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Practices for users' engagement in innovation

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Abstract

This work shows the first results of a wider project aiming to the definition of practices in firm-users interaction. In order to move toward this aim we performed a content analysis based on two steps to investigate the messages containing firms' proposals to users involving them in a participatory context. The contexts shaped by firms are digital platforms to carry on co-innovation projects. We analysed 20 different platforms and we grouped the results in five categories to highlight some of the most important topics emerged from our literature review in the frame of service research, consumer-generated content, and user-generated content.

Keywords: Co-innovation, involvement, User-Generated Content

Introduction and Objectives

Service logic spread in last decade strongly and with a high impact. Nordic school research approach underlined the relevant role played by interaction (Grönroos, 2006, 2008, Ravald, 2009) entangled with value creation. It is considered as necessary to achieve value creation and enables the cooperation in this kind of process (Vargo and Lusch 2008; 2011).

Empirical researches (Colurcio et al., 2011) stated the usefulness of new technologies, especially web-based ones as they favour the interaction among users and between them and firms leading creativity to emerge in a powerful way (Colurcio et al., 2012).

Digital contexts attained a more relevant role in human beings life and in business activities too, in particular as it regards practices for new product development (Russo Spina and Mele, 2012) and new ideas (Colurcio et al., 2012).

Users/consumers' contribution to value proposition process is highlighted (George and Scerri, 2007) in two parallel research streams, known as consumer-generated content (CGC) and user-generated content (UGC).

In this perspective technologies can favour creation of new outcomes and new collective creativity (Howe, 2006) in an open innovation context (von Hippel, 2005).

Nowadays firms are more and more aware of the opportunities and the potentialities of these interactions and some authors underlined how individual creativity, collective creativity and firms' creativity can merge (Pepler and Solomou, 2011) achieving such a higher value creation potential, as an unpredictable number of actors (Stoeckl et al., 2007) can support it.

The considerations and the quotes above cited shed new light on firms' choices about digital communication as a strategic issue depicting the creation and the development of new practices (Schatzki, 2001) to co-produce by involving users. This concept hails from Ackoff (1972), stating "the activity performed by an actor (the co-producer) in close contact with a firm to achieve a specific output". During the time this approach was enriched and revisited on the basis of different research streams.

This work represents the first result of a wider research aiming to the definition of collaboration practices' in firm-users interaction to develop innovative processes. In detail the paper focuses on this interaction thanks to a two-steps content analysis, performed on messages proposed by firms to the users acting in the co-innovation context.

Literature Review

Nowadays innovation processes are performed more and more thanks to users' intervention and resources, as "value co-creation drives innovation and evolution within the market" (Vargo et al., 2008). "Users sometimes develop and modify products for themselves" (von Hippel, 2005) and in this way they shape new products or services, so firms are strongly interested in this kind of interventions, as they can reduce risks and uncertainty about the potential success of a new product or a new service (Cova and Dalli, 2009). In the same time product concept effectiveness can be enhanced (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1995). In addition the more users are involved the more they are willing to pay as consumers (Franke and Piller, 2004), leading to higher performances in terms of satisfaction (Payne et al., 2008). Thanks to this approach and following the most spread ideas from service research (Grönroos, 2005, 2011) users can be seen in different ways. For instance they can be considered as developers (Jeppesen and Molin, 2004), innovators (Chang and Kaasinen, 2011), workers (Cova and Dalli, 2009), partial employees (Dholakia et al., 2009), advertisers (Berthon et al., 2008), designers (Battarbee, Koskinen, 2005), and so on.

This set of new possible roles is even the reason why it is more advisable to employ the word *user* instead of the word *customer*. This difference is empowered by the kind of actions performed by these subjects as they use resources even apart from buying something from a

firm. The usage of resources can be framed as a resource integration, as stated in both service logic and service-dominant logic (Grönroos, 2006; Vargo and Lusch, 2006)

The dichotomy between user and customer still exists and it emerges as important when talking about the outcome of the activities performed, especially if this happens in new high-technology contexts. Some literati defined this result as user-generated content (UGC) or customer-generated content (CGC).

New technologies plays the role of enablers to favour users in being active in value creation contexts (Obrist et al., 2008). Websites, forums, and especially online communities can act as a support to broaden the knowledge of such processes even before they lead to creation, sharing, and deployment (Blythe, 2009) of new contents, like products, services or just ideas. The definition of UGC existed even before web 2.0 spread it in a larger way (Kaplan, 2010), with a strict connection to online communities; in particular some scholars asserted (George, Scerri) web 2.0 strengthen its power and created new opportunities.

UGC and CGC have both been defined by the Organization for the Economic Development (OECD, 2007) as “*content made publicly available over the internet*”. Sometimes this concept is slightly disparaged by some scholars (Cha et al. 2007), as some contents created online can be available only for the subjects belonging to a group, like online communities.

Subjects performing activities aimed to new UGC are considered even in a stronger way when Muñiz and Schau (2011) defined them as *fans*. This happens especially in communities, both the ones created and managed by the firms and the ones appearing in a spontaneous way. This last case is even more important as Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) stated people behaviour in spontaneous community is not censored and can express all of its potential.

People participation to communities and more in general to UGC and CGC can be described through an interaction between users and a firm favoured by the involvement (Brodie et al., 2011). In connection with this last feature, users are generating new content acting as volunteer contributors for firms (van Dijck, 09).

The absence of wage does not lead to the lack of benefits, as users participate for different reasons. “Motivations can be highly idiosyncratic and varied” (Amabile, 1996), but some literati tried to depict the reasons why people took part in such processes with firms. In line with this approach Dahl and Moreau (2007) classified seven different explanations leading to actors involvement: competence, autonomy, learning, engagement and relaxation, self-identity, public accomplishment and community. One of the most debated topic in literature among all of the reasons cited above is engagement. The relation between involvement and engagement is intense as it emerges from some of the most quoted definitions. A quote from Higgins and Scholer (2009) can be useful to show this connection, as engagement is defined “as the state of being involved, occupied, fully absorbed or engrossed in something”. Similarly Breidbach et al. (2013) embed involvement in the concept of engagement. Moreover Kotro (2009) investigated people involved in innovation project by firms when deepening Lego Mindstorm case study. Apart from the above underlined connection and by summing up we quote Abdul-Ghani et al. (2010) defining engagement as requiring consumer connection, utilitarian, hedonic and social benefits.

The positive effect emerging from users’ participation – as stated above – in processes performed in interaction with firms can be in contrast with opportunistic behaviour. This topic has been considered both on firms’ orientation and on consumers’ orientation. Etgar (2008) defined opportunism as *situational* and impacting on the quality of B2C interaction.

Aim

The aim of our work is to frame managerial practice (Schatzki, 2001) of communication to drive the involvement of users into engagement to obtain their contributions of creative

insights, suggestion, emotions, and so on (Colurcio et al., 2011, Colurcio and Caridà, 2013) and even to UGC.

Some literati called for new contributions on involvement and engagement (Woodruff and Flint, 2006, Payne et al., 2008) and in this work shed some new light on this topic in relation with issues emerging from our literature review, namely, UGC and CGC, by framing all of them in the context of service logic. Moreover we want to move towards the analysis of opportunistic behaviour performed by firms.

The ties among the above cited topics can be depicted thanks to service logic and in detail through some of the most relevant concepts, like interaction, tool and outcome. We can refer to them as the most important and common as they are strongly considered in the hallmark of service logic (Grönroos, 2006, 2008) and service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2006).

Method and context of analysis

As our focus is on communication, we decided to investigate firms' messages addressed to potential consumers (and to users in a more general way). This is the reason why we chose to perform a content analysis, defined by Berelson (1952) as "a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of manifest content of communication".

The work is based on an empirical investigation built around 20 cases, in which firms asked for users' participation and support. Firstly we selected the way in which cases have to be considered. In order to have a range of cases representing a wide scope of possible interactions among users and firms we started from the list of industries prepared and used by Italian Institute of Statistical Research (ISTAT) when reports on consumers are asked from the government or from some of the local agencies. The usage of such a kind of perspective is common in consumer behaviour research (Cantone and Risitano, 2005, Dalli and Romani, 2011). Similar approaches are common even in international contexts, where comparable data are provided by national statistical institutes, in evaluating services (Mazzeo, 2003) and particular clusters of consumers (Rodriguez et al., 2002).

Starting from the above introduced approach we defined a list of cases to be used for our analysis. In the first step of this selection we collected more than 45 cases. This collection has been performed by focusing on the most common cases emerging from exploration into research engines in a period of two months. In order to perform this kind of collection we chose the most useful word to depict the kind of activity we were about to investigate, such as design, customization, personalize, create your own, and so on.

Then we analysed in depth the 45 cases emerged to further select on the basis of two criteria:

- similar approach to communication in terms of length and fairness of the message published through the company own website;
- belongingness of at least one firm to each of the industry used in the research method proposed by ISTAT.

The second step of our work started with 20 firms to be analysed through their way to communicate to involve potential customers – or in a more general way, users – in their activities. In this phase we selected the messages conveyed by each of these firms through their online platforms, like communities, blogs, forums or their official websites.

In the following lines we shortly introduce the cases we considered:

- Livemocha: a website favouring the study of foreign languages thanks to contents already composing a database and relating users studying a language with mother tongue users, leading to a mutual support;
- Waze: a navigation app for Smartphones in which users contribute to live updates on congestion and maps in the database and support to new users;
- The collective: participation is the main feature of this community to favour consumer behaviours and proposals oriented to environmental issues;

- 99 design: a website hosting a space to launch design contests, favouring interactions among firms asking users to design new brands;
- Creative allies: a community where people can submit designs for musical products, sell them and achieve a standing in the context they take part in;
- Oakley: a website where this sunglasses firm gives the chance to innovate their products and to favour customization;
- Shoes of prey: the website of this shoemaker allows to personalize shoes and to obtain them produced with premium materials, but thanks to a handmade process;
- Customize it your own: a website allowing the creation of a logo or a brand to be printed on a wide range of products. The design can be totally new or based on the existing database;
- Build your app: a website containing a toolkit to facilitate the creation of new apps for Smartphones even for people with low or no technical skills;
- Appbuilder: a website with a section favouring the creation of new apps for mobile phones or the modifications to existing apps to improve their usage on some models;
- Spreadshirt: a site for t-shirt designer, in order to customize them with images, photos or texts and to have other products “branded” in the same way;
- Customink: an online laboratory for t-shirt designing and for similar gadgets. The firm team offers support to design, modify or buy online the customized products;
- Medgestore: a website to design customized cases to protect Smartphones. Users can even publish their designs online and the community can use them to personalize new cases;
- Fewsome: a website leading to the customization of wristwatches, with colours, numbers and images, based on the assumption that “no human is the other alike”;
- Milk and Honey: a website providing lots of tools to favour shoes customization, in terms of both design and structure;
- House Beautiful: an online virtual space where different areas of a flat can be designed online with reference to a lot of different details, like appliances or accessories;
- IdeaStorm: a website launched by Dell to collect proposals to be selected by the firm. There is even a section to show the already chosen and realized projects;
- 4 food: the “gamification” of food service is the key of this website where users can create new recipes for burgers and compete in a chart by advertising them through social networks;
- Crowdspring: more than 137.000 designers are registered to this website and they create logos, brands and even websites. They can even achieve a contract with the firm;
- Jonathan Adler: the furniture producer allows the design of new products online, by customizing materials and colours and supporting environment in developing new outcome.

In the third phase we started analysing the content of these messages thanks to a content analysis. This method can be suitable as messages can be considered as raw materials (Bryman, Bell, 2003) and latent meanings can emerge in this way. This analysis can take place by using a suitable software, viz. *KhCoder*. The usage of a software like this is well considered in relation with communication since 50s (Berelson, 1952, Holsti, 1969) and with UGC too (Smith et al., 2012). Unobtrusiveness of this approach (Webb et al., 1999) is one more advantage arising. Data emerged from two different kinds of analysis. Firstly a so-called cluster analysis has been performed. Then a full concordance has been done as it is useful to define the most frequent occurrences, viz. the number of times in which they have been used by firms to communicate. This latter has been performed several times in order to clean out all words leading to possible misunderstanding in the interpretation of data, in particular among the ones with the higher number of occurrences. The studies on consumer behaviour based on content analysis rely on a validation process emerging from comparison with the literature topics (Kassajian, 1977). Thus, the upcoming results have to be crossed with the review of the literature we performed in order to frame firms’ practices in collaborative innovation through communication activities.

Findings

The first phase of our analysis is called cluster analysis in the software we used as it couples the words used together more often than others. The list of results was composed just selecting the results above 1,000, in order to focus on reliable results. In this way a first selection among all the collected ties was automatically performed by the software. Then we decided to be more restrictive when selecting the results to achieve a sharper validation from the empirical evidences, so we decided to choose only the relations with an index higher than 2,000, even if the highest result inside the list emerging from the software was 2,450.

The words coupled in this phase have been further selected in order to count out the obvious relation, like the ones between pronouns and verbal forms. After this additional selection we had 3 relevant relations, contained in the following table.

1st couple	Index	2nd couple	Index	3rd couple	Index
We – you	2,320	You – together	2,175	Possible – together	2,044

The ties emerging from this first phase of the content analysis let us focus on the interaction and above all on the subjects shaping the activities to be performed.

The first couple of words group the firm (with the word “we”) and the potential user (referred to as “you”) when proposing the activity to be performed in order to create something new.

The second couple of words lead us to a similar consideration compared to the one above, as the subjects of the interaction can be the same, but the extent of the potential interaction is wider as sometimes the word *together* can be used to refer both to the firm and to the other members of the community.

Finally the third relevant couple of words is composed by possible and together. In this way we can underline the relation between the set of subjects expressed by the word together and the adjective *possible*, used in association with positive words or expressions, like the one listed here: better, new way, mission, and so on.

The second step of our investigation through the software is a full concordance, namely an operation performed in order to list all the words used in the messages by the companies and to show the frequency of usage of each of them. The analysis has been done on single words as they “are the smallest unit” (Berelson, 1952).

The list of words emerging from the analysis of *KhCoder* was quite long and it needs to be put through a selection with the aim of erasing useless terms for our investigation like conjunctions, propositions, proper nouns (brands, products, services, name of communities, web address), and so on.

In this way we obtained a list of the most common words in the messages of communication used by the firms selected for our research. We created a list of the ones with the higher number of occurrences after coupling the ones to be considered together as leading to the same meaning. The outcome of this activity can be seen in the following table.

Word/words (1st part)	Occurrences	Word/words (2nd part)	Occurrences
You	24	Teach	9
They – their – them	23	Content	8
Language	20	Activities	6
Learning – learners	20	Together	5
We – our	19	Develop	5
Create	16	Help	5
Community	11	Share	5

After listing the selected words we decided to investigate in detail the context in which they had been used to achieve a categorization of the words instead of just having a list of them.

Thanks to the detailed observation of them we attained five different categories collecting all of them. The choice of the topics to collect the words depended on the most relevant concepts arising from our literature review. In detail we chose: aims, interaction and subjects, tools, outcome and phases.

In the first group we collected the aims, namely the reasons why firms proposed to users to take part in their activity. These aims can be also useful to involve people and to favour their focus on some potential results to be achieved. The words we collected under the tag *aims* are: learning, create, develop, and teach (50 occurrences).

In the second group we put together the words describing the interaction and the subjects shaping it. In this way we recall the first findings emerging from the previous phase of the analysis (the so-called cluster analysis) and we look at them as a whole. The words put into this category are: you, we-our, together, they-their-them, community (82 occurrences).

The tools are the way to create the third category (25 occurrences) and we decided to use this concept because the word *language* emerged with such a high frequency and even because the meaning of the word *help* was always the support provided by the firm itself or a suggestion to ask for or give assistance to other members of the community.

The fourth group is composed by the outcome of the activities proposed by the firms and the word *content* is the only one with a high occurrence (8 occurrences). We also gave a glance to the words with lower frequency and we can put in this category some of them like product, service, idea, proposal, and project, but we preferred to select the words only from the above displayed list.

Finally the fifth and last category is phases as we found several references to the time in which some activities are expected to be performed. In detail we can easily divide them in before the generation of new ideas (content, products, services, and so on) and after it. The words *activities* and *share* are the most common to describe these two different moments of participation (11 occurrences).

Discussion

Firstly we want to underline the high relevance of the concept of interaction. It is one of the main topics in service research and it can be considered as the *locus of value creation* (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000). This interaction is central in the relationship management (Grönroos, 1982) and it has to be built towards communication. The results showed in both of the phases of our investigation can support this statement, as firms are strongly interested in and oriented to use words like *we*, *you*, and *together* to appeal potential users towards processes to be performed together in the online platforms.

The reason why firms decide to involve users in activities in online contexts can be described thanks to the results arising from the second part of our investigation, first of all by looking at the category of words named *aims*. In effect firms want to create a context in which activities like learning, creating, developing and teaching are performed together with users and users can act as potential “amplifier” of these actions, viz. in a certain way they can substitute the firm in spreading the processes leading to new content, as two categories of our findings can state, with topics like sharing and content. The role to be assigned to users is in line with some of the definitions we focused on in our literature review, like workers (Cova, Dalli, 2009) or partial employees (Dholakia, Blazevic, 2009), favouring our validation of results as suggested by (Kassajian, 1977).

User-generated content can be considered as the most useful way to describe people contribution to the innovative creation processes of a firm, because content can be considered as a more general concept, but first of all because the results showed us how often firms use

this concept when referring to the potential users. When considering the previous recurring activity of learning and spreading with the content emerging from the activity performed by users, the continuous improvement (Obrist et al., 2008) of the process can emerge.

Finally firms are interested in favouring this kind of activities in a way useful to spread this logic in the whole context. In detail we want to underline the focus of the firms on the time, as they ask to take part to these activities and then they ask to share the result of the activities in order to involve more and more users. In this way firms can let users be the ones acting instead of its workers in some different phases developers (Jeppesen and Molin, 2004), innovators (Chang and Kaasinen, 2011) of the innovation process.

This last consideration leads us to the connection with firms opportunistic behaviour, as users are encouraged to perform some activities without a wage, differently from what is usually asked to firms employees.

Based on value co-creation literature (Grönroos, 2008, Vargo and Lusch, 2008) and on recent contributions useful to define co-creation practices (Kowalkowski et al., 2012), our research highlighted the role of firms' digital platforms. They involve users in developing innovation processes and they arise as practices, viz. as "*shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action*" (Wenger, 1998, 1991, p.5). These platforms are characterized by the same features of interactions, resource integration and sharing of principles, customs and myths.

Limitations

The main limit of our research depends on a firm-focused perspective, as users' perceptions are not taken into account. However if we consider the aim of our research, viz. the way in which practices started performing their effects, our first research step emerges as required to define the state of the art of the collaboration in digital platforms in firm-users interactions.

Further Research

Our findings represent a starting point for further research and they will even be verified in a wider range of cases. Main theoretical implications concern the contribute both to debate on web-based communication and to studies on the collaborative approach to innovation in the fuzzy front end.

In next step of our research we will focus on users' perceptions of the activities they perform together with firms in order to be in line with one of the suggestion emerging from our literature review, stated by Malthouse (2011): "engagement is based on experiences, making it a different kind of psychological state, one that must be studied jointly with experiences". This statement leads us to the necessity of comparing the results emerging from this analysis on communication with the perception of the users.

Moreover we will deepen this topic in relation to opportunism as it is one issue emerging in value creation research (Ertimur and Venkatesh, 2010) and can impact on the firm-users interaction, especially on a medium-term relation.

Managerial Implications

On the managerial side, the main implication consists of the definition of a practice for companies to allow a systematic approach to the engagement of users in the innovation process. The definition of a practice could be particularly interesting for companies in a crisis period when the reduction of costs is a strategic point in the innovation matter

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