CONSUMPTION AND COMMUNICATION OF LUXURY BRANDS ONLINE – ILLUSTRATING A QUALITATIVE ONLINE CASE STUDY

Anita Radón

The Swedish School of Textiles University of Borås, Sweden

Bryggaregatan 17, S-501 90 Borås, Sweden

anita.radon@hb.se

ABSTRACT

Internet research has grown tremendously over the last decade and we see new and elaborate ways to use the Internet for data generation with increased technological abilities as well as increased Internet usage among companies and consumers. This paper illustrates a qualitative online study within the field of marketing with focus on the consumption and communication of brands. The specific interest is in showing how a particular phenomenon is studied using different Internet research methods and how this has resulted in more thick qualitative descriptions of consumption and communication in an online environment. The paper shows how the aim and context of a study leads to an Internet research approach and how the online study was conducted, the methods that were used, the results it gave and thus also sketches the possibilities and future of Internet research.

Keywords: Qualitative, Online research, Online Environment, Brands, Communication

INTRODUCTION

With the tremendous growth of Internet usage among companies and consumers, the web has become a huge empirical ground for the collection of data within, for instance, the field of marketing. Given the potential for empirical research online the field of Internet research is steadily expanding and a growing body of academic research has dealt with the phenomenon. Ngai and Wat (2002), early on, made a literature review and classification of electronic commerce finding 275 articles in nine different journals. Lee, Hwang and Kim (2007) investigated the diversity in electronic commerce and also the question of whether or not Internet studies is a discipline has been raised (Baym, 2005). One of the most recent classifications studies is that of Wang and Chen (2010) who used the bibliometric technique to review the electronic commerce literature and found that it can be classified into seven categories, of which this particular study would fall into the category of business and management. The field of marketing and management is well suited as grounds for Internet research, and studies have been conducted, although mostly using quantitative methodology. Even though still rather limited, some researchers have conducted qualitative online research, many of them, for instance, within health studies (Fleitas, 1998; Murray, 1997). But there is still a need for more qualitative online research examples and methods for examining this type of research. The concept of netnography (Kozinets, 1998) was introduced as a methodology in consumer and marketing research. It is described as a method "...devised specifically to investigate the consumer behavior of cultures and communities present on the Internet." Goulding (2003) also stressed the need for greater emphasis on rich and varied forms of data collection in consumer and marketing research. This study shows how qualitative online research has been used to generate marketing research on the Internet.

THE STUDY

The purpose of the study described was to investigate how a sense of luxury brand is created in an online environment, thus putting it within the discipline of marketing and management. Since choice of research strategy is often primarily based on the aim and research questions, and given that the aim was to study occurrences in an online environment, the choice to study them online seemed inevitable. Qualitative research online is defined as: "qualitative research that relies upon networked computers as a vehicle for data collection" (Miller & Walkowski, 2004). Technology enables new types of Internet-based measurement, such as access to discussion groups, Website visitor

tracking systems, e-mail consumer panels, on-line surveys and on-line focus groups (Quelch & Klein, 1996). Mann and Stewart (2000) refer to this as computer-mediated communication (CMC), and it is defined as "...the direct use of computers in a text-based communication process. CMC or qualitative research online in this study refers to a means of generating data and reaching respondents online and is not to be confused with research on behavior online".

Empirical Context

The empirical context for this study is the online environment for luxury brands, meaning that there are a number of different online settings where brands appear online. Websites examined were grouped into four categories: (1) brand websites, (2) consumer-to-consumer sites, (3) communities and (4) replica sites and such. The information about the websites was provided in the study in a 20 page matrix showing the websites and addresses, and also indications for numbers and periods.

Data Collection

Independent online communities serve as the basis for the opinions gathered online and for reaching respondents for interviewing. These communities were observed and also actively participated in. Some of the people in the communities were approached via e-mail and asked to participate in an interview via telephone, e-mail or instant messaging. The preferred medium for these respondents was instant messaging. The communities were chosen based on one primary concern-- that the focus was fashion and luxury or brands. The communities used in this study are not directly related to each other but are connected because they pertain to the same topics. The way in which they interact with each other is a major challenge for luxury brands. The strongest link that can be seen between the different sites is that between counterfeit or replica sites, or eBay and that of brand websites. This is because many of the replica sellers are using pictures and logotypes from the official sites when selling their merchandise, either passing it off as genuine, or, when it is stated that they are replicas, for comparison. The consumers and potential consumer in the communities are also often providing links to either replica sites or official sites when making their queries about goods.

Data Presentation

The research material on luxury brands online is not only vast and in need of systematization, but it is also visual. The previous section showed what different consumer conversations look like and that these will be presented without interference and censoring. The other visual empirical material used is extracted from sites that show a certain phenomenon. This is the most important way of showing the luxury brand and counterfeit websites. The pictures used are called illustrations throughout this study and are presented with text describing the phenomenon being discussed. The empirical material throughout this study will be presented with visual illustrations, such as the one seen here. Each illustration is also followed by a text describing what phenomenon or characteristic that the specific illustration shows.

CONCLUSIONS

Evaluation Methods

Some of the evaluation criteria proposed by Kozinets (2002) will be viewed in connection to the choices made in this study. Kozinets holds that in general, online communities should be preferred that have (1) a more focused and research question-relevant segment, topic, or group (in this research the communities were chosen based on the topic, it was to be specifically concerning or related to brands, luxury and fashion,); (2) higher —traffic of postings – the communities were, before being chosen, examined for how many registered users there were and also number of postings and a check on when the latest entry was posted. (communities with ‘fewer’ postings were chosen when the topic was extremely relevant and there were no other communities with higher frequency postings); (3) larger numbers of discrete message posters - this aspect has not been relevant in this research; (4) the data should be more detailed or descriptively rich– this has not been an issue that needed further examination or evaluation since the communities found were rather active and the data posted by members and non-members was extensive; (5) more between-member interactions of the type required by the research question – it is not completely clear how Kozinets distinguished this criterion from the others proposed, or if this is to be viewed as a more general criterion that holds the same information as the other criteria. The interactions between members in the communities chosen for this study have only been viewed within the forums; whether they choose to engage with one another one-on-one has not been

examined and was not a pre-requisite for choosing communities.

Apart from the evaluation of communities, Kozinets describes two important elements regarding the data collection and analysis; (1) the data the researchers directly copy from the computer-mediated communications of online community members and (2) the data the researchers inscribe regarding their observations of the community and its members, interactions and meanings. How the data in this study will be presented has been described earlier in this chapter. The major difference between this study and the netnography method proposed by Kozinets (1998, 2002) lies in the fact that not only communities have been viewed. Instead the communities are seen as a forum for discussion between consumers and as part of a larger luxury brand context.

Future Online Research

The methodology used in this study has the strength of showing the actual setting online and can show real handling of luxury brands online by consumers and companies. These parts could not have been viewed using only traditional qualitative methods. The study is explorative in nature and because of this it is hard to distinguish exactly when some of the concepts and characteristics are discerned. The rapid growth of luxury brands online presence and increased community participation by consumers also makes the study hard to exactly replicate. The study is also limited with regard to specific luxury brands and instead views luxury brands as a concept and different perspectives on the building and creation of brands. Although this research has focused specifically on viewing luxury brands, it is believed that some of the results of this study will be applicable to brand creation online, and, most importantly, that the systematic viewing of different websites as components can inspire and pave the way for new types of qualitative research online. There is a need for more elaborate studies using qualitative methods to illicit descriptions and data on consumers online. There is also a need for research on the evaluation of qualitative data within Internet research and standards for quality within the methods have to be put forth.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research is supported by Handelns Utvecklingsråd.

REFERENCES

- Baym, N.K. (2005). Introduction: Internet research as it isn't, is, could be, and should be. *The Information Society*, 21(4), 229-232.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01972240591007535>.
- Fleitas, J. (1998). Spinning tales from the World Wide Web: qualitative research in an electronic environment. *Qualitative Health Research*, 8(2), 283-292.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/104973239800800211>.
- Goulding, C. (2003). Issues in representing the postmodern consumer. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 6(3), 152-159.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/13522750310478985>.
- Kozinets, R.V. (1998). On netnography: Initial reflections on consumer research investigations of cyberculture. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 25(1), 366-371.
- Kozinets, R.V. (2002). The field behind the screen: Using netnography for marketing research in online communities. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 39(1), 61-72.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1509/jmkr.39.1.61.18935>.
- Lee S.M., Hwang T., & Kim J. (2007). An analysis of diversity in electronic commerce research. *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, 12(1), 31-67.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2753/JEC1086-4415120102>.
- Mann, C., & Stewart, F. (2000). *Internet communication and qualitative research: A handbook for researching online*. London, UK: SAGE Publications Limited.
- Miller, T.W., & Walkowski, J. (2004). *Qualitative research online*. Milton Keynes, UK: Research Publishers LLC.
- Murray, P.J. (1997). Using virtual focus groups in qualitative research. *Qualitative health research*, 7(4), 542-549. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/104973239700700408>.
- Ngai, E.W., & Wat, F.K.T. (2002). A literature review and classification of electronic commerce research. *Information & Management*, 39(5), 415-429.
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0378-7206\(01\)00107-0](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0378-7206(01)00107-0).
- Quelch, J.A., & Klein, L.R. (1996). The Internet and international marketing. *Sloan Management Review*, 37(3), 60-75.
- Wang, C.C., & Chen, C.C. (2010). Electronic commerce research in latest decade: A literature review. *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, 1(1), 1-14.