain.

"Our challenge is to grow in a structural way, rapidly scaling the different businesses of the group and keeping the focus on the younger community and generations" underlined Mattia Riva. *"We are 170 people with an average age of 29 years old, added De Nadai, and the issue of age is relevant, precisely because being close to the target has been and is our strength. It will be necessary to delegate and listen"*.

Being closely linked to fieldwork is evidently the key, attracting teenagers in online spaces and meeting them in schools (80 thousand young people physically met, 4 million online) alongside with the organization of tailor-made activities. The business model of OneDay as a developer of targeted services for young people is built around common interests, starting with the online journey, and it is based on a network of brand ambassadors and communities that represent the real beating heart of the group.

Hence, this represents the stage where playing the challenge of change: *"The new generations go fast and companies are no longer able to reach them"*, due to the distance between them and their communities, it may be added. *"We have experienced epochal changes on the ScuolaZoo platform, and we have transformed our communication on social networks to involve, develop and grow together with our communities, from the customers to the employees"*. It is precisely to the ambassador network that One Day turns to look for new profiles to hire in the company, resulting in the 17% of the employees being contacted from this channel. *"As a company we will have to manage change in a structural way"* underlines Mattia Riva. For One Day, the organization is capillary and focused on individuals, with an important structural and human investment: each community, for example, has a unit directly reporting to the company, which takes care of engaging individual ambassadors, and there is also great attention to the growth of each person and there are no communication hierarchies."

"The challenge is to follow the growth of the communities and remain open to the new generations". A company made by Millennials that speaks to Millennials is an important resource for companies that want to open up to new market segments. With this in mind, there is ZooCom or Talent House, which offers businesses strategic and creative consultancy or develops specific marketing campaigns.

4.3.1 Business model and analysis

OneDay's branches of business have a common denominator: the community. The main competitive advantage possessed by the group is to create loving brands for the new generations. The pillars for the creation of this vital advantage are working through an unmistakable smart and passionate approach, ensuring flexibility and rapidity to land projects, which makes the real difference.

- *Community*: knowing the target is not enough, they like to live it. They look for the daily involvement of young people through activities in the field and on social networks.
- *Need*: living and listening to communities every day allows OneDay to intercept their needs and build on these new business scenarios.
- *Delivery*: thought, said, and finally done. They always try to enter the market at an outstanding rapidity, since “ideas are cheap, execution is everything!”

The brand portfolio included in the group, therefore, responds to this need for speed and simplicity, where every single firm has been created, managed or acquired in order to allow proximity to the customer, the supreme participant of the community (OneDay Group, 2021).

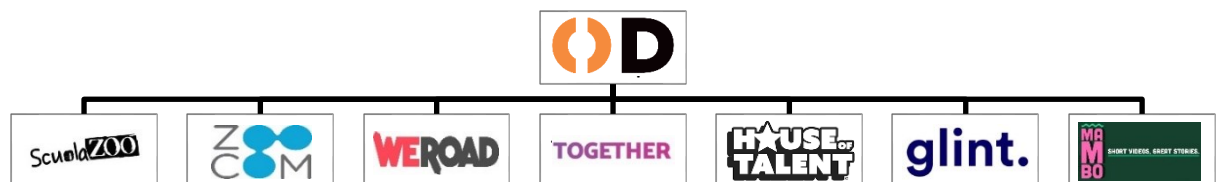


Figure 50 - OneDay Group brand portfolio (Corporate Website, 2021)

ScuolaZoo started in 2007, representing the historical brand of the group, from which it all began. Today it is the most loved media brand for young students. Over the years, it has been able to involve and represent two generations of adolescents, reaching the entirety of Z-Generation thanks to a mix of activities on social media and in real life, from travel to activities within schools.

Zoocom started in 2013 as the creative media agency of the group with a focus on Z-Generation, specializing in keeping brands, projects and companies updated, permitting them to remain relatable for younger generations. This results in a team of creatives and transversal strategists who love their target, listen to them, live them by creating the opportunity for brands to get in touch with them through content and events, speaking their language.

WeRoad started in 2017 while today it represents the largest online community of young road travelers in Europe. WeRoaders and coordinators share the desire to discover distant countries, new cultures, but they also embedded the desire to share this experience with their peers. These results in a community that believes in sharing experiences, whose goal is travelling as well as creating friendships that last over time. In short, it is much more than a tour operator.

Together, from 2019, is the integrated communication agency that aims at creating lasting relationships between brands and people, managing tactical projects capable of generating an immediate impact on the business. This goal has been achieved through ideas with the power to make connections even when this seems impossible. Thus, this represents something unique, surprising and magical, which in *OneDay* has been named “Togetherness”.

House of Talent joined the group in 2018 as an accelerator of dreams. With its crew of talents and creators it addresses the target teenagers between 9 and 14 years old, creating entertainment content capable of transmitting values such as inclusion, team play and exaltation of diversity. Based in a 333 square meters loft in Milan, it constitutes the first Academy entirely dedicated to the Z-Gen and the development of their talent.

Glint is the youngest branch of the group, created in 2020 as an ecommerce business partner with the aim of helping brands to grow through a simple, modular and shared digital experience. It remains alongside SMEs and large companies from all industries wanting to place and sell their product online, through the setup and management of the ecommerce channel, but also through the strategic preparation of digital native brands for online sales with a direct-to-consumer approach.

Mambo, on the other hand, recently joined the group, takes advantage of the content creator community to offer a fast and accessible solution to all brands or companies desiring to produce short video content on new social networks like TikTok (Engage, 2021).

4.3.2 Definition and classification

Generation Z and Millennials are admittedly the targeted audience to which all OneDay is dedicated. Therefore, following a content-based classifications, it is only a question of identifying this category within the models proposed by the various researchers mentioned. Again, there is no single interpretation, but rather multiple ones that may be combined together to stress different aspects of how OCs can contribute to the OneDay business model.

Following the definitions proposed by Hagel and Armstrong (1997), the target community of OneDay can be classified as *demographic consumer-focused* OC, since belonging to a particular generation is just one of those characteristics that fall into the demographic range. Indeed, if the reference generation of the group had been the boomers, that is, all those people born between the years 1946 and 1964 (Khan Academy, 2020), the ways in which they should have been intercepted are completely different, starting from the communication channels, to the narrative of the group, up to the real contribution of the OC to the purpose of the company's portfolio.

The peculiar thing about the OneDay portfolio is that every single brand in the group deals with a specific sub-category of this demographic community, or, in other words, focuses on a single aspect that the target community necessarily demands.

Following this suggestion, ScuolaZoo deals with one of the most important themes of youth, namely, school and education. A large section of ScuolaZoo's business is therefore supported by collaborations between the brand and other institutions, such as schools, but also local tour operators for summer travel, which allow a revenue-based categorization as *exclusive deals* (Hanson, 2000). Another significant portion of ScuolaZoo's business comes from school merchandise, such as diaries, backpacks, diaries, T-shirts, cases, which moves the classification towards that of *product and sales* (Hanson, 2000).

Likewise, WeRoad addresses another aspect on which young people are particularly sensitive, namely the possibility of traveling, the desire to know new places, cultures and people around the world. WeRoad, therefore, seems to be placed exactly halfway between the two classic definitions of *topic-oriented* OC (Stanoevska-Slabeva & Schmid, 2001) and *relationship* OC (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997).

On the contrary, Zoocom does not deal directly with managing the community of Millennials or Z-Gen but it rather focuses on providing consultancy and strategy services to all those companies who intend to target young people, but do not have the resources to intercept them, or who simply desire to access higher level of competence and professionalism. In the case of Zoocom, it is precisely this direction towards specific companies and business organizations engaging the targeted generations that allows it to be included in the *business category OC* (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997).

Furthermore, for the same reason House of Talent deals with the management of an *OC business category* (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997), meaning targeting those who wish to take the path of the content creator in new digital platforms such as TikTok. Within this crew of influencers, the talents are engaged for the organization of events, book sales, and participation in television programs, web formats and even writing songs, acting as an intermediary between these young dreamers and renowned brands and companies. From these collaborations, as it is now well known, significant portions of the influencers' earnings arise.

In short, the strategy followed by the OneDay Group is transparent, and it consists in targeting the environment that surrounds the new generations, trying to engage them and their stakeholders in the most tactical points of contact.

4.3.3 Governance, social control and members' participation

As described by the Culture Manifesto (OneDay Group, 2021), the group has its own history and a strong identity. Hence, the way of doing business is based on three pillars, almost mantras, shared by all the companies of the portfolio.

- *Ambition* is included because in 12 years the company has gone beyond the comfort zone, taking all the opportunities while trying to perpetually break the industry's status quo. They continue to do so by aiming at achieving a large international growth in the next 3 years.
- *Speed* is needed to follow the fastness of the target, while continuing to evolve with it.
- *Concreteness* is guaranteed, since between "saying, ideating" and "doing, executing", what is ever relevant is the second option. At all seniority levels, collaborators are likely to get their hands on multiple tasks and activities.

The shared approach makes everyone speak the same language and creates the fertile ground for OneDay growth of current companies, as well as the birth of new businesses. As a matter of fact, every business budded another, and this is their peculiarity: creating, learning quickly, innovating and creating new spin-offs are the keywords. In this way, OneDay unleashes potentiality and turns ideas into business, so that the majority of their businesses are born as a spin-off of existing products.

From a CSR point of view, OneDay aspire to have an impact on New Generations because young people represent the driving force of what is happening in the world today, shaping how it will evolve tomorrow. This is why OneDay takes action on social responsibility projects, ensuring to accompany young people in every phase of their growth by engaging them on specific themes of adolescence and adulthood. Collaborators meet young people from day one on the benches, listening and supporting them in dealing with the problems related to bullying, gender and race discrimination, and bad information. The aim has been to sensitize them on the importance of responsible entertainment and accompany them through their first life test until maturity.

The group, thus, continues to sustain them even when it comes to the preparation to confront the world of work after studies, because the delicacy of such moments as a personal and professional transition towards adulthood is widely recognized.

In this case, this Manifesto acts both as a source of communication to the outside contexts and as a "user guideline" for managers and collaborators within the group, which as Sibai et al. (2015) investigated, represent one of the main moderation activities in the logic of *clan governance*. Such definition adapts extremely well to the nature of speed, practicality, concreteness and flexibility with which this scale-up proposed its businesses and services within the market.

4.3.4 Outlook

The growth of OneDay, until now, has been substantial, constant and consistent with the strategy with which Paolo de Nadai began his adventure by founding ScuolaZoo, which acted as the first point of contact with the world of the new generations. Over the years, as described in the previous sections, a successful product diversification tactic was therefore implemented, which allowed the group to achieve an extremely vast and organic corporate structure and brand

portfolio. Every business that has later become part of the group has strategically addressed a need that the new generations or their stakeholders expressed.

The outcomes of many examinations show that the desire to belong to a group or movement is still present among teenagers, although it has changed from face-to-face to meet ups within online communities (Mäkitalo, 2020). Digital networks are unquestionably the best way to connect and involve the Generation Z, but businesses must be cautious about the platforms and material they leverage. Such generations appear to be quite selective about the networks they consume, with an innate orientation towards visual material. The value and potential that influencers and content marketing may provide to businesses, as well as a better knowledge of what influencers mean to young people, has been a fascinating competitive advantage built through the years within OneDay Group.

Generation Z is frequently described as tech-savvy, well-educated, internationally connected, and innovative (Gupta & Gulati, 2014; Priporas et al., 2017). Generation Z is also known as “*the wired generation*” because they can easily find and grasp information, achieve a global and contextual outlook, but appear to get simply insulted and fragile (Jeys, 2019). Generation Z now has a variety of chances to communicate, engage, and govern their digital behavior thanks to digital mediums. Technology is an instrument for generation Z; whose lifestyle is shaped by this, so they were conceived into a high-tech period (Gaidhani et al., 2019; Van den Bergh et al., 2016). Most teenagers' usage of social media has become entrenched in their lives, and it is one of the fundamental tendencies shaping Z-Gen (Gaidhani et al., 2019; Tulgan, 2013).

In conclusion, as can be easily understood, for companies that have something else, as the main protagonist of their business, the knowledge of the contexts that surround these new generations is difficult to obtain internally. However, failing to communicate with these target customers is critical, since Millennials and Z-Gen represent a large chunk of tomorrow's market for many of these companies. For this reason, the positioning of OneDay Group and its complete portfolio of products and services is extremely strategic and satisfying in managing OCs as target customers.

4.4 Meta: All-around OC

During the Facebook Connect event, Mark Zuckerberg, among the most famous CEOs, re-named his company: it is called Meta and reminds the symbol of infinity, a little squashed, in blue. The names of the individual apps and platforms Facebook (intended as social network), Messenger, WhatsApp, Instagram and Oculus will not change. As a matter of fact, the corporate structure remains unchanged.

The declared goal is to adapt the image of the colossus of Menlo Park to the construction of the metaverse, intended as "evolution of the mobile Internet" on which Facebook, or rather Meta, invested about 10 billion dollars in 2021.

The metaverse should indeed result in a "virtual environment" where people can actually enter and exit as a sort of Internet in three dimensions, where everybody can meet, play, work and shop in the form of an avatar capable of reproducing facial expressions and body language and with the aid of virtual reality viewers, glasses for augmented reality and ad hoc applications.

It is not a match that Facebook-Meta can imagine playing alone: *"Teleporting to the metaverse will be like clicking a link on the internet: an open standard. We need interoperability"*, explained Zuckerberg (Corriere Economia, 2021). Other companies like Epic Games and Microsoft are already working on it.

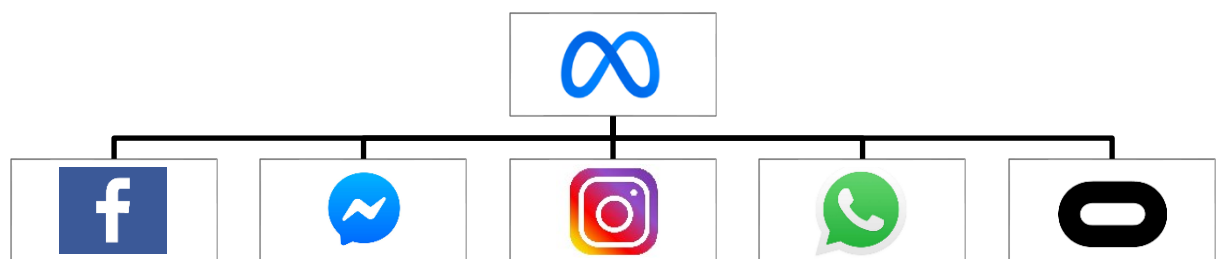


Figure 51 - Meta brand portfolio (Corporate Website, 2021)

4.4.1 Business model and analysis

Last spring, a Gucci handbag has been sold for around \$ 4,100. What is weird about it? It was the digital-only version of the Dionysus model, with the iconic bee, within Roblox, one of the most famous platforms for Z-Gen video-gamers. In the real world, the same tangible bag costs \$ 700 less (AP News, 2021).

The metaverse brought to the fore by Mark Zuckerberg is not just an idea or a vision but is and will be a way to monetize and experiment with disruptive business models. It will not be a matter of games or platforms people can interact with from the outside, but which people can enter and experience firsthand, through an avatar. At the moment, advertising is worth almost the totality of revenues for Meta: 28.2 billion out of 29 total in the third quarter (Facebook Investor Relations, 2021). In the metaverse, Mendelsohn, vice-president of Meta, explains that *“advertising will be an important component, but not the main one: we are already seeing alternative experiments with augmented reality. On Instagram Rayban let you try on different types of glasses. Brands can let you try on make-up, clothes or evaluate the purchase of a piece of furniture. We are only at the beginning of the journey; we can imagine that there will be a free part financed by advertising and a paid part, such as the purchase of concert tickets. Brands will also be able to create rooms in which to show experiences and products”*.

The mention of the Luxottica brand is not accidental. *“The Rayban Stories we launched with them can be seen as the very first step towards the creation of a hardware ecosystem”* says Mendelsohn *“to allow people to move in the metaverse, look around, and hear the sounds from various directions”*. For Meta, hardware is a crucial junction, as well as a further possibility of diversifying revenues, if it will be able to reach the masses with its products.

He wants the Oculus purchased with foresight in 2014, the Stories glasses and the other devices to become the gateway to the new world and, in fact, through smartphones. As a result, Meta will take control of the ecosystem, with Zuckerberg pledging to creators and developers of more substantial earnings than is now happening in the Apple-iOS and Google-Android enclosures.

“Our goal is to reach one billion people over the next ten years and generate hundreds of billions of dollars in digital commerce”, says Mendelsohn. Trying to interpret the trend staying behind such decision and establishment, Luca Della Mora explained that *“We spend more and more time online, and more and more often our image is delegated to an avatar. It therefore becomes more and more natural to attribute the same importance to virtual goods as we do to*

physical ones: for the very young it is already so". The manager emphasizes that with the NFT (non-fungible token) and the metaverse, *"the concept of guaranteed ownership in the digital world changes: objects or spaces can be bought, sold and exchanged. Possession must be multi-platform"* (Corriere Economia, 2021).

Furthermore, on top of these innovations, Meta presented its haptic glove, which will be used to recreate the sensations of contact with objects in the three-dimensional world on the hand, making the experience also on a physical and multisensory level for the first time (la Repubblica, 2021; Eurogamer, 2021; Smartworld, 2021).



Figure 52 - Meta haptic gloves (Eurogamer, 2021)

4.4.2 Definition and classification

A Metaverse represents a theoretical and artificial ecosystem related to the physical world, defined by the prefix "meta", suggesting transcendence, and the term "universe", suggesting a deep link with reality too. According to Lee et al. (2021), to attain such dichotomy, this concept must proceed through separate steps, which will be examined as follow.

Digital twins concern massive-scale, combined with elevated-fidelity, virtual schemes and structures. Natural duplicates' features, such as item movements, heating, and even functionalities, are reflected in digital twins (Mohammadi & Taylor, 2017). Actually, what sustains such connection seems to be the data (Grieves & Vickers, 2017). Computer-aided design (CAD) for industrial design and product development, artificial intelligence (AI) for factories automation or smart cities, but also robot-assisted tools for dangerous procedures are just a few of the present utilization of these technologies (Bauer et al., 2019; Pokhrel et al., 2020; Smith & Ramamoorthy, 2020; Cureton & Dunn, 2020).

Once a digital duplicate of the material universe is built, the second step aims at creating a *digital native* content, where everyday makers may be symbolized through avatars and fictional personas are engaged in shaping realities in virtual environments. Similarly, associated structures and institutions, such as culture, business, legislation and rules are necessary to foster these inventions (Bush, 2021). Those habitats are the digital equivalent of the real society and its current regulations, which legitimize the development of goods, commodities and services (Viljoen, 2020).

The metaverse might evolve into a self-sustaining and permanent simulative world, which co-exists alongside and interacts with the actual reality with a substantial level of autonomy as a result of the last phase, namely, *surreality*. As a matter of fact, avatars embed individuals who possess the possibility to join and perform a variety of live tasks and activities, concurring with an infinite number of other users (Grieves & Vickers, 2017). Surprisingly, it allows compatibility, interoperability and interconnectivity across devices containing multiple digital realities. This, at least on a theoretical level, should permit users to co-create, distribute and share contents among several yet t distinguishable digital universes (Lee, et al., 2021).

However, how do the specifications of the metaverse proposed by Zuckerberg reconcile with all those traditional definitions previously studied and analyzed? Furthermore, as a surreality, can we assume that all theories relating to offline communities manage to collide with those of online, as the metaverse is a clear duplicate of reality?

In fact, the metaverse represents the maximum expression of the definitions proposed by Rheingold (1993), Jones and Rafaeli (2000) and other authors, while at the same time it embeds all the attributes of the OC proposed by Whittaker et al. (1997). Despite this, it actually limits to apply Stanoevska-Slabeva and Schmid (2001)'s definition of "*virtual world*" to the Facebook

metaverse. In fact, in the early 2000s, it was still not clear how far the technology could have gone, that is, how far connectivity and interaction between users in digital contexts could be guaranteed.

Perhaps, among the criticism that could be raised in the parallel between the concept of metaverse and OC, there is the objection that Meta represents more a *crowd* or a *commonplace* (Zhang & Watts, 2008), than a *community* in the strict sense of the term. As a matter of fact, since we do not perceive everyday life as a community, but we rather apply such definition to a context in which individuals participate in specific interest groups this latter meaning could be applied to Meta. However, if Meta were to maintain the setting held up to until now on Facebook and Instagram, it would be plausible to assume that avatars, and therefore people, will self-select in microenvironments existing in the metaverse, and divided between the various platforms of the brand portfolio.

For example, when people walk into the supermarket to do their shopping, they are definitely not participating in a community. Nevertheless, what if shopping was performed in a comic shop? In that case, the doubt of belonging to a community during the act is already more substantial. According to the same logic, when in a few years the shopping will be made physically (but virtually) on Meta's environments, will the mere presence of users on the platform be considered as a sufficient base of shared interest to allow the categorization of users in a community?

Obviously, these are just speculations, but this approach would be proposed as a continuation of what has been developed in recent decades by this web giant. All that remains is to wait, to understand how the Metaverse will actually be implemented in the near future. What is certain is that marketers, business organizations and researchers are extremely curious to know how this communication channel can be used in C2C, B2C and B2B digital contexts.

4.4.3 Governance, social control and members' participation

The notion of avatar derives from a Hindu concept, representing the manifestation of a god in the common world shaped as people or animals. In recent years, gamers and users of virtual social platforms, such as Fortnite, have been able to customize and tweak the look of their avatars with practically unbounded choices (Kolesnichenko et al., 2019). Avatars as buddies, advisors, or a virtual ego have also been used in current investigations to help people control

themselves and boost goals in fields like education or health (Fuchs et al., 2019). Hence, avatars are digital representations of humans in digital environments, as well as many other physically integrated entities, for example NPC (non-player character).

The digital depiction of a human operator is meant to operate as a reflector of their behavior for the interactions with several other metaverse participants. Throughout diverse social practices inside the metaverse, the configuration and attractiveness of avatars may influence user perceptions, such as sensation of plausibility (Latoschik et al., 2017) and existence (Kocur et al., 2020), integrity (Brown & Prilla, 2020), body property (Freeman & Maloney, 2021), and group satisfaction (Ratan & Hasler, 2014). Those perceptions are in turn influenced by a variety of aspects, including the specifics of the avatar's face (Wei et al., 2004) and attributed expression (Murphy, 2017), the accuracy of the avatar's body (Kocur et al., 2020), avatar outfits (Brock et al., 2018), reliability of facial animation (Yun et al., 2009), the grades of precision in avatars' gesticulations (Mathis et al., 2021), shading (Ishii et al., 2016), the styling of avatar behaviors (Brown & Prilla, 2020), coordination of the avatar's physical movements (Choi et al., 2019), among those deserving a mention.

However, existing computer algorithms are not yet capable of capturing and reflecting users' feelings, gestures, and connections in real time. As a result, more input modalities may be incorporated to increase avatar fidelity. In this sense, therefore, the choice of strategic partnership between Zuckerberg and Luxottica for the new Rayban lenses will allow Meta to make great strides towards this goal.

Avatars therefore seem to be the first mechanism of control and moderation of the OCs in Meta, or the first reflex dividing the interactions of the physical world from the digital one. Nevertheless, can avatars physically reflect the role played by the user within the metaverse? For example, in role-play videogames (RPGs), the character's stats are significantly affected by the avatar's attributes chosen to be developed. Some particularly burly avatars, in fact, possess incredible strength, giving up speed, while others, much slenderer, follow the opposite logic.

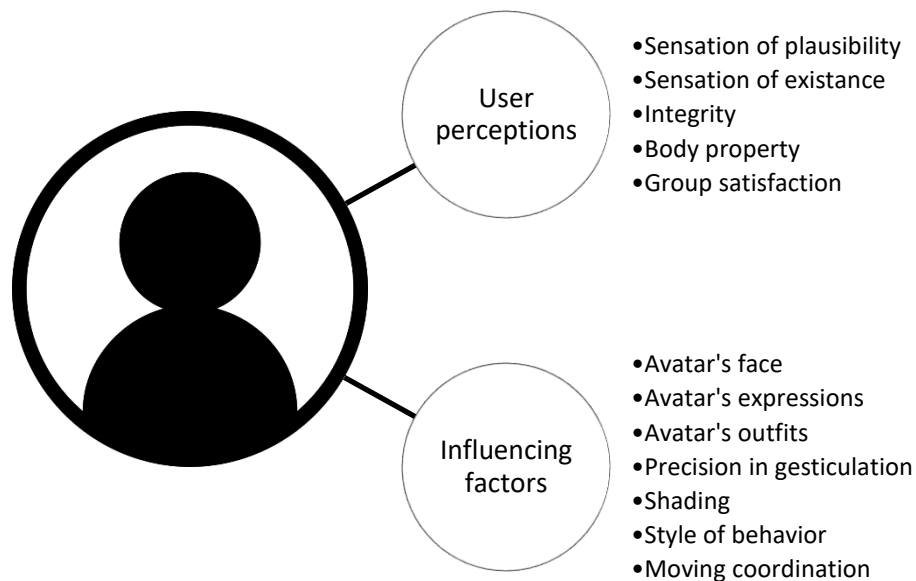


Figure 53 - Avatar's implication in a metaverse (Lee et al., 2021)

Another necessary moderation mechanism in Meta will surely concern content creation since the process of creation is in charge of users in an accessible and productive way. Even though researchers and, as a consequence, marketers are becoming more intrigued on XR/AR/VR authoring creation (Freitas et al., 2020), such tools and applications primarily let users shape and edit material without struggling to pass significant technological constraints. It is also worth noting how AI or machine learning may help with the automated transfer of things from the actual world to online surroundings. On the other hand, banning is a popular method of censoring knowledge and thoughts when some actors, whether people or organizations, but also authorities, judge them disagreeable, harmful, or destructive (Chaabane, et al., 2014). As an additional protection, censorship is among the most diffused methods for regulating behavior even in the digital contexts (Raman et al., 2020). Ban and censorship are strongly associated with a hierarchical governance (Sibai et al., 2015), which may seem consistent with the significant organizational-sponsored nature of the Metaverse.

The meta-commerce concerns the activities of buying and selling occurring in a C2C and B2C logic within the boundaries of a metaverse. The moderation and governance of these transactions will take great inspiration from the techniques applied in the traditional ecommerce, which have made great advances in recent years. However, many limits still exist at this time. As a

matter of fact, many difficulties have been examined relating to the interoperability and inter-compatibility of separate digital universes, where even within the same company, only few tasks may perform in an integrated manner. For example, Monster Hunter or Pokémon Go permit the transfer of gaming data across different platforms (Indig, 2021; Gamespot, 2018).

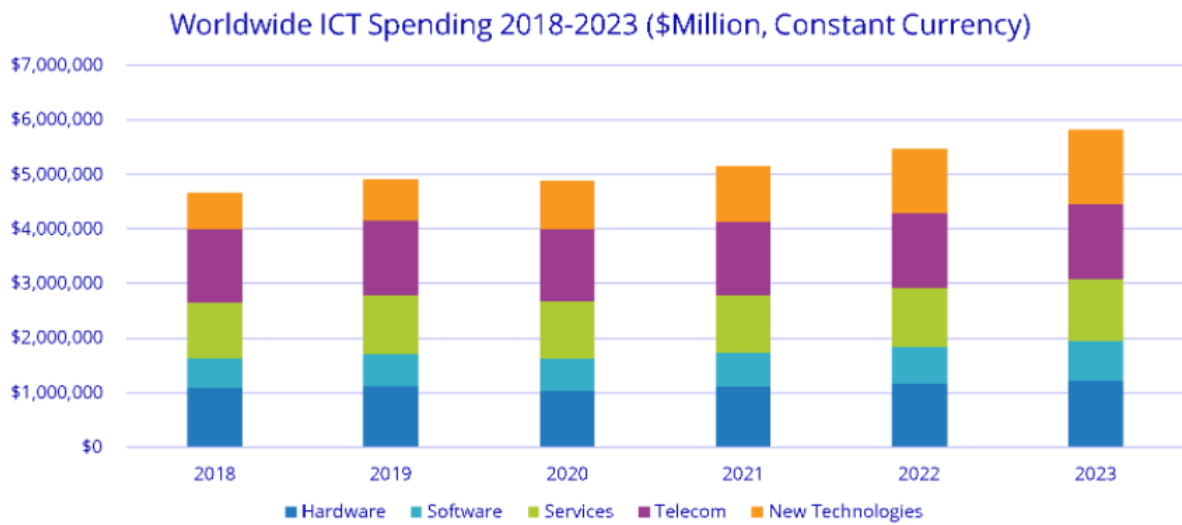
In this, the Meta group could reveal a great competitive advantage, as the structure of its portfolio of platforms is well integrated with each other, populated perhaps by the largest mass of users ever registered online, and completely dependent from the management of its CEO. In any case, the translation of physical property into digital environments will be one of the priority challenges for Meta, and for all other companies seeking to develop a metaverse as the center of their business model. It is no longer possible to restrict the ownership to the single platform (or universe) in which it is acquired, but it must necessarily be made possible to transfer it to the different universes. Concerning this question, we will see how fundamental the applicability of technologies would be, such as blockchain to validate and certificate the ownership over a digital thing, namely a Non-Fungible Token (NFT).

4.4.4 Outlook

The 2022 will be the year in which more and more people will begin to become familiar with what has so far been seen as a science fiction scenario.

Many will want to live this immersive experience and to do so fully they will equip themselves with hi-tech gadgets linked to the Internet of the future, such as virtual reality viewers and other augmented reality wearable gadgets, such as goggles and smartwatches, from the upcoming Apple glasses, as it seems, in 2022, to Google's brand new Oppo Air Glass, which have already been presented (True, 2022).

An IDC (2021) study attempted to identify and anticipate future information and communication technology (ICT) developments. While conventional ICT investment is expected to mirror GDP growth during the next generation, the whole sector is expected to increase at a rate of over 2x GDP as emerging innovations take a bigger proportion of the market. IoT is already driving considerable market expansion, and emerging technologies like robots, artificial intelligence, and augmented reality/virtual reality (AR/VR) will account for more than 25% of ICT investment in the next 5-10 years.



Technology Spending \$M	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Traditional Technologies	\$4,005,011	\$4,146,194	\$4,005,032	\$4,130,413	\$4,277,843	\$4,453,674
New Technologies	\$653,808	\$766,521	\$891,760	\$1,030,455	\$1,189,208	\$1,362,017

Figure 54 - Global ICT spending Forecast (IDC, 2021)

New technologies will soon surpass \$1 trillion in yearly revenues, thanks to the tremendous rise of IoT in past few years, fueled by expenditures in the industrial and transportation industries. The COVID-19 epidemic has had only a little impact on the expansion of such technological advances, and other emerging segments like robots/drones and AR/VR equipment (together with accompanying applications and services) will enjoy comparable growth in the near future. As firms go beyond prototypes and into wider deployments of technology like augmented reality monitors and AI-enabled robotics, the whole sector will experience a fresh growth phase during the coming decade.

Conventional technologies that are still growing (cloud, mobile, social, and analytics) alongside new emerging technologies, possessing a natural cohesiveness. Analytics, blockchain, social, and AI are examples of traditional IT software applications that turn new technology into actual income gains. Furthermore, when end-users implement new technologies into usage scenarios, there will be even more convergence in emerging technologies. As a result, the aggregate impact of emerging technology exceeds the income associated with the others distinct categories like IoT sensors, 3D printers, or drones.

Therefore, from a purely technological point of view, it seems that the choice of Meta is strongly supported, if not guided, by a rapidly expanding market trend towards all those technologies that will allow a perfect implementation of the metaverse in the business model of Facebook and of its product portfolio.

A risk that Meta runs, however, concerns strong pressure from its competitors. As a matter of fact, many web giants have already taken the first steps towards this ecosystem. Facebook, therefore, is not the only major tech company that is focusing on the metaverse, quite the opposite. Here it is what the big companies in Silicon Valley and beyond are planning.

- **Apple:** according to the analyzes, the Cupertino company is planning its entry into the mixed reality sector (Apple Meaven, 2021), with AR and VR technologies that could become a natural evolution of mobile and wearable devices for the navigation of the web. If Apple were to launch a product that uses this technology in the next few years, the boost to the market could be significant.
- **Microsoft:** the parent company of Windows was certainly more explicit in its intentions, announcing the launch in 2022 of Mesh for Teams. This is a feature that will combine the possibilities of mixed reality with productivity tools, allowing you to work remotely in a more natural manner (Microsoft, 2021). According to the company, using avatars and virtual rooms it will be possible to make interactions less detached and eliminate some intrinsic problems of video calls.
- **Niantic:** the AR software house famous for Pokémon GO has announced the launch of a free and open-source kit for the development of more accessible augmented reality experiences (TechCrunch, 2021). According to the company, this will allow the creation of mixed reality applications, where the metaverse becomes an extension of the real world. The goal is therefore to exploit the opportunities of this new web paradigm, without losing the physicality and human warmth of live interactions.
- **Snap:** the company behind Snapchat and Bitmoji is considered to be even ahead of Facebook in the development of the metaverse. In fact, it has long introduced the possibility of creating custom avatars and functions that take advantage of augmented reality to make the experience more immersive.
- **Roblox:** born in 2006, this software is defined as an "imagination platform", because it allows users to create their own 3D worlds and interact with other users to play, talk or collaborate on creative projects. Going on the stock exchange in November 2021, the

software house Roblox Corporation is considered one of the most promising companies in the industry.

These are just few of the tech companies that are investing in the metaverse: among others, we also find Tencent, Nike, Dyson, Epic Games, Nvidia and Amazon. A list that is set to grow again in 2022. Will Meta be able to survive such fierce competition? Will all these platforms be able to guarantee the end-user adequate interoperability, as in real life? We just have to wait and see what the future reserves for this promising market.

5 SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Starting from the deregulation of internet in 1995, an outstandingly increasing amount of people surf the web every second. These users are somehow forced to interact with each other, exchanging thoughts, opinions and advice at an inestimable rapidity, due to current innovations on connectivity, which has allowed a relevant reduction of the cost of accessing technologies.

One of the most significant repercussions of this disruption concerns the great intricacy of OCs in user and in P2P interactions, which continues to make it difficult for scholars and marketers to achieve a deep understanding of this phenomenon, and by consequence, to achieve harmony between definitions from various fields with varying specializations. As a matter of fact, sociology and ethnography, computer science and information technology, management and marketing, as well as psychology all contributed to the formation of a comprehensive knowledge about OCs, since each of these approaches has been able to stress relevant features about OCs.

Hence, within this entangled framework, the role of community management has become relevant in successful companies. It is for this reason that for some of them, the introduction of OCs as the focal point of their digital business strategy has resulted in the achievement of a strong competitive and sustainable advantage. Therefore, this report is intended to stress whether or not the exploitation of a strategy based on OCs can help businesses canalize their community building and management efforts.

5.1 Summary

As it has been demonstrated, belonging to a group is an essential component for humans. The same logic is certainly valid in digital contexts too. Literature traditionally refers to this digital context as “online community”, which over time has freed itself from the strong territorial connotation and constraint.

Authors have proposed several definitions, which have been examined in detail within the previous sections. All of these definitions, however, share three common factors, summarized by the most prolific author investigating this subject, namely Preece (2000). According to her, an OC rests on three main pillars: *people*, *interactions* and *technology*. In the absence of even one of the three, the definition of "online community" collapses.

After this introduction, in order to analyze the peculiarities and the characteristics of some OCs, it was necessary to divide the types into two macro-areas: a *content-based classification* and a *revenue-based classification*. Being aware that several categorizations may overlap with each other, it stands to reason that this distinction provides a valid approximation to summarize this complex and vast literature. As a matter of fact, a content-based classification has allowed the distinction between community of *interests, relationship, fantasy* or *transaction*, as well as community based on *geographic, demographic* or *topical* specifics, but also *B2B, B2C* or *C2C/P2P* communities, while, contemporarily, a revenue-based classification focuses on the financial payments required by members to guarantee the participation on OCs, as well as on the revenue model through which they are sustained.

Furthermore, OCs evolve over time in adaptation to a variety of conditions, following the same logic of products or companies' life cycles. Some authors seem to treat OCs as a mere intermediate step towards reaching communities of practice, while others, on the contrary, have examined and categorized in detail every single phase of OCs development.

During the *inception*, OCs emerge as the sum of individuals' desire for contribution and entertainment. Once the technological medium is fully set, the actual *creation* of the OC starts. Some indicators, including the utilization of a common language or the self-selection of members into communitarian roles, suggest the entrance into the *growth* stage, while others, such as the need for moderation and governance, signal the *maturity* phase. OCs that do not proficiently adapt to these changes are likely to incur into *death*.

These classifications, definitions and categorizations are relevant for community managers and developers. However, the participation of members within OCs required further insights and analysis. As a matter of fact, although the primordial reasons why individuals join OCs are embedded into the definition of OC itself, the environment becomes entangled if members' divergent interest are taken into consideration, causing the necessity for OCs to be internally regulated through different tools.

The first feature that contributes to the regulation of OC participation concerns the definition of members' roles, which have been investigated throughout disparate approaches, here summarized in three research streams.

An *activity-based classification* categorized members in terms of contribution activity, resulting in the first definition of *lurkers*, who just read messages passively, and *posters*, the ones who

participate publicly. Lurkers may avoid active participation because they do not feel the need to post, they are still learning about the group, they perceive their behaviors as contributory, they have trouble making the software work, possibly because they do not relate to the group.

Further investigations have been conducted, summarized in an *engagement-based classification*, which assume that the level of engagement affects the activity and role of members within OCs. This approach takes credit from psychological marketing, finding a wide acceptance among scholars and marketers. From the application of this criterion many interesting classifications of members have emerged, resulting in terminologies such as *tourists*, *minglers*, *devotees* and *insiders*, or *arrivals*, *strangers*, *players*, and *residents*.

Latest studies focus on achieving a massive estimation of members' behaviors in online contexts, starting from theories concerning physical communities and testing whether or not they may constitute a suitable stimulation for OCs too, according to a *multi-dimensional approach*. The most surprising consequence of this approach results from the union of the OCs-related literature with that relating to brand management. Through this, many roles related to *community management* have been identified, which in turn are divided into those related to the setup of the OC and to the management of new and existing members. In addition to that, a few roles especially dedicated to *brand management* emerged, divided between those involved to develop the meaning of the brand, and those who maintain relationships with other stakeholders. Finally, the so-called *self-focused roles* have been detected, belonging to members who only possess personal goals to participate in the community.

Beyond the selection of members' role, many communities, once grown, need a governance structure and moderation in order to socially control its participants. Many mechanisms have been proved, for example *authority*, *self-control*, *contracts*, *coercion*, *merit* and *fairness*. Few authors, instead, concentrated their effort on harmonizing all these mechanisms under specific governance structures. This results in the division in *radical governance structure*, namely market, hierarchical and clan governance, and *hybrid governance structure*, theorized as the combination of these variants.

In terms of moderation, it has been demonstrated that relying just on governance mechanism does not allow a transparent understanding of the social control within OCs. Hence, the *governance mechanism* is to be observed in association with the *moderation purpose*, which defines the function and objectives of the moderation activity. This may vary from moderations

aimed at initiating, maintaining, monitoring or terminating interactions, as well as rewarding or punishing OC members' behaviors, or at clarifying and formalizing roles and norms. The most useful result of this method is that it highlights the most suitable moderation activities in relation to the governance mechanism of a specific OC.

Another trend that is detected within the OC, as it happens in traditional-offline groups, is the development of loyalty towards the community. From a managerial point of view, it is therefore interesting to understand if there are some qualities of the OC that stress the achievement of this level of loyalty. In fact, at a *community-level*, loyalty is affected by the OC size, themes and interactions networks, while at *user-level*, it is affected by content popularity and preferences, but also by few linguistic indicators.

Strangely, triggering loyalty in order to reach and develop members' potential is not enough for managers in a variety of occasions. It will be necessary to rely on WOM marketing techniques, or to the deliberate use of commercial promotions to influence the interactions between users of an OC. Over time, the logic of investigation of the WOMM has passed from a *linear* and *organic* vision to the theorization of a *co-production network*, which emphasizes the relationship between actors in the OCs, rather than mere economic transactions.

Among the variables that are recognized as capable of influencing the success or the result of WOMM campaigns in the contexts of OCs, the *characters narratives* which conveys the message, the *forum* in which conversations occur, the *common norms* that socially control the group have been drawn, as well as the *characteristics* of the promotion itself. The combination of these five peculiarities is combined with two further dimensions, namely the interpersonal orientation of WOMM interactions and the tension that the WOMM message causes in the OC. This suggested the existence of at least four different WOM stimulation tactics in OCs, namely an *evaluation*, *embracing*, *endorsement* and *explanation* method.

Furthermore, as already discussed in this final recap, the success factors of an OC are varied and extremely dependent on the life cycle in which the group may be identified. It will be interesting for business organizations to understand which KPI to analyze, or which feature to stress in order not to make their community management and stimulation efforts vain. The metrics they need to be aware of concerns *growth* indices, *user retention*, *volume of activities* and *long-term inclination* for survival. Their applications have ramifications and implications for digital communities, as well as for the design of the systems that supports them.

The intent of this first part of research, investigation and analysis of the literature, reaching and commenting as many sources as available, is clearly to provide the widest spectrum of knowledge on the subject of OCs. Without achieving this type of background, the comprehension of further case studies would be extremely complicated and limited. Hence, discretionally, it was decided to analyze four different case studies coming from different industries and having disparate business models. This has allowed to highlight at least as many different strategies and methods to stimulate and positively exploit the connection with relatable OCs. The selected case studies are Twitch, Estetista Cinica, OneDay Group, and Meta.

Twitch has been reductively defined as an “interactive TV”, born as a spin-off from JustinTV, which joined the Amazon ecosystem in 2016. Although it remains less popular than others entertainment platforms, such as YouTube, it has gained attention due to its current results concerning transformation of the creation, broadcast and profitability of user-made content in OCs contexts, which drove the classification of Twitch as “community incubator”. Actually, the number of users does not represent the correct index to rely on, since while YouTube earns on advertisements, Twitch and, by consequences, its partners, earn on engagement.

During the pandemic in 2020, the business grew tremendously, even though viewers and streamers did not grow proportionally, due to the revision of Twitch’s policy for signing new partners, who are streamers that are more professionals rather than amateurs. This affiliate program offered by the platform implies the access for partners to subscriptions, emoticons, bits, donations and advertisements. Such business model results in a migration from traditional media towards new frontiers of interactive OC-based frontiers of entertainment.

Few criticalities deriving from the massive interaction between users, partners and OCs have been evaluated. On top of that, Twitch still struggles to handle compliance standards required by the integration among structured governance with local OCs. From a managerial point of view, a myriad of members rotates around partners. It often happens that new partners gain public participating in other partners’ streaming, emerging with a dynamic comparable to the spillover effect in startups, which still sustains the definition of “incubator”.

Cristina Fogazzi, alias Estetista Cinica, landed on social media few years ago and today represent one of leading authors of the positive body change, contrasting the ideals of aesthetic canons spread within the cosmetic and beauty industry. Her business enlarged quickly, in terms of both peoples and turnover, leveraging on the influence on social communities she has been able

to stimulate and cultivate. As a matter of fact, its beauty OC relies personally on her advice through BellaVera e VeraLab as main reference points.

This outstanding success has been achieved throughout a consistent omnichannel approach in combination to a transparent WOM marketing which keeps its community members engaged and participative. Actually, Cristina suggests a correlation between followers and turnovers (for example, turnover is higher in cities where more followers live). This may result in very interesting implications for other companies aiming at taking inspiration from Cristina's successes.

In this occasion, Cristina's contact and interconnection is both an advantage and a burden. Actually, every customer relies on its cynical suggestions, making the brand meaning extremely bonded with the character narratives of *Estetista Cinica*. Many difficulties may arise in future, since a natural international expansion of the brand may lack this component, given that these advantages exist only within Italian boundaries yet.

The following case study deals with OneDay Group, which consists in 170 employees and 20 million in turnover, focused on services for millennials and Z-generation as their targeted customers. Within the group, ScuolaZoo, Zoocom, WeRoad, Together, House of Talent, Glint and Mambo together synergistically collaborate towards a sole common goal: to create the largest community of youngers in Italy. To do this, they leveraged their targeted OC, built by Paolo de Nadai at the time of ScuolaZoo through social medias. In fact, from the OC within social media it comes a large portion of OneDay workforce.

OneDay's Culture Manifesto stresses on many occasions the focus of the group on satisfying every single aspect that the targeted community demands, from schools, to travels, to experiences. As a matter of fact, an approach born in combination of ambition, speed and concreteness drove consistent results, such as the achievement of a 40% annual growth. For companies aiming at enlarging their customer base including new generations, having OneDay as partner – a company made by Millennials who know how to get in touch with their peers – represents an essential competitive advantage.

Finally, the last category for the batch case studies analyzed has been called "All-round" OC, and it is represented by Facebook, which has been rebranded under the moniker Meta in relation to its ambition of building and developing innovative user experiences on the so-called metaverse. A metaverse consists in virtual environment that visionarily replicates the real

world, where people may meet, play, work and shop just like in everyday life, but in the shape of avatars.

Among the first signals of the spread of this business goal, journals and scholars recognized the trend for digital wearable sold in Fortnite or Roblox. According to Zuckerberg, the need for interoperability is a factual necessity. Hence, from Meta's perspective, an optimal conjunction between hardware and software is a critical success factor. Operating in this direction, the company has already collected a batch of strategic decisions, starting from the partnership with Luxottica, to investments on AR/VR glasses, such as Oculus, or haptic gloves. Furthermore, NFT and blockchain should sustain intercompatibility and interoperability of universes, which should replicate the real world, resulting in what has been defined as a "surreality".

Among the various topics in this field, it is necessary to recall the management of avatars as the primary governance mechanism, since it has been proved that the configuration of these digital representations of human digital environments may significantly influence users' perceptions, with strong implications for the regulations of meta-commerce. These implications may result in a total modification of the expression of communities in digital contexts.

Research about industrial spending on ICT confirms the feasibility of the metaverse project, which is based on the exploitation of innovating technologies, whose growth rate will be substantially higher if compared to conventional ones. However, few criticalities concern the strong competition experienced by Meta in building this metaverse. In fact, Apple, Microsoft, Niantic, Snap, Roblox are just few examples of companies working on disparate levels of surreality to be included in their business models and platforms.

5.2 Implications for future research

As previously mentioned, this dissertation aims at uniting and harmonizing as many sources as possible about the OCs. As a matter of fact, an effort has been made to unify, comment and combine the contributions of disparate authors, coming from different backgrounds and branches of specializations, who had the merit to detect interesting aspects of the OCs from multiple points of view. According to this logic, definitions, classifications and categorizations have been summarized in specific macro-categories. Without this slight, but essential, simplification, it would have been almost impossible for the reader to reach a satisfactory level of

understanding of OCs, surrounded by a very relevant degree of intrinsic complexity, which however contributes to their importance today.

Nonetheless, much remains to be discovered and examined regarding OCs. In practical terms, the most impactful works for this research stream are still those developed at the beginning of the 21st century, when much was still to be developed on the internet. Although testing the existence of OCs on blogs may be interesting, today this format is highly obsolete and less widespread than in the past.

However, it seems that this approach of the authors has been channeled and inherited partly by the investigations on social media networks, and partly by the tests on communities of practice, which have assumed an increasingly systematic importance and impact at a managerial level. For this reason, the overlapping between social media networks and OCs research streams seems to be perhaps one of the most confusing elements, even though these approaches are often coherent with one another.

For the aforementioned reasons, unlike other research sectors, it seems that companies are far ahead of experimentation in terms of OCs or, at least, this is what the examination of the case studies presents us. The reason why case studies were needed to understand real applications and implications of OCs, as in the case of Facebook for the metaverse, or in the case of Twitch as a basis for incubation and monetization, is that big corporations, such as Amazon and Meta, rather than scholars and the academic world, drive disruptive innovation nowadays.

After a thorough examination of the contributions taken as a reference for the development of this study, it can be concluded that the tendency towards the delay of the research on this topic is due to few, but significant reasons. This tendency towards the delay of the research on this topic, after a careful examination of many contributions needed for the elaboration of this thesis, is due to few but significant reasons.

Technology, an essential element on which the concept of OCs is based, is often taken as it presents. Researchers and scholars do not have access to new disruptive technologies, which may enable them to conduct deep test and investigations. This causes a bias in all their analyses, where often the technology on which the community relies is trapped and frozen in a moment of time, instead of tracing its development in parallel with the attitudes of members in the OC.

The comparison between the amount of *data* that large corporations like Amazon or Meta can acquire and the data accessible for research is not balanced. Millions and millions of users interact with each other, creating huge datasets, which can be used to identify trends and phenomena related to the concepts of OCs. By contrast, there is no public dataset available for research. In order to obtain data relating to user interactions and behavior in these platforms, it is necessary to set up a complex process for APIs (Application Programming Interface), which allow the extraction of data from a website through another application. The level of effort that is required just for the acquisition of data is outstanding, even before their validation.

5.3 Managerial implications

If some corporations are driving innovation in terms of OCs, it seems evident that the most relevant implications of this research need to be analyzed from a managerial point of view. Following this logic, the case studies represent four exemplary methods to stimulate OCs, as well as for the creation and employment of substantial business opportunities.

Among other aspects, the Twitch case demonstrates how a business can be supported by the monetization of user-made contents. Helping content creators, influencers and brands monetize their OC is the first pillar of Twitch's success. On the other hand, however, it suggests that relying on user-made content and interactions is more complicated than expected. This, in fact, creates the platform's need for sophisticated social control activities and governance mechanisms, which however, given the mass of interaction to be detected, often fall into approximations. Despite this, if small and medium-sized enterprises are going to apply this model to their business, they may not experience these complexities, as the communities on which to monetize may be smaller in size and less populous.

The OneDay Group case, on the other hand, made it possible to highlight how often the definition of customers as the focal point of the businesses could be reductive. The creation of the group's brand portfolio is exemplary, suggesting that it is possible to focus on an OC, developing skills and competences in this regard, and then intercept and consult all the stakeholders in some way connected to that focal OC. However, this leads to a specification. A profound knowledge relating to particular OCs companies may want to engage, is difficult to be obtained from the outside. For this, the Group builds its workforce from members of certain OCs. The establishment "a company created by Millennials for Millennials" is the most iconic, since,

despite the fact that the new generations themselves do not represent real OCs, their approach to school, travel and entertainment is inevitably shared among youngsters.

Cristina Fogazzi, aka Estetista Cinica, shows us how, by leveraging the right narrative characteristics in relation to one's own community, it is possible to build new businesses around the cultivated OCs. This has profound practical implications, especially when compared to a more traditional approach to the relationship between companies and customers. Often the birth of new businesses is associated with the emergence of potential new customers. This case, on the other hand, demonstrates how the trend is reversed: the potential of customers would not have emerged without the cultivation that Cristina has conducted over the years of the blog. Somehow, the community gives value to VeraLab products.

Finally, almost all the implications highlighted by the first three case studies are embodied in Meta. With the metaverse, people, companies and marketers will face the greatest revolution of the 21st century, in terms of interaction, interconnectivity and interoperability. Like Meta, a few companies propose themselves as pioneers in this field of research. While this could, on the one hand, cause an acceleration of this phenomenon of innovation, at the same time the possibility that these will fall cannibalized from competition is actually present. The most complicated task while writing this paper was to keep an updated approach to the topic of metaverse, as, once the news of this vision became public, newspapers, researchers and professionals began to debate on the whole web about the possible implications of this scenario. Progress is going faster than literature could imagine, predict, and then analyze. Consequently, the implications for OCs in these surreal contexts are still blurred.

To conclude, one of the main findings of the research conducted is that, as far as companies are concerned and regardless from the industry they belong to, there is a variety of different methodologies and tactics aimed at involving and stimulating OCs. Furthermore, concerning the difference between the definition of "customer" and "community", a reflection should be made on which of these two is actually more relevant in this context. In fact, as analyzed during the course of this study, the advantages of a consistent contact between companies and OC are many, as they may trigger disruptive innovations. Perhaps, what still hinders the application of this approach – which goes far beyond the theme of the consumer as a "prosumer" theorized by the so-called service-dominant logic – is the degree of skill and competence needed by small

and medium-sized enterprises to manage this mass of complexity and intrigue of live P2P relationships occurring within OCs. If, on the one hand, taking inspiration from the giants of the web is certainly a winning strategy, on the other hand, companies may be required to deal with internal resources, sources and skills, before shouting for success.

However, as the case studies under examination demonstrate, it is not strictly necessary to reach gigantic masses of users in order to create opportunities around OCs, which render the implications of this report highly interesting for managers, companies and enterprises aiming to involve this phenomenon as the focal point of their business model.

6 CONCLUSIONS

As a final conclusion, it could be useful to provide a purely personal point of view on the argumentation performed during this thesis on OCs. As a matter of fact, I was fascinated by the peculiarities of the phenomenon way before considering its business implications, as, starting from a young age, I found myself personally engaged within different OCs. In recent years, the rapid development of social networks has allowed the phenomenon to take even more resonance, both in my personal life and at a more systemic level.

By deepening the research that various authors have conducted on the topic of OCs, it has been possible to obtain a more ordered and coherent vision, where the theorized classifications and definitions result from real phenomena, which occur in the life of the members of the OCs.

Therefore, a greater awareness of the applicability of the topic to industries and companies has been following the completion of the thesis, and the consequent bibliographical research. The pinnacle of this process was by far reached with the examination of the four selected OC-based case studies. For example, a coherent analysis of the Twitch case would not have been possible without previously analyzing the existing literature, which enabled to understand the various facets that the platform was hiding, starting from the role of each individual member to a self-realization of what role I could individually represent, to the governance structure adopted to moderate digital relations. The same goes for Meta. Once again, only few visionaries perceived the potential of application of OCs to the field of digital universes. In fact, as users browse and interact within the platform, they rarely pause to think about why they choose it, in respect to other competitors, why it is developed in a certain way, or how improvements could be implemented in order to achieve its full potential.

This thesis has personally allowed me to identify these questions, to which answers have been at least partially given. Should any reader, whether being a student, a manager, a researcher or an entrepreneur, want to exploit the knowledge and suggestions learned during the reading of this thesis, he would receive the opportunity to focus on what I personally perceived as key aspects of the coming digital transformation of companies and individuals, based on digital interaction, interconnectivity and interoperability.

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