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Title: Online Communication Platforms as a new Marketing- and Distribution Channel: A Critical Analysis on the Basis of Selected Examples

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1 Introduction

1.1 Problem Definition and Objectives

"Homo est animal sociale" (Humans are social beings by nature) – *Aristotle*

With increasing interconnectedness and speed of growth, online communication platforms enjoy great popularity and are swiftly resounded throughout the globe. During the hype and fall of the *New Economy* in the nineties*,* companies used the Internet to commence a new era of online-based businesses. The major boom, however, took place on the private sector yet involving a complete new understanding of communication. Today, high-speed Internet access combined with easy-to-use *Social Software* enables people to maintain interaction with peers worldwide: to a striking extent for entertainment purposes. Usergenerated-content is the buzz and given the vast potential to growth that still lies ahead, it has only reached its infancy (Mühlenbeck & Skibicki, 2007, pp. 16-18).

Communication platforms such as online communication platforms, blogs and wikis are springing up like mushrooms, and instant information provides almost full market transparency (Bollhöfer, 2007, p. 81). As a result, consumers become increasingly mature and are hence able to recapture their active role within the consumer-seller relationship, thus recovering the balance of powers. (Meckel, 2006, pp. 8-9). It is especially in online communication platforms, where these collective consumer powers are unfolded; mainly by the use of Word-of-Mouth (WOM), a phenomenon that apparently dominates today's open "net-multilogue". Personal recommendations have always been a reliable source that inhibited or impeded purchase decisions. The dynamics of online communication platforms, however, add a multiplying effect since vast audiences can be reached instantaneously (Urchs & Körner, 2007, p. 672). As companies gradually recognize this trend, they understand that customer interaction is an essential link to sustain a competitive edge. Even though WOM has in a multitude of cases shown to be a serious threat, it can as well be a valuable weapon for modern businesses. Today, millions of people have registered in online communication platforms, in which they reveal their preferences, favourite brands and interests.

Quintessentially, a huge pool of data is generated, which readily lies at companies' disposition to be used for targeted advertisement (Graff, 2008). The balancing act, however, is to commercialize communities in a sensitive way. Since members generally refuse advertisements within platforms, companies need to apply smart yet unconventional strategies, which are entertaining and viral and inspire participation without interfering community principles (Wiedmann, 2007, pp. 683-685).

This paper is to analyze the chances and pitfalls of online communication platforms as new marketing and distribution channels, and successively illustrates the use of coeval tools for community marketing by means of selected examples.

1.2   Course of the Investigation

Within the course of the investigation, the phenomenon of online communication platforms and their potential as new marketing and distribution channels will be examined while taking into consideration the functionalities of related marketing approaches. On the basis of selected examples, strategies that have been applied within communities in different countries will be highlighted.

After Web 2.0 and selected corresponding applications are introduced, a main focus of the paper is to explain how marketing tools can best be applied best in communities and to specify possibilities how these can be used as marketing channels. Appropriate marketing approaches in communities and reasons for their enormous success will be given. Furthermore, different forms of WOM with illustrations of their functionality are explained on the basis of selected examples. Finally, communities are researched upon their potential as distribution channel and future developments in the sector of e-commerce will be depicted aiming at the explanation of marketing approaches in use as well as their potentials and application methods. Practical examples will be used to introduce the most promising contemporary platforms and related advertisement formats and to give a realistic evaluation of the impact of community marketing. All examples contain controversial argumentations and highlight both advantages and disadvantages. To wind up, a closer look is taken on possible risks of gradual virtualization and the loss of privacy as well.

2   Paradigm Shifts Towards a new Understanding of the Internet

When Tim Berners-Lee created the Internet in 1991, his initial idea of the web as a two-way medium could not yet be realized. Since then, the Internet has grown up fast and the amount of websites increased from 10,000 in 1994 to far over 100 million today. (Potts, 2007). During the last 15 years, the Internet has been revolutionizing the way we think, act and live – even more significantly than any technology before. Recent numbers show its major impact as new mass media. Along with the technological developments, user expectations have changed considerably as well, and drastically transformed the ways of communication and information sharing. (Eimeren & Frees, 2005, p. 362).

2.1   The Web 2.0

Looking at the remarkable technology headways, the modality of using media has changed sustainably: TV, print media and Internet are not only used more frequently but also simulta-

neously. In 2005, the average citizen used various media up to ten hours a day; one and a half hours more than only five years before. It is especially the Internet that has become a common property and it is now used by 60% of all adults in Germany. (Eimeren & Frees, 2005, pp. 362-363). With the emergence of the Web 2.0, Berners-Lee's initial vision became true, and today, users are at the same time producers: The Internet has finally become a two-way medium. (Potts, 2007). "The second internet goldrush is in full swing, and this time it's all about real people, creating, editing and showcasting their own lives and opinions" (Lancaster, 2007, p. 16). Web 2.0 has become a widespread buzzword that is used to describe a vast range of online applications and activities. Contrary to what the term suggest, Web 2.0 is neither an update to technological specifications nor a replacement of the alleged Web 1.0. (O'Reilly, 2005). It is rather an idea based on the common vision of its user. "The objective of all Web 2.0 services is to mutually maximize the collective intelligence of the participants" (Hoegg, Martignoni, Meckel, & Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2006, p. 12), and further to provide benefits for every participant through dynamic information sharing and generation.

Consumers become *prosumers* and create the content themselves, referred to as usergenerated-content. (Mühlenbeck & Skibicki, 2007, pp. 25-26). *Social Software* as a generic term that describes all applications, which enable users to publish own contributions as uncomplex as possible in the form of knowledge articles, music, videos, photos and the like. (Gscheidle & Fisch, 2007, p. 393).

Social Networking is stated as the most striking feature, since to maximize collective intelligence, self-regulating communities need to coordinate information and communication-based content. These comunities are benefit-based and follow the opensource principle. Companies need to learn how to use the wisdom of crowds in order to best optimize their products. (Mühlenbeck & Skibicki, 2007, pp. 20-22).

2.2   A new Species of Users

The biography of users has changed from a normal-biography, which was predominantly used to forecast consumption in the industrial age, to today's multi-biography. (Dziemba, Rauch, & Wenzel, 2007, p. 15). Unlike the seventies, consumers nowadays appear as indecisive and changeable (Hilber, 2000, pp. 5-6). A multi-biography is characterized by the fact that phases of life are not straight-line, but rather become temporary and overlapping. The way of using information has changed. Everybody, whether professional or amateur, is able to produce and distribute information. The way of socializing has shifted and it is increasingly carried out through the Internet. (Meckel, 2006, pp. 8-9).

Depending on the life cycle stage, users will in future generate about 80% of their social contacts in communities. Moreover, the duration of usage will double within the next five years.

Thereby, usage time of social media will add up to about 70% (Kalka, 2006, p. 18). Approximately 90% state that the Internet is very important or even indispensable in daily life. (Fittkau, 2007, p. 143). The Next Generation of teenagers – often referred to as the *E-Generation* – which also has a strong entertainment orientation, dominates communities such as Facebook or MySpace, where they exchange views and evaluate products that are recommended to friends. As a result, their buying behaviour is highly dependend on others. (Tapscott & Williams, 2007, pp. 46-50).

2.3   An Overview of Web 2.0 Applications

The best known applications of Web 2.0 are blogs, wikis, social networks and social software programmes. As a matter of principle, these applications can be differentiated into either a *community with networking character* or a *consumer-generated-content portal* (Wiedmann, 2007). The most striking difference in consumer-generated-content portals is that the collaborative element is stronger than in communities. In communities, the individual user publishes content that cannot be worked on by other users. Due to unitary networks, it can be easily connected and only made accessible to other network members (Klemper, 2006).

2.3.1   *User-Generated Content Portals*

In contrast to communities, user-generated-content portals do not require users to register themselves (Wiedmann, 2007, pp. 684-685). On the long run, the purpose of these networks is to take advantage of the global wisdom of crowds.

The term *blog* is a composition of the words web and log and describes private online diaries, with chronologically sorted entries. More than 70 million blogs worldwide are listed in the weblog search engine *technorati.com*. Weblogs were originally used to make notes of personal thoughts and opinions. Within the course of time, however, blogs were subject to thematic development. Nowadays, the Internet yields a far-reaching variety. The main forms remain online diaries, expert blogs and corporate blogs (Schmahl, 2007, p. 83).

A second common application, which is often mentioned in connection with user generated-content portals are *wikis*. The term wiki originates from the Hawaiian and means "quick" (Mühlenbeck & Skibicki, 2007, pp. 38-39). Wikis are in general an open collections of websites, on which everybody can easily work on. The most well-known wiki application is the free online encyclopedia wikipedia.org, launched in 2001. (Przepiorka, 2006, pp. 15-16).

A third application type are *podcasts* and have a similar functionality as blogs, because users can produce content in form of short videos or audio clips (Wunschel, 2007b, p. 648). The *Oxford University Press* defines podcasts as "a digital recording of a radio broadcasting or similar programm, made available on the internet for downloading to a personal audio player" (2005). With podcasts, an additional information and entertainment channel has been gener-

ated. After downloading the podcast, consumption is independent from time and place which further strengthens the popularity of this media (Wunschel, 2007b, p. 650). However, the main reason for consumption is the information and entertainment aspect of podcasts. Today, 90,000 podcast feeds are registered worldwide whilst usage still yields high growth rates.

2.3.2 *Online communication platforms and Social Networking*

In contrast to the previously mentioned applications, online communication platforms with a social networking character are a more complex matter. Technical, commercial, psychological, and social aspects are connected to a multifaceted and interpersonal area of relationships.

The central idea to understand the functionality of communities is the *logic of donation*. Every online community ultimately begins with a *reading donation*, i.e. one person making a contribution to the community without immediately recalling something back. The whole system is based on free donations, which are not connected to commitments. Nobody is in anybody's debt. Contrarily, everybody can choose whether or not something is given back. The interpersonal approach, however, is that the contributor, of course, *hopes* to get a response in return.

In general there are two different types of online communication platforms

1. user created online communication platforms
2. company created online communication platforms

In both, users need to register and provide basic, personal information in their profiles to become a member. Most communities feature address books, which link members to their friends within the same and even across networks. Social aspects are a matter of special importance. People look for like-minded people, seek identification and in turn get feedback, fairness and acceptance (Wiedmann, 2007, pp. 683-684). Nevertheless, vanity, self-portrayal and small power games are looming large as well (Eigner & Nausner, 2003, p. 62). Profiles develop towards an *I-collage,* and as Danah Boyd, social network services (SNS) expert at Berkeley University states: "Profiles are digital bodies, public displays of identity where people can explore impression management. Since the digital world requires people to sign themselves into being, profiles provide an opportunity to craft the intended expression through language, imagery and media" (2006). In the first instance, members are not particularly networking to find new friends. One reason is to keep in touch with people, who are already part of their extended social network. (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Another reason for networking is that users try to establish relationships with as many people as possible, because it makes them feel more important and popular (Horrigan, 2001, p. 2).

Financial Numbers prove the success of online communication platforms. The second biggest online community – Facebook – has an estimated value of USD 15 billion and an approxi-

mate turnover of USD 250 million, even though it has been in business for only four years. (Hamann, 2007a). Likewise, the Holtzbrinck group took over the most popular German network StudiVZ for EUR 85 million (Kaube, 2007). Consequently, the question of what asset makes social networks that expensive and therefore that valuable, needs to be raised (Pohlmann, 2007). With mega forums such as Facebook and StudiVZ, large companies hope to benefit from peoples' social drive, but alongside this put an end to privacy (Moorstedt, 2006). Unique advantages that SNS feature are not only the immense amount of personal data, but much rather the network connections of the companies' existing customers. Due to the fact that people are more affine to purchase products that were recommended by friends, the WOM effect is extremely well supported by social networks (Hill, Provost, & Volinsky, 2006, p. 256).

3 Marketing in Online communication platforms

With communities as emerging marketing channels, promising approaches can be obtained. The strategy is to engage customers in an active way by encouraging conversation *inter se* and directly on a two-way basis with companies. All arrangements such as sales, PR, and advertising focus on existing customers in order to strengthen the respective relationship. An essential point about community marketing is that satisfied customers lure new customers by recommendations trough their social network (Hill et al., 2006, pp. 256-257).

3.1 Communities as Innovative Marketing Channels

For the following discussion, two types of community marketing approaches need to be distinguished. On the one hand, organic communities such as StudiVZ, Facebook, and Second Life are created by their users and marketed by companies (Lutz, 2007, p. 721). On the other hand, corporate communities are initiated by companies to begin an active conversation with customers and act as a direct marketing tool.

3.1.1 Social Network-Based Marketing Approaches

Since consumers are facing more than 3,000 advertisements per day – most of them unconsciously – advertising needs to attract their attention in an effective manner (Grether & Markarian, 2007, pp. 297-298). Especially emotions and entertainment became very popular. Today's consumers are well-informed and demanding. Also, people do only want assistance when they need it and only want to see ads they are interested in.

Social network services provide information to locate the perfect spot for any advertisement. The collected techniques that are used for network-based marketing are taking advantage of connections between customers. Besides conventional data, the social network of a consumer defines an additional variable to adjust marketing activities more accurate. It is of high impor-

tance for a company to know, if and with whom their customers stay in contact. The knowledge can be translated into striking marketing actions. Moreover, the examination of social networks provides clues about the likeliness of a purchase. The survey "Network-based marketing: identifying likely adopters via consumer networks" by Shawndra Hill et al. examines this phenomenon. The study proves that network-neighbours who are linked to an existing customer, are three to five times more likely to become customers than those who were identified with traditional methods of market research (Hill et al., 2006, p. 256).

The revolutionarily new approach of network-based marketing is *network-targeting*. Pursuing this concept allows companies to adjust their marketing actions directly to network neighbours of existing customers. Simultaneously, the great disadvantage of WOM marketing is long overdue, since recommendations can always be omitted positively or negatively. With network targeting, marketers have again influence about who is receiving what kind of information (Hill et al., 2006, p. 257). These effects do not result from the fact that customers are heavy advocats that act as unpaid sales personnel, but rather from the fact that people like to be encircled by likeminded peers. People sharing the same preferences tend to make similar purchase decisions.

In order to create successful WOM, experts are assigned outstanding importance. They distinguish their selves by their all-embracing and deep knowledge regarding products and prices while constantly researching and comparing products. Moreover, they are more than willing to share their knowledge with network-neighbours. Due to their high credibility, lead-users are able to influence opinions and set new impulses. Especially with explanation-intensive and complex products, the opinion of a lead-user is sustainably shaping purchase decisions. Lead-users are loyal customers and distinguish their selves by an outstanding high customer lifetime value (Urchs & Körner, 2007, p. 677). Apart from the lead-user, connectors, i.e. people with a highly developed network and salesmen, who are particularly versatile to persuade others of new ideas, are core people to successfully kick off viral campaigns. (Gladwell, 2000, pp. 30-35).

As a matter of fact, innovative marketing approaches such as viral, buzz, and guerrilla marketing become growingly realizable within social networks (Ehrlich, 2007, p. 270). The viral structures of online communication platforms can extensively be used, and hence be benefited from people's openness and social orientation. Nevertheless, classical advertisement is not to be considered superfluous or obsolete, it is rather that community-based marketing is the perfect supplement for conventional marketing activities (Breitenbach, 2006a).

3.1.2   *Brand Communities as a new Marketing Instrument*

Contrary to social networks, corporate-created brand communities are initialized by companies to intensify the contact with their customers. Muniz and O'Guinn define a brand commu-

nity as "[...] a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand. These brand communities exhibit three traditional markers of community: shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility" (2001, p. 412).

As a matter of fact, the addressed moral responsibility is an important reason for companies to build brand communities. Their members show strong commitment to the brand and try to contribute to its performance by helping the company identify business and marketing related issues (Hanlon & Hawkins, 2008). An average brand community involves 300 to 500 customers and prospects, who brainstorm ideas and discuss trends (Ives, 2007). The main motivation for creating brand communities is to establish and maintain loyalty, moreover link customers to the brand and ultimately lure prospects (Michael, 2007, p. 72). Furthermore, brand communities optimize customer communication, suit as a recruitment platform, and generate as well as manage knowledge. Consequently, a valuable source of customer research is created, while increasing both online and offline reputation (Eck, 2007, p. 638).

Furthermore, trust is created with the company and playing an important role for member participation in all community activities. However, until now many brand community approaches appear incredulous and fail to match customer interests. The Brand Science Institute (BSI) discovered that existing communities often center sub-brands and are not about the actual, well-established brand. In many cases, brand communities are misleadingly limited to their online presence, which leads to considerable traffic, but does not influence the real purchase behaviour of participating users. Especially in the beginning, brand communities need direct and honest moderation in order to increase the community continuously (Brand Science Institute, 2006a). As soon as community members are permanently and actively integrated, sustainable effects for the brand can be generated and a positive spreading of brand issues through consumers can be achieved. The aim is to commit the user to the community and to turn the enthusiasts into co-marketers (Jac, 2006). Companies which use their communities strategically will most benefit and translate them into a valuable asset (Hanlon & Hawkins, 2008).

A central point in brand community management is to assure instant gratification by offering incentives to ensure the quality of community ideas, and to make consumers enjoy their time spent in the community (Kalmann, 2005, pp. 3-4). The great challenge companies need to overcome is to provide absolute transparency and the loss of a piece of ownership to the customers (Brand Science Institute, 2006b). In return, they gain profound knowledge about consumers' values and perspectives (Radzievsky, 2006).

3.2 Online Communication Platforms as Infrastructure for Promising Marketing Approaches

Social networks offer unique possibilities for innovative marketing approaches. Especially those approaches that are dependent on participative consumer assistance and rely on the interaction and dynamics within communities are highly relevant. The following section introduces a selection of very promising marketing actions supported by online communication platforms.

3.2.1 Unlocking Word-of-Mouth

After several attempts to use WOM strategically, online communication platforms seem to be the decisive evolution push. In general, WOM describes all communication modalities about products and brands on a consumer-to-consumer level. Nevertheless, it has to be mentioned critically that WOM requires one significant success driver: The person offering advice has best interests at heart (Hollis, 2006). Recommendations are based on personal experience and require intense individual examination of the product. Usually, people with close- and long-term relationships offer advice to their friends and therefore have a strong commitment to their recommendations (Langner, 2006, pp. 218-219). As a matter of fact, personal recommendations hold the highest credibility among consumers and in turn the highest impact on purchase decisions. WOM is the oldest and most efficient marketing technique that – in former times – has mainly been restricted to direct peers such as friends and family members. Therefore, it was extremely difficult to reach a broad audience within a given time frame. However, with the occurrence of online communication platforms, WOM can massively spread within just instants (Vivier, 2008).

3.2.2 The Product as the Topic of Communication

WOM can be seen as a generic term for different forms of communication, in which context viral-, buzz- and guerrilla- marketing as well as advocacy, influencer marketing and evangelism play a decisive role. Even though these techniques may seem to be equal, there is a clear distinction in between. (Vivier, 2008). The main differences between all approaches, is the adjustment on either creating WOM about the brand or about the way of advertisement. The shared goal, however, is to make brand and product the centerpiece of all communication and thereby the center of attention (Oetting, 2005). Advocacy will be discussed as example in the context of its online application.

Advocacy describes a form of an opinion-shaping process within a social community, where the decisive stimulus consists of personal persuasion. It exerts direct influence on an existing attitude and affects purchase decisions of third persons. For instance, advocacy is commonly used by eBay and Amazon in the form of positive reviews, such as customers who bought this item also bought… (Leskovec, Adamic, & Huberman, 2007, p. 2). The method is not very

easy to manage at all but as well purposefully initiated. It especially appears appropriate for products, which emanate emotionality or have a high complexity, which is why consumers gladly welcome peer support. Nevertheless, the core message and all efforts belong to the advertised product (Schmahl, 2007, p. 78). Additionally, advocacy can as well be found on social networks as well.

3.2.3 Strengethening Awareness

Viral marketing and guerilla marketing approaches try to release themselves from pure product messages and pursue the goal to entertain consumers by extraordinary and shocking advertisement, which encourages forwarding to friends thus spreading it in a virus-like manner. Social networks provide the perfect infrastructure for epidemic spreading (Urchs & Körner, 2007, p. 676). The challenge is to make people aware of the advertised product, without putting the brand in the foreground. The aim is to increase awareness and make people associate positive and surprising feelings when thinking about the brand. (Oetting, 2006b). A successful viral marketing example can be an epidemic spreading of a video clip, podcast, ad, link or any other transmittable media throughout an entire community. The idea of viral campaigns is to produce an intelligent, humorous and worth seeing clip, which is to be seeded among influential customers (Langner, 2007, pp. 695-698).

The essence of viral marketing is that the product is not the most important aspect. Viral campaigns are much stronger depending on the entertainment factor, which ultimately encourages people to spread it. If a clip enjoys great popularity, people will send it to friends in order to share the allegedly unique piece of entertainment. Online communication platforms provide the perfect infrastructure to spread viral advertisement within seconds to a broad, worldwide audience. (Hollis, 2007). Contrary to product related WOM approaches, viral marketing is not requiring an individual examination of the product itself. Much rather, it is seen as a situative, shortterm recommendation. (Langner, 2006, pp. 118-120). In other words, viral marketing is indeed spread by WOM, but does not equate to it. (Oetting, 2005). With viral methods, advertisers achieve clips to be seen by people, since they received these from connected peers that know about their personal preferences. As a result, advertisement is not perceived as disturbing any longer: It is perceived as pure entertainment, which people like to share with their friends without necessarily understanding or questioning the underlying concept (Nitsche & Schlossbauer, 2006, pp. 24-25). Viral marketing campaigns aim for increasing brand awareness and feature the brand in a positive light by creating favourite associations.

In contrast to that, guerilla marketing describes a philosophy of extraordinary and unconventional marketing actions, which aim for largest possible furor while employing smallest possible budgets. (Schminke, Koch, & Reimuth, 2007, p. 36). Guerilla actions can be carried out online, offline, mobile or cross-media. Thereby, guerilla marketing uses viral structures and

advantages of online communication platforms to spread messages to a broad audience. Until today, the most popular actions took place offline, mostly with huge banners and billboards but nevertheless, online guerilla marketing is getting increasingly popular (Holzapfel, 2007, pp. 126-127). Guerilla and viral marketing use the entertaining content of their clips and actions in order to arouse attention while simultaneously giving a reason to pass it on. Within these techniques, WOM is used to spread the message.

However, the conversation between consumers will contain the way of advertising instead of the advertised product. The differences between viral and guerilla spots is that guerilla spots contain greater provocation. In contrast to viral commercials, guerilla actions try to shock and surprise, while using the method of sharp arrows. Viral ads rather aim for being spread epidemically. (Oetting, 2007a). Online guerilla actions are used to create dialogues about a product in an online community by using any possible trigger; even if it is risky, provocative or controversial. (Vivier, 2006). The triggers of these dialogues are external impulses such as events, *PR-Stunts* or specifically placed content that creates surprising and positive associations with a brand thus making it a nationwide topic of conversation. However, actions require accurate preparation and legal know-how (Oetting, 2006b).

Despite these facts, guerilla marketing is not a silver bullet but rather an efficient completion of a company's existing media mix. Although this method is unconventional, advertisers should not try to take consumers for fools. The most common pitfall is to post surreptitious advertising by paying bloggers and community members to market people unknowingly. This form of buzz marketing is very dangerous and can cause sustainable image damages (Mayzlin, 2006, pp. 155-157).

3.3   Social Commerce as the new User-Generated Distribution Channel

The question that now needs to be raised is how to commercialize online communication platforms in order to earn money. At a particular point in time, any successful community achieves a size where it can not only be financed by founders or a few sponsors any more. The challenge to overcome is to harmonize commercialization with the advertisement aversion of community members. In terms of Web 2.0 developments, users need to be encouraged to generate content in order to maintain traffic on websites and not be scared off with advertisement messages.

In the context of communities' distribution possibilities and potentials, social commerce and affiliate marketing show the most promising attempts to fulfil this role. Social commerce – derived from the connection between e-commerce and social software – describes electronic commerce which is linked to consumer-to-consumer recommendations. On the virtual market places of today, the former pure consumer can now change between the roles of a consumer, producer, consultant, critic, salesperson or vendor (Mühlenbeck & Skibicki, 2007, p. 104).

In 2008, a highly controversial discussion about social advertising in the form of personalised ads launched by Facebook in the fall of 2007 took place. The central idea was that Facebook users can become *fans* of brands by linking their profiles to commercial profiles of a certain brand. While becoming a fan, users agree that companies can post certain advertisement messages on their profiles and moreover, send personalised advertisements to peers after each purchase of the particular brand. Therefore, social ads automatically inform network neighbours through messages containing peers' pictures, the purchased product and a commercial note. Each purchase release automizes (positive) WOM in a viral manner. However, the user maintains in control since the decision as to whether to become a friend with the brand or not stays with the user. A friendship can be cancelled at any time, so there are no obligations at all.

This approach is the first attempt veering towards affiliate marketing in social online communication platforms. Revenue sharing is a further developed technique, which recompenses fans on a monetary or non-monetary basis. Within affiliate marketing, a subset of performance marketing, a company builds a virtual distribution network on the basis of commercial and private websites such as profile sites in online communication platforms. (Schmahl, 2007, p. 51) If, for instance, a friend or network neighbour is interested in the product and the purchase was initiated through the link on the Facebook profile, a commission is paid out. Most affiliate systems work with pay-per-sale gratuity. Thus, consumers get involved in the profit of a company (Schmidt, 2006).

3.4 Online Communication Platforms: impact on product innovation

Apart from the mere identification and addressing of possible target groups, especially online communication platforms driven by corporations with commercial aim in mind, help extract valuable market information on current trends and help generate and set up an informational basis for new product designs. In such a way, online communication platforms are used as a market research tool, benefitting from a product and target group specific audience yielding a maximum of useful information. In brand communities, members tend to have a very strong interest in the product and in the brand itself. As such, the typical member engages in product discussions and tries to participate with his or her knowledge in providing for product enhancements.

4 Practical Examples of Online Community Marketing

After the theoretical discussion of selected marketing approaches in the context of online communication platforms, the functionality and variety of advertising formats is now examined from a practical viewpoint on the basis of selected examples in the following section.

Two examples will be discussed in depth: Firstly, the commercial use of Facebook by the Coca Cola Company; secondly, future scenarios of very promising marketing approaches will be examined in the context of Second Life as another practical example. To wind up, the risks of virtualization will be highlighted.

4.1   Coca Cola: The Use of Facebook

Facebook, the second biggest social network service in North America serves more than 60 million active users worldwide. Since January 2007, the average of new registrations per day counted 250,000, equaling a weekly 3% growth rate during the last year (Owyang, 2008). Contrary to the general opinion that Facebook rather appeals to teenagers, facts show that more than half of all users are outside of college and that especially the user group aged 35+ represents the fastest growing fraction (Li, 2007). *Mark Zuckerberg*, the 23-year-old Facebook founder tried to revolutionize online advertising with Facebooks new advertisement applications: social advertisement, beacons and pages (Mouse, 2007). Since *The Coca Cola Company* has been a partner of the Facebook advertising from the beginning on, it serves as a well-suited example to be discussed in the context of this paper to explain the diverse marketing approaches Facebook is currently offering (Ad-Programm, 2007).

In general, there are two basic marketer approaches to use within Facebook: For guerilla marketers on the one hand and for marketers with a certain budget on the other hand (Smith, 2007). Guerilla approaches offer Coca Cola a cost-free but aggressive and surprising opportunity to mingle with fans. In connection with the new advertisement offers, companies are now able to open corporate profiles. Due to these profiles, brand fans have the opportunity to network with the company by sending friend requests. Coca Cola already integrated a profile of their brand *Sprite*. On this profile page, an application is downloadable for users where they can create *Sips* – virtual 3D avatars. Even though most application features are cost-free, the "really fancy" ones can simply be activated by codes that are placed inside the cap of Sprite bottles (Ad-Programm, 2007). When a user becomes friends with Sprite, his peers receive an automatic notification on their news feed (Smith, 2007). Thereby, Coca Cola is present as a product (in this case: Sprite) and at the same time tries to be transparent and creates positive associations, since the company is directly networking with friends that have become fans. Corporate profiles are relatively new. Their potential – however – is estimated to be quite high because they make a brand more personal and touchable on an easily accessible level.

The most efficient and oldest way to communicate with fans is to build small brand communities, where customers, friends and partners can interact and share the brand feeling. Furthermore, groups are the easiest way to do viral marketing because they appear on user profiles and are often used as status symbols. Due the fact that profiles are highly trafficked, the recognition of the brand is significantly high (Smith, 2007). Both, Coca Cola as holding and

Sprite as a sub-brand are each tagged in over 500 groups. Groups concerning the *Coca Cola Christmas Truck Advert* have the highest member rate with about 13,000 fans.

Another important guerilla tactic uses the application *Events* to promote marketing events, parties and company milestones. With Facebook events, Coca Cola can invite all friends and plan the next event interactively. Over 100 events are promoted by Coca Cola on Facebook per year and therefore have a great WOM character through enthusiastic fans spreading the word in an evangelistic marketing way (Smith, 2007).

The most efficient tools for advertisers with budget are polls, social ads and beacons. Polls are a very simple and low priced way to conduct research. To create a poll, one simple question has to be asked while giving five possible answers (Smith, 2007). For instance, Coca Cola asks: *What is your favorite soft drink: Coke, Pepsi, Mountain Dew, Dr. Pepper or Red Bull?* After determining the payment arrangements (usually up to 50 cent per answer) and the desired amount of answers, generally 200, the poll is posted on the newsfeed of every welcome page. Since users only need to tick one answer, participation is indeed convenient. When the desired amount of answers is reached, the results are divided by sex and age and give a first insight about soft-drink preferences within the Facebook community.

Social ads are one of the most promising marketing methods because they enable companies to accurately target their ads on the basis of personal data. While creating an ad, marketers can limit the target group by determining age, sex, specific keywords, educational level or leisure time activities (Smith, 2007). Simultaneously, they can conduct polls to further divide target groups. The second approach is to open a brand profile on Facebook and then try to become friends with users: This way, the company is authorized to post commercial messages on fan profiles (Oetting, 2007b).

A rather more aggressive side of social ads is called beacons. Beacons track user actions with cookies from sites other than Facebook (Smith, 2007). The central idea is that data from Facebook can first unfold its real power when it is connected to information about purchase and surf behaviour outside of Facebook (Gerdes, 2008). For instance, if Coca Cola is a partner and a Facebook member purchases fan-items on *Coca-Cola.com*, an automatic feed item is sent to all network neighbors. The initial program was an opt-out application that required users to explicitly prevent feeds from being distributed (Smith, 2007). However, After launching the program, privacy advocates claimed privacy intervention by Facebook (Hansell, 2007). As a result of several reviews, the program is now based on an opt-in option, where users need to explicitly agree that their purchase behaviour is posted to their friends (Story, 2007). The question is now whether or not community members (want to) become unaware buzz agents by recommending products to their peers by an ad tagged by their name and pic-

ture. These sharp reactions show that Facebook needs to overcome the challenge of balancing user-friendliness with advertising revenue (Ostrow, 2007, p. 1).

However, recent developments show that there is a significantly high potential to further enlarge the possibilities to entertain fans on corporate profiles. For instance, highly frequented videos and commercials such as the Christmas Truck ad can be posted on profiles, so that fans can forward them in a *YouTube-manner*. Brought about by applications such as *Super Wall* or *Fun Wall* it is already possible to post YouTube videos. However, with the emergence of corporate sites, companies can create their own entertainment centers by using viral structures and the social character of their fans. In order to create a win-win situation, it is very important that companies use a personal and transparent way to interact with their fans.

4.2   StudiVZ: First Steps in the Commercialization

StudiVZ is the fastest growing online community in Germany. With 5.3 billion page impressions per month and 4.5 million users it promises being a paradise for marketers (Graff, 2008). However, contrary to its competitor Facebook, StudiVZ is not yet profitable (Hauck & Kortmann, 2008). The reason is not only the collegiate target group but rather the way of usage. Click-through rates of advertisement banners are significantly lower than those on Internet portals such as *Web.de, T-Online* and *Spiegel-Online.* Since members of StudiVZ are mainly using the community to flirt, meet friends and chat, this is not a surprise (Kunath, 2007a). Already shortly after StudiVZ was bought by the Holtzbrinck group, first plans of commercialization were announced. *Marcus Riecke*, CEO of StudiVZ, explains that targeted advertisements on the basis of the characteristics age, sex, course and place of study are planned. The true underlying concept, however, was to send personalized advertisement to cell phones and email addresses. After an outright wave of protests, StudiVZ was forced to ease general terms and conditions and attached an opt-out option (Hamann, 2007b). As a result, StudiVZ is currently operating with four different advertisement formats.

Telegrams are exclusive text teasers, which forward users automatically to the website of StudiVZ's business customers. Telegrams are placed at individual welcome pages, and can therefore easily be noticed. Furthermore, StudiVZ is guaranteeing 20 million *AdImpressions*, which equals 1.3 million users and as many as 100,000 clicks on companies' commercial websites for a fee of 45,000 Euros. *The Blue Man Group Stage Entertainment* planned to strengthen their advertisements offers for the collegiate target group and intended to establish intensive relationships with potential customers through the help of an exclusive telegram. Over 625,000 users were forwarded to the target page where further information about the show and short video clips were provided. The clips were extremely popular and therefore spread across the community – soon ranked first place on the video platform *MyVideo.de.*

With the support of their online campaign on StudiVZ, the *Blue Man Group* instantiated a six-digit turnover (GWP Online Marketing, 2007).

The second advertising format is called *sponsored groups*. Sponsored groups describe user groups whose members were invited through teasers placed on members' welcome pages. Within these groups, promotions and special offers are arranged guaranteeing about 1.6 million invited users. The fee of the format amounts to EUR 90,000 (GWP Online Marketing, 2007).

Banners are the most traditional way of online marketing and are also available on the German online community. StudiVZ currently offers six banner formats, each guaranteeing a different number of clicks, depending on the location where they are placed. The banners can be personalized and tagged on specific member profiles (GWP Online Marketing, 2007). Until now, the last commercialization approach is the *boutique*, where corporate partners can post special offers for the community (Suter, 2007). Amongst others, members can purchase laptops, photo albums and the new *Elegance Calendar* featuring StudiVZ's most beautiful members (Hauck, 2007). Although StudiVZ and Facebook partly operate with similar marketing approaches, StudiVZ can not (yet) offer beacons, applications and parts of social ads, since the technical requirements are not met (yet).

However, there are some more critical issues that need to be considered in view of StudiVZ's

Currently, the great majority of StudiVZ users are represented almost solely by *German teenagers* and *college students* and no specific target groups (Hamann, 2007b). Accurate targeting will be the most important advertisement strategy for online communication platforms and therefore any platform that is unable to offer precise targeting will lack in competitive advantage on the long run. "Finding a way to use people's interests and personal connections to show them relevant ads has always been the promise of social networking, but we're still waiting to see the big successes" (Kunath, 2007b).

4.3 Second Life: Marketing in a Virtual World

Second Life (SL) defines itself as virtual 3D community, which is entirely created by its residents. Within this community, users can create *avatars*, a virtual character, which is able to shop, buy land, build houses, develop and sell products, play and meet people. (Second Life, 2008). The virtual world is online since 2003 and counts over 3.2 million registered users. However, there are only 90,000 active users per day, showing that about 70% of all users are nominal members (Breuer, 2007, p. 12). Global players such as Starwood Hotels, Adidas, Toyota and American Apparel had their virtual stores almost from the beginning, but the ex-

pected success could not yet be instantiated. SL is rather a culture-phenomenon than a platform for marketing. The advertising industry slowly begins to develop innovative approaches for a commercial use (Schultz, 2007).

Nevertheless, "brands are underestimating the investments required" (Kintz, 2007). A reasonable online presence starts with investment sums from EUR 20,000 onwards. However, there are further investments necessary – such as virtual shops that need to be promoted inside and outside of SL. On top of that, permanent virtual sales personnel need to be compensated for attending the store (Breitenbach, 2006b).

Also, most companies do not understand, that there are already plenty successful *in-world* brands to compete with. For example, the avatar *Moopf Murray* owns a very successful company, which produces and sells roller skates. *Gareth Lancaster*, creator of Moopf Murray, told that he already sold 50,000 pairs of roller-skates. (Walker, 2006). Fashion companies such as Adidas and American Apparel face even harder conditions. Designers are popular avatars within SL, mainly ruled by housewives, who have plenty of time and astonishing talent (Wagner, 2007). Moreover, many active users try to avoid *real-time* brands because they want to create a fantasy world, which shows as few similarities with the real world as possible (Walker, 2006).
Virtual worlds are innovative and today's marketing activities for this media are not yet fully developed. The following section tries to describe some scenarios of how to use SL as marketing and distribution channel. The scenarios contain likely developments but also already realized approaches.

Branded entertainment provides opportunities to create product and brand worlds by presenting products in a brand-affine environment. For example, Sony BMG opened their *Media Island* in 2006, which mainly consists of chill-out areas, concert halls, clubs and so called *artist-booths*, where leading BMG artists such as Christina Aguilera, Justin Timberlake and Ben Fold are featured. Additionally, songs and merchandise products of these artists can be purchased. Even though the island is not profitable in an economic way, the project offers valuable PR-effects.

SL is also a cost efficient place to develop prototypes. The hotel chain *Starwood Hotels* uses SL to test the interior and design of its new brand *Aloft*, which will be launched in 2008. Therefore, an entire replica of the new holiday resort was reversely engineered and its development can be observed by business associates and users while being completely detached from time and space relations. Due to its 3D character, SL can be used for product configurations by customers to purchase in-world or for the real-world. For instance, Reebok and Nike use SL to feature the Reebok *Custom Line* and the respective *NikeID*. Customers can indi-

vidualize their shoes by choosing different components. When creating a shoe in SL, the customer receives a blank, which can be individualized and afterwards produced in a real-world customization store (Breuer, 2007, p. 7; p. 35).

The continuous criticism of e-commerce stores, namely that shopping experience is decreased to the benefit of profits, can be overcome by *V-commerce* in SL. Hence, 3D stores allow a complete store design around the brand. Adidas, for instance, wants to strengthen brand awareness and popularity of new products with a viral campaign. The virtual Adidas store already sold about 23,000 pairs of *a3-microride* sneakers. In addition, the store is used to test new products to estimate potential success in the real-world (Haupt, 2007). Finally, events can be extended with a performance in SL. On the one hand, additional target groups, which could not physically participate in real-world events, can be reached, while on the other hand time limitation can be abolished.

The topic web 3D and its potential are encompassed by great discussions. Even though SL stores and presences can not realize "hard" economical aims, "idealistic" goals such as forming precise brand profiles, building awareness, founding communities, and the cultivation of customer relationships can be pursued.

Global players such as IBM and MTV announced that they aspire to create virtual worlds, which will graphically and technologically perform on a significantly higher level. Virtual showrooms and *ingame-advertisement* will be marketing techniques of the future, and companies will start preparation (Eichstetter, 2007, p. 592). MTV plans to launch a virtual world based on its very successful series *Laguna Beach*. It is one of three virtual world projects, with which MTV plans to regain users, who are extremely engaged in online communication platforms (Siklos, 2006). SL offers interesting possibilities for product and company presentations, but whether the online world proves to be a long term pioneer needs to be waited for (Waschkies, 2007).

4.4   Risks of Virtualization

The above mentioned marketing approaches and future scenarios serve to better understand the potential that is available in online communication platforms. It is now to dare future prospects in order to highlight the risk of this gradual virtualization. Recent discussions concerning privacy issues resulting from new advertising formats in Facebook highlight this relevance.

The modern generation does not care to share personal data with the web community, yet their generosity is risky. Global companies already have accounts in all great communities

and check profiles of potential employees to get an idea of their personality and attitudes. It is not uncommon that the Internet destroys careers before they have even started. Moreover, the Internet never forgets; any "awkward" picture, message or mail is saved for many years. Even though this movement of freedom has immense advantages and is not at least the fundament of the user-generated Internet, it should be used with awareness (Hamann, 2007a).

Apart from privacy concerns, the increasing time people spend online can cause considerable forms of addiction. International synonyms for this disease patterns are *Net Addiction, Online Addiction, Internet Addiction Disorder* (IAD), *Pathological Internet Use* (PIU) and *Cyberdisorder*. Internet applications such as chats and online communication platforms are most addictive. About 32% of all users are classified as online addicts. There are five criteria to identify addicted people. First of all, addicts suffer from loss of control and can not independently decide how long they are online or when to go offline. Secondly, their behaviour is restricted and most of the day is spent online. Furthermore, they develop strong tolerance towards Internet activities. Fourth, they show withdrawal syndromes such as nervousness, bad temper and aggressions. Lastly, the addiction has a strong influence on their social as well as working environment. Arguments with friends and family, as well as decreasing productivity, short sleep and the unconscious desire of being "online" are the most common withdrawal syndromes. Endangered persons are in first instance those who are labile and have weak self-confidence.

The *Humboldt-University* of Berlin conducted a study which proves that teenagers, unemployed- and lonely people as well as housewives are most likely to become addicted and escape into virtual worlds where they can pretend to be someone else and live a "better" life. Since the year 2000, the number of web addicted people in Germany has doubled. In the US, as many as 200,000 Americans and 7% of the world population are addicted. The biggest issue is that web addiction is very difficult to identify (Hahn, 2002). People lose connection to reality and find great acceptance with friends inside the virtual-world. They live the life of their dreams and see no personal advantage in the real world. Unfortunately, platforms, online communication platforms and virtual worlds strongly support these developments. Today, everything can be done within the Internet. Food shopping, socializing and leisure time spending. It has thus become extremely easy to loosen the connection to reality (Bollhöfer, 2007, p. 77).

5   Conclusion

Within this paper, the potential of online communication platforms as a new marketing and distribution channel was depicted. The consumers' development into a multi-optional consumer as well as the technological requirements strongly support this development. Further-

more, companies begin to realize the great importance of individuality of advertisements and the development of an increasing demand for ad adaptation to individual customer preferences.

Social networks as well as brand communities convince with their advantages to create loyalty and awareness. Moreover, innovative guerilla and viral marketing approaches prove to be promising methods to target the interconnectedness of social networks and to unfold their full potential. However, these marketing approaches rather strengthen idealistic aims such as general Public Relations and positive associations than yet being economically profitable.

Although the practical cases in this paper have shown that several pitfalls still need to be overcome, it becomes clear that online community marketing is an intelligent match to the overall marketing strategy of a company and thus a promising endeavor. Notwithstanding, the future of the Internet is still in mere progress and a variety of communities and business ideas are still mushrooming towards its surface. Many of them are likely to disappear again, however, the stars of the new Internet wave are already looming. The new generation of Amazon, Google and Yahoo are now MySpace, YouTube and Facebook.

Currently, the number of online community users are nowadays far over the 100 millions. Nevertheless, the greatness and transparency which was once seen as a unique advantage of communities is turning into a handicap with rising popularity. Soon the market of online platforms will differentiate itself. Content and target group specific communities will be the next generation and the new basis of targeted advertisement. Within these specific communities, targeted advertising will be even more effective and due to the high involvement of its members, create loyalty and credibilty. In addition, peers in these topic-related online communication platforms will probably be very affine to certain related and personalized ads of the subject matter (Häntzschel, 2007). Mega-communities such as Facebook and MySpace are likely to further develop into browsers, where other applications will be made accessible.

Currently, a whole universe consisting of a multitude of virtual worlds is developing. By thinking ahead, boundaries will become more indistinct and communities and virtual applications will open up for interaction. Beyond this, advance notices about next browser generations let hope for the merger between web browsers and virtual interfaces as well, thus making communities an integrative component of Internet usage. With recent development scenarios such as virtually meeting with friends for a shopping trip at Amazon.com to further visit the concert of a favourite band via MySpace profiles will certainly be realizable in the near future (Bollhöfer, 2007, p. 79).

In the meantime, cell phones have developed towards a multi-channel media combining organisational, entertaining and interfacing functions (Birkel, 2007, p. 482). People are increasingly using cell phones to access time- and context-related information and services (Bollhöfer, 2007, p. 80). Mobile marketing therefore represents another promising approach for the future development of marketing. Online communication platforms such as Facebook already reacted by creating applications that enable to access profile sites via cell phones (Birkel, 2007, pp. 482-483). The commerce with interactive services will become more intuitive and much closer integrated to consumer habits in the near future. Henceforth, the Internet will surround people like a second skin and lead to an augmented reality. Community commercialization in combination with mobile marketing will be exploiting the full potential of network marketing: with the interconnectedness of cell phones and communities, ads can even be adapted to specific place and time usages (Bollhöfer, 2007, p. 80).

Closing up, targeted marketing will most definitely gain significant importance in the near future of community marketing. The Internet will be accessible from all different types of mobile devices from anywhere at anytime. However, the most important aspect companies need to understand is to let their customers participate, even though this also implies to give away some control of their brands into the hands of the consumers. Nevertheless, the potential that it will pay off on the long term is high since people's social drive can be turned into a huge benefit and therefore worth the risk because: Humans are social beings by nature.

"Homo est animal sociale"

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