A case of Strategic Online Communication in Postmodernism

Using Facebook to Create Virtual Brand Communities

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Foreword

The authors of this thesis would like to mention that this is the result of their joint efforts and only the mutual collaboration and constant communication between the two parts could lead to the finalization of this work. As such, the problem statement, the study structure and main theories as well as the case analysis and discussion were first of all debated between the co-authors and only after, individually elaborated. The different parts of the thesis maintain their authorship as follows:

Corina Diana Iamandi & Petronela Postolache:
Abstract
Chapter 5. Illustrative case study: Toyota Sienna
Chapter 6. Outcomes and discussion
Conclusions

Corina Diana Iamandi (Exam number 287925):
Methodology
Thesis structure
Chapter 1. Postmodernism: the philosophical and social condition of the new millennium
Chapter 4. Building virtual brand communities with Facebook
Section 5.1. Toyota’s social media activity
Section 6.1. What was the role of Toyota Sienna’s Facebook community in the overall campaign?
Section 6.2. To what degree did Toyota Sienna manage to form a community on Facebook?
Section 6.3. How did this communication campaign centered on the Facebook community manage to reach the postmodern consumers?
Section 6.4.1. Virtual communities: the connection between postmodern individuals and organizations

Petronela Postolache (Exam number 287883):
Introduction
Literature review and theoretical framework
Chapter 2. Postmodernist influences on consumption
Chapter 3. Facebook: an example of a communication tool suited to postmodern consumers
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Corina Diana Iamandi & Petronela Postolache
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Section 5.2. Toyota Sienna's integrated marketing campaign
Section 5.3. Analysis of Toyota Sienna’s virtual community on Facebook
Section 6.4. Theoretical foundations for the relationship between Facebook virtual communities and postmodernism
Section 6.4.2. Facebook – a tool for building stronger and better virtual communities

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ABSTRACT

A CASE OF STRATEGIC ONLINE COMMUNICATION IN POSTMODERNISM: USING FACEBOOK TO CREATE VIRTUAL BRAND COMMUNITIES

Purpose: This thesis was set up to investigate which opportunities and benefits a company can attain by utilizing Facebook to create virtual brand communities for its postmodern consumers. During the past few years, many books and articles have treated the subject of virtual communities as a plausible solution to a demanding and unpredictable consumer. However, few authors have investigated this phenomenon in the context of an epoch where social networking site Facebook dominates the online world. Thus, this thesis explores through the postmodern lenses, the potential of building virtual brand communities on the hosting platform Facebook.

Design/approach/methodology: This thesis takes a social constructivist perspective over the topic, being aware of the authors’ role in interpreting the research material and their contribution to the final meaning of the results. The thesis was conceived as a new theoretical perspective over the strategic online communication and it started from a series of assumptions, which were supported by the theoretical discussion and doubled by an illustrative case study aimed to demonstrate the applicability of the theories in the real business context.

Results: The thesis argues that companies’ use of Facebook for creating and growing virtual communities, is an emerging phenomenon with few guidelines available and lots of improvised tactics. In the particular case of Toyota Sienna, it was observed a focus on the utilitarian aspects and a shortcoming in leveraging the consumer-to-consumer knowledge share, but also a constant preoccupation for improvement. Facebook offers companies access to a large segment of population and all the tools necessary for a structured management of the virtual community.

Practical implications: This thesis contributes to the corporate communication practice by bringing a new theoretical perspective over the topic of strategic online communication. Combining theories from three different areas, this investigation

1 The term virtual brand community might be replaced locally with "virtual community", "consumer community", "community of users", "brand community" or other to facilitate the ease of reading. It should be acknowledged however that the terms are used interchangeably and hence they all stand for the same meaning (cf. Section 4.2.).
systemizes a series of theoretical and practical aspects related to the companies’ pressing need of entering Facebook.

**Originality and value:** From the authors’ knowledge this constitutes the first attempt to approach the social networking site Facebook as a potential tool for building and managing successful virtual community that could respond to the postmodern consumers’ expectations. Its originality and value comes thus from the interlocking of these fields’ theories with a high relevance for the discipline of corporate communication.

**Key words:** Postmodernism, Consumers, Virtual Communities, Social Network, Facebook.
INTRODUCTION

Today's business world is more turbulent than ever, with important changes caused by the technological advancements and the rise of a new communication instrument – the Internet. Sociologists Alexander Bard and Jan Soderqvist (Bard & Soderqvist, 2002) suggest that the transformations for the society will be profound due to the increased possibility of communication and collaboration among people: “the breakthrough of digital interactivity as the dominant medium of communication is a paradigm shift”.

Back in 2006, Time Magazine foresaw coming this “community and collaboration on a scale never seen before”. They pointed out that in Information Age everyone has the ability to contribute or to shape the future. The change that made it possible was Web 2.0, “a tool for bringing together the small contributions of millions of people and making them matter” (Grossman, 2006). As opposed to the first generation of websites (Web 1.0), which were static, Web 2.0 offers regular citizens the possibility to post publicly on the Internet texts, videos, audios or pictures. Thus, the consumers’ level of involvement with the Internet grew significantly, way more than television and written press. And things do not stop here... Web 3.0 is emerging, enabling the creation of high-quality content and services produced by gifted individuals using Web 2.0 technology as a platform (Young, 2008).

The fact that large numbers of people have moved from traditional to online media have consequences for corporate communicators, who are now responsible for the social media function and budget allocation. In addition, Web 2.0 demands a new approach as a result of more transparency and hyper-connectivity among people. Corporate Communication International indicates that “the challenge is for communication officers to focus more on the strategic, rather than the tactical use of the new technologies” (Goodman, 2009).

Therefore, the opportunities of customers for interaction and gathering information have increased in a manner that “is transforming the company-consumer relationship” (Leavy, 2004). People use the web to collect information that they need from each other, rather than from businesses, are likely to find out about brands and products from their peers, rather than the official voices and spend much more time interacting with each other than consuming content from websites. There is a clear loss of control of the way customers get in contact with the company's message and that is relevant in the context of a
company’s communication. What Time Magazine predicted proved to be true: in virtual communities, consumers act now like marketers speaking on behalf of the brands.

In this new relationship economy that is born from the combination of technology with the human network (Allen, Deragon, Orem, & Smith, 2008), the rise of activity on Facebook is significant because this site can be viewed as the human network. With more than 500 million members and being ranked the second website in the world (Deragon, 2011), it seems that Facebook created indeed a global phenomenon that is “connecting more than half a billion people, and mapping the social relations among them”. In addition, it “created a new system of exchanging information and changed how we live our lives” (Grossman, 2010).

In this context, companies have started paying attention to social media and look for ways to integrate it in their communication strategy, contrary to their initial skepticism caused by the lack of control and unclear measurements tools. The automotive industry has been especially interested in this. Big names from the industry, like Ford’s head of social media, Scott Monty, explains why there is a need for change "People don't trust corporations as much as they used to. They trust third-party experts, and they trust people like themselves". Ford's social media strategy is "humanizing" the company: "It's one-on-one communication in the public square. It gives a person the satisfaction of having interaction with a big company like Ford and of being listened to. And it also shows the public that we're listening and that we get it" (Gillette, 2010).

Toyota Motor U.S.A. has also been very willing to get a more personalized interaction with customers through social media. In a recent interview (Morrisey, 2011) Denise Morrisey, senior marketing and communication administrator at Toyota, discussed how social media helped manage customers' perceptions during the recalls crisis they have faced and why this is increasingly important for the company. Asked about the choices in terms of different platforms, Morrisey named Facebook as one solid established web site that will continue to be utilized by Toyota in the future. The way in which this company understood the role of Facebook in their communication with customers will be analyzed later in this thesis.

The corporate use of Facebook includes building relationships with customers and creating virtual communities, which are usually very costly to build anywhere else on the Internet (Gillin, 2008). Traditionally, virtual communities have emerged as independent micro sites all over the Web but lately, more and more they appear on social networking
web sites like Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter. Many times, here the discussions evolve around brands and products regardless of companies’ approval, thus its impact on the image and reputation of brands. In the same time, companies are faced with lots of unstructured information on the topic and do not know how to react.

This thesis advances the idea that more than a thing to worry about, a virtual community should be viewed by companies as a strategic opportunity. Companies should proactively involve their customers in these specialized, non-geographically-bound communities, where the negotiation of the brand and shared interpretations can serve as social “glue” (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). This idea is in accordance with the postmodern view on consumer who, it is said, enjoys not only consuming but also creating and sharing with the others (Cova, 1999). Therefore, it becomes important for all companies willing to reach postmodern consumers through social media, to build and develop their own virtual brand communities. Considering the above, the thesis will investigate:

*How and why should a business-to-consumer company utilize Facebook to create and grow a virtual brand community? The thesis will be based on a case analysis of Toyota Sienna Facebook page.*

In order to contribute to the academic literature on this particular topic, and to support the findings with empirical information, the present study will seek to answer the following research questions (RQ):

**RQ1: What defines the postmodern consumer and what drives his consumption behavior?**

Starting from the presumption that understanding is not about finding one universal truth, the study looks at postmodern consumers in how things become meaningful to them, how they perceive the world and how they use brands, goods and services to tell stories about themselves. Related to that, the study will point towards the challenges of reaching and communicating with the postmodern consumer.

**RQ2: What does Facebook offer to companies in terms of online communication with consumers?**

This thesis focuses on the particular case of Facebook from all the other social media platforms. The aim is to gain in-depth knowledge about the opportunities and limitations
that can arise from choosing Facebook. The answer to this question is aimed to support strategic online communication by structuring some of the information available on this subject. By looking at the particular case of Toyota Sienna Facebook page, the thesis will further reveal punctual characteristics of online communication though this web site.

RQ3: What is the relevance of virtual brand communities in the context of online communication?

The third question will be addressed by exploring the literature on virtual brand communities and the case of Toyota Sienna. Backed up by the postmodern interpretation on consumers and the expansion of online communication, virtual brand communities are considered a strategic solution in this hectic environment. The thesis proposes a theoretical foundation for the relationship among postmodernism, Facebook and virtual brand community.
METHODOLOGY

In order to attain its goal, the thesis follows a certain methodology which will be described further. The first step in the methodology design is the choice of theory of science, as this determines the selection of methods, procedures, instruments and techniques as well as the validity and accuracy of the results obtained.

SCIENTIFIC PARADIGM

A paradigm is a set of basic beliefs representing a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the world, the individual’s place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts. These basic beliefs can be summarized by the answers to three main questions: (a) What is there that can be known (ontological assumptions)? (b) What is the relation between the knower and what is to be known (epistemological assumptions)? and (c) How can the inquirer go about finding what he believes can be known (methodological assumptions)? (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

As the purpose of the thesis is to highlight the particularities of postmodern communication in the context of virtual communities, it appears appropriate to guide the investigation by the principles of social constructivism. Two major criteria lead to this choice: the subjective nature of the research approach and the highly contextualized topic of investigation.

In consequence, the ontological assumption of this thesis is that social reality is constructed in language (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Meaning, emotions, ideas are not just there in the minds of people but constructed during and along social interactions. Since the social world, including the people themselves is the product of social processes (Burr, 1995) the thesis will look at the way in which postmodern consumers participate and contribute (through posts and uploaded materials) at the construction of the virtual Sienna community (cf. Section 5.3.).

Following this logic, the epistemological assumption of the thesis is that the investigator and the object of investigation are interactively linked to one another (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The focus in social constructivism is moved from questions about the nature of people or society towards a consideration on how certain phenomena or forms of knowledge are achieved by people in interaction (Burr, 1995). Therefore the researchers here will focus more on how Toyota Sienna’s fans are an active part in the construction
process of meanings, emotions, values, etc. along with the community owner (cf. Section 6.3.).

Considering the variable and subjective nature of social constructions, it is natural that individual constructions are identified through direct interaction between the investigator and his respondents (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Therefore the methodological assumption in this study is that appropriate knowledge can be obtained with the use of qualitative research methods. A detailed presentation of the research method employed in this study will be presented in the following section.

**RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD**

The current section will present the aim and rationale for the thesis, the scientific method and the techniques employed in the investigation process and the criteria for the selection of the case of analysis, as well as the expected validity and reliability of the findings.

**RESEARCH NATURE AND PURPOSE**

The co-authors will adopt an interpretive attitude in this thesis, as it allows a better understanding of the symbolic and subjective aspects of the topic of analysis. The interpretive worldview, generally adopted in qualitative investigations, is concerned less with the study of external forces that may determine people's behaviors and more with exploring individuals' intentions, motivations and subjective experiences (Daymon & Holloway, 2002).

As such, the thesis will be mainly analytic and explanatory focusing on how can companies build and manage their virtual communities with Facebook, presuming that the use of this particular social media channel contributes to better engagement with the postmodern consumers (Thames, 2010).

**METHOD OF INQUIRY**

Another important step in the design of methodology is the choice of method of inquiry. Two major forms of reasoning, usually thought of as contradictory, are the inductive and the deductive approach. The former works from the particular to the general, inferring laws through observation of singular instances. The later works from the more general to the more specific and it starts with thinking up a theory, narrowing it down through building of hypotheses and collection of observations to test their validity, and ultimately
leads to the confirmation or refutation of the initial data or theory (Trochim, 2006). It is important to mention that these approaches, different in their nature, do not exclude each other (Rothchild, 2006). Both of them can be used complementary in the research process, in concordance with the different stages of the investigation.

Considering the purpose of the thesis and the scientific tradition to which it subscribes, deduction appears as the appropriate method to produce valuable knowledge here. This implies the formulation of initial assumptions which will conduct the entire process of investigation and will be further tested along the analysis of the illustrative case study. The theoretical assumptions are:

**Assumption 1:** Postmodern consumers changed their consumption behavior; they see now consumption as an expressive and social act and in consequence they use products and brands to express themselves.

**Assumption 2:** Shared interests drive consumers to join virtual communities in the social media (with or without the support of corporations) where they influence each other and express their power in relation to the companies. Among these, the most influential and attractive channel at the moment is Facebook.

**Assumption 3:** Many companies involved with Facebook do not make proper use of its potential to stimulate consumer dialogue and interaction and this makes them lose visibility and credibility in the long run.

It should be mentioned that these assumptions were inferred from precursory theoretical investigation and they are the rationale behind the three research questions presented in the introduction. This comes to confirm once again the interconnectedness of methods of inquiry (inductive-deductive-inductive) in the research process.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

As specified already, this is a qualitative research implying the co-authors’ concern with the investigation of subjective reality (Daymon & Holloway, 2002). Hence, in order to achieve its goal, the thesis will be based on investigative methods that allow a fine capturing of the subjective meanings produced in social interactions.

One such qualitative method is the *case study*, a central investigative method in social sciences which allows an intensive examination of a single entity with the use of multiple
sources of evidence (Daymon & Holloway, 2002; Trochim, 2006). This thesis study will focus on a single case study, as it offers the opportunity to undertake a deep exploration of a particular phenomenon. The aim of such an investigation is to bring theoretical contributions to a specific field which in this case is the management of virtual brand community on Facebook.

The greatest advantage of such a research method is that it allows the combination of different theoretical and methodological frameworks and facilitates the collection of detailed information across a wide range of dimensions of a singular case. The biggest problem is that along the research process, the case study might prove itself not suitable and its data insufficient to answer the initial research questions (Daymon & Holloway, 2002). To prevent such pitfalls, the current thesis will overview varied theoretical models from different fields (postmodernism, consumption studies, social media, virtual communities) and connect them with the observations resulted from the analysis of the case study.

Another mention to be made regards the suitability of the research method. Qualitative methods are regularly susceptible of internal validity only (the truth of the inferences about the cause-effect relationship). It means that a case study is concerned with proving the validity of the initial theoretical assumptions and less with the degree of generalizability of the results obtained (i.e., the external validity of the investigation) (Trochim, 2006). In consequence, the thesis will collect and analyze material available online, created by both consumers and Toyota Sienna representatives. The data will be then correlated with the previous theoretical models, in order to test their validity and applicability in the real business environment. The final stage of the investigation reviews the overall theoretical and empirical findings in a discussion upon the specificities of strategic communication in postmodernity. The steps of investigation are presented below:

Figure 1: Structure of the research process
DATA COLLECTION AND DATA ANALYSIS

This thesis focuses on the analysis of the Toyota Sienna's online promotional campaign. The goal is to understand and exemplify how companies build and manage virtual communities on Facebook through the observation of Toyota Sienna’s online communication. As such, the analysis will be conducted entirely external comprising a thorough observation for over three months of the Toyota Sienna’s primary communication channels, Facebook page and YouTube channel. The information gathered in this stage will consist mainly in written text, as well as statistical data, video and audio, and photographic documents as many other official documents released by the company, consumers and third parties, available online.

CRITERIA FOR SELECTION

The company chosen for investigation has been selected for several reasons:

- This is a thesis about virtual communities on Facebook hence the preliminary criterion for the case selection was its active presence on Facebook. By “active” is intended a constant interaction between company and consumers reflected by (at least) weekly posts, updates and uploads.
- A second important factor was an increased company-consumer interaction, as the study investigates how companies respond to their consumers’ needs. This was reflected by the constantly growing fan-base on Sienna’s main online platforms Facebook and YouTube (cf. Section 5.2.).
- Thirdly, the industry sector was important too in the choice of the case. As Toyota Inc. is an automotive producer, it belongs to the business to consumer sector and hence it faces a high consumer exposure. This puts it most likely in direct contact with consumer trends and makes it an interesting case for the discussion upon communication strategies in postmodernity.
- Very important was also the suitability of the case with the overall topic. As the study refers to postmodern trends in consumption, the case needed to reflect nevertheless these cultural trends. Toyota is the world’s leader in car production and an example in innovation and product customization. The Sienna “Swagger Wagon” is a minivan addressed to young families, which meets all safety and comfort criteria while endorsing a non-conformist and stylish image (cf. Section 5.2.). Considering these it was assumed Toyota Sienna is a good illustrative case for the current thesis.
Besides these internal criteria, some external factors impacted also on the choice of the case. The nature of the topic implied an external analysis, which meant that a case with high transparency and accessibility of information was necessary. Also, the time and space allowed for the analysis constrained the authors of the thesis to limit themselves to a singular case study instead of a multiple case study. As this is a theoretical investigation, a certain balance between theoretical and empirical data was necessary and by approaching a single illustrative case the authors managed to reach their goal within these constraints.

**RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY OF THE INVESTIGATION**

In any qualitative study the major challenge is the representativeness of the results. As mentioned already, case studies are concerned with the intensive study of one or several particular cases which means that its results cannot regularly be generalized to other instances (Daymon & Holloway, 2002).

However, the logic of the case study allows testing the validity of the outcomes differently than in quantitative studies, which means the research should look for credibility instead of internal validity, transferability rather than external validity, dependability and not reliability and confirmability instead of objectivity:

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<tr>
<th>Traditional Criteria for Judging Quantitative Research</th>
<th>Alternative Criteria for Judging Qualitative Research</th>
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<td>Internal validity</td>
<td>Credibility</td>
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<td>External validity</td>
<td>Transferability</td>
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<td>Reliability</td>
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<td>Objectivity</td>
<td>Confirmability</td>
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**CREDIBILITY OF THE RESULTS**

The thesis has employed a theoretical discussion and an interpretative analysis of the user-generated content available online. The final propositions were the result of a correlation between the main theoretical pylons used – postmodernism and social media – and the results of the empirical analysis. In consequence it can be argued that the results of the thesis are credible as they rely on inferences from the data previously elaborated.
TRANSFERABILITY OF THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

The thesis was based on a set of theoretical assumptions (cf. Method of inquiry) derived from preliminary field investigation. The context of analysis consisted of a particular case of online communication which, it is argued, is representative for the topic investigated. In consequence it can be stated that the current research model is transferable and applicable to other similar cases.

DEPENDABILITY

For the results to be considered reliable in qualitative studies, the researcher has to manifest sensibility to any changes occurred in the research context and adjust the investigation accordingly. The thesis’s authors carefully observed any modifications that could impact on the research process and signalized them in the final results of the analysis, adapting their interpretation to the real time developments.

CONFIRMABILITY OF THE RESULTS

The last condition is only partially respected in the current analysis, as the authors of the thesis did not present the final results to the subject of investigation, i.e. Toyota Motor Sales USA. However, due to the transparent nature of the process, the current analysis and its final results are publicly available for the interested parts.

ORIGINALITY AND VALUE

Considering all the above it becomes obvious that the current study has certain limitations implied by the research methods and the scientific tradition to which it subscribes. It holds however significant theoretical contributions as well. Both its strengths and weaknesses will be discussed in the following section.

LIMITATIONS

The research process:

- was bounded to time and space, therefore it was context-dependent;
- was interpretative and subjective requesting a high sense of discrimination and subtlety on the part of the researchers, which might imply a certain degree of inaccuracy;
The outcomes:

- regard directly the case involved and as such they have a low degree of generalizability;
- are context-dependen therefore relative and hardly repeatable in similar contexts.

However, it should be mentioned that the scope of this research was not to provide numeric results which can be replicated in similar contexts with identical results, as both the topic and the method leave place for interpretation and subjectivism. The intention here was not to measure the success of Toyota Sienna’s campaign but to extract certain communication guidelines, by integrating the case study with knowledge on postmodern conditions, on social networking site Facebook, and virtual communities, in a unitary theoretical model.

**ORIGINALITY**

Beyond subjectivity and low representativeness of the results, the current investigation brings certain theoretical contribution to the corporate communication field. From the authors’ knowledge this constitutes the first attempt to approach the social networking site Facebook as a potential tool for building and managing successful virtual community that could respond to the postmodern consumers’ expectations. Its originality and value comes thus from the interlocking of these theories with a high relevance for the actual field of corporate communication.
LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The literature review part serves to describe, analyze and compare different theoretical contributions around the study’s area of interest. In order to get a satisfactory understanding of the phenomenon researched, this part will focus on two main areas: postmodernism and virtual communities in the context of Facebook. One of the constant preoccupations of this thesis was to look at the topics discussed from different perspectives and have an interpretative approach. In order to have a critical perspective on the topic, the interpretations of the theoretical positions considered the background, the history and the values of the authors, as these might have influenced their particular understanding of the topic.

Postmodernism was presented through the lenses of various French philosophers, among whom Jean-François Lyotard and Gilles Lypovetsky. To contribute to this theoretical debate, the work of Stephen Brown, Professor of Marketing Research at the University of Ulster, Ireland, who described the postmodern reality and the consumer society as two synonymous entities was used. Furthermore, the work of Alladi Venkatesh and A. Fuat Fırat completes the theoretical debate, as the two authors bring in new significant ideas on consumption and consumers. They supplemented previous work in the field with an original theoretical perspective which they entitled ‘liberatory postmodernism’, and made the name of a relevant article for the marketing literature: “Liberatory Postmodernism and the Reenchantment of Consumption”.

In addition to this, the work of Bernard Cova, Per Ostergaard & Christian Jantzen, Carolyn Costley, Lorraine Friend, Emily Meese, Carl Ebbers & Li-Jen Wang were used to support the idea that postmodern consumer, values both tangible and intangible attributes of products and enjoys creating and sharing with others (cf. Section 2).

To understand the role of Facebook for companies’ online communication, this thesis looked at the work of Charlene Li & Josh Bernoff, and Glynn Mangold & David Faulds. These authors have dealt especially with the broader topic of social media, from which this thesis derived some suggestions that can be applied to Facebook as well. In the specialized literature, articles on the subject of Facebook are scarce. More interest on the topic is present in the main stream media, from which this thesis selected the work of Lev Grossman, senior writer at Time Magazine and Kurt Lewis, former PR practitioner and president of Anvil Media, a search engine marketing agencies. Former master thesis like the one of Hagelskjær, J. & Busk, S. or independent research studies
like the one conducted by Altimeter Group were employed to complete the view over Facebook.

For a better understanding of brand communities, this thesis employed one of the most cited papers in economics and business on the topic, “Brand Community” written in 1995 by Albert Muniz and Thomas O’Guinn. The authors stressed particularly the connection between the brand on the one side and individual identity and culture on the other side. This perspective focuses on the connection between consumers and the way they influence each other. The article of Kristine De Valck, Gerrit Van Bruggen & Berend Wierenga, “Virtual communities: A marketing perspective” is seen as a valuable contribution for understanding how consumers make use of virtual communities as social and information networks, and how this affects their decision-making processes.

In the realization of this thesis, academic texts and scientific investigations were completed with a series of non-conventional texts and studies, such as e-books, podcasts and audio registrations of scientific conferences. Due to the novelty of the topic and in accordance with the research’s methodological requirements, these sources are necessary in order to comprise the complexity of the subject and enlarge its perspective.
THESIS STRUCTURE

In the first part of the thesis the theoretical background was developed, discussing different theories upon several major themes: postmodernism, postmodern consumers, social networking site Facebook and virtual communities. This constituted the base for the second part of the study where empirical data was collected and systemized, resulting in an overall “picture” of the Toyota Sienna case, as seen from an external perspective. The data resulted was then analyzed and discussed. First, the empirical data was systematically approached according to three investigative questions in order to understand how Toyota made use of Facebook to reach the postmodern consumers. Then, the theoretical connection between Facebook virtual communities and postmodernism was reviewed to highlight the rationale behind the problem statement.

The thesis structure can thus be divided into four main parts, as follows:

I. Introduction. Depicts the context within which the thesis is developed, formulating the problem statement and the research questions and describing the research methodology and the theoretical framework.

II. Literature review. Develops the theoretical body of the thesis by discussing first the aspects of postmodernity and how these socio-cultural trends impact on consumers’ (purchasing) behaviors. It further debates the changes in consumer behavior once with the emergence of social networking site Facebook and goes on by focusing specifically on how to build virtual communities with Facebook.

III. Illustrative case. Includes data gathering and analysis of the Toyota Sienna case. This part of the study will investigate the strategy Toyota employs on its Facebook Page.

IV. Discussion and conclusions. It overviews the results of the case analysis and discusses them in relation with the theoretical framework. Furthermore, it highlights the theoretical connection between Facebook virtual communities and postmodernism.
Figure 2: Thesis structure

- Postmodern conditions and postmodern consumers
- Facebook in the context of social media
- Facebook virtual communities as a response to postmodern challenges
- Illustrative case
- Discussion and conclusions
CHAPTER 1. POSTMODERNISM: THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND SOCIAL CONDITION OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM

This chapter’s purpose is to provide the theoretical context for further developing the study. Consumers and consumption trends are influenced by how society operates and by the changes that take place within the socio-cultural universe. As the study assumes that postmodern values dominate the contemporary society, an overview of the most prominent themes of postmodernity becomes instrumental.

1.1. THE MOVE TOWARDS POSTMODERNITY

There isn’t any One true Map of the earth, of human existence, of the universe, or of Ultimate Reality, a Map supposedly embedded inside these things; there are only maps we construct to make sense of the welter of our experience, and only us to judge whether these maps are worthwhile for us or not.

(Fay, 1990)

It is commonly understood that postmodernism is what follows after the modernization process is complete (Routledge, 1998), and thus cannot be comprehended without a comparison to the Enlightenment era. This indicates that a discussion upon the principles of the two epochs is necessary in order to understand better the conditions of contemporary society.

Modernity is the historical period defined by values opposed to the traditional order that dominated the medieval times, implying the progressive economic and administrative rationalization and differentiation of the world which leaded to the formation of the capitalist-industrial state. Consequently, post-modernity represents a movement towards the post-industrial order (Lyotard, 1984) as a symbol of the epochal shift or break away from modernity (Featherstone, 2007).

From a philosophical perspective, the modern era is the period dominated by the humanistic belief that the world is One. It held for centuries the scientific conviction that a common denominator can be found for all systems of belief and value and that the world is a unified field, explicable by a single explanatory system. Postmodernity, on the
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contrary, is the condition of coping without these absolute common denominators, especially without the idea of a neutral and homogeneous time and space. Postmodernists hold that, in some sense, history and modernity have come to an end (Routledge, 1998).

Therefore postmodernism can be defined as a set of critical, strategic and rhetorical practices employing concepts such as difference, repetition, the trace, the simulacrum, and hyperreality to destabilize the modern concepts of presence, identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty, and the univocity of meaning (Alysworth, 2009).

But one of the most striking features of postmodernism is the way in which it incorporates a wide range of different theories and concepts (Jameson, 2003). As often highlighted in the specialist literature, the “indefinable” nature of postmodernism is what merely defines it (Felluga, 2003). The contradictions, contrasts and fragmentations of its theories distinguish it from modernism which strongly believed in and promoted epistemological unity.

However, the most significant clues for tracking the transition from modernity to postmodernity are the major cultural changes undergone in the western society. As the American literary critic and political theorist Fredric Jameson (2003) says, “In the postmodern culture, culture has become a product in its own right; the market has become a substitute for itself and fully as much a commodity as any of the items it includes. If modernism was still minimal and deliberately a critique of the commodity, postmodernism is the process of consumption of deviant commodification”.

The “alteration” of culture is in fact one of the top themes on the postmodern agenda. If postmodernists defend the self-reflexivity, self-irony and parody, the increased visuality, contextuality and locality, as expressions of the breakdown of narratives (the denial of universal truths), anti-postmodernists see these as “symptoms of the death of humanity” and a loss of –historical– sense of reality (Felluga, 2003).

The heralds of this theory are Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard (1981). In his remarkable work, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (2003) Jameson associates the postmodern condition with a loss of individuals’ connection to history. What is left, in his opinion, is a fascination with the present, as postmodernity transforms the historical past into a series of emptied stylizations that can be

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2 Culture is understood here as a set of values, norms and practices adopted by a society in a certain historical period.
commodified and consumed. In the same line, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, says that individuals have lost contact with the "real" and they have nothing left but a continuing fascination with its disappearance (Felluga, 2003). The following table highlights the main critics brought by the authors:

Table 2: The "symptoms" of postmodernity (Felluga, 2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symptom</th>
<th>Authors: F. Jameson &amp; J. Baudrillard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The loss of history: a desperate attempt to make sense of the age in a way that refuses traditional forms of understanding</td>
<td>For postmodernists, there is no outside of ideology or textuality; indeed, postmodern theory questions any claim to &quot;truth&quot; outside of culture. &quot;The great event of this period, the great trauma, is this decline of strong referentials, these death pangs of the real and of the rational that open onto an age of simulation&quot; (J.B.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediatization</td>
<td>An effect of the loss of history is the constant &quot;retro&quot; recreations of the past by the media, through movies and television. Television, film, and the internet separate individuals from the real right when they struggle to reproduce it more fully and faithfully: &quot;The hyperreality of communication and of meaning; more real than real, that is how the real is abolished&quot; (J.B.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The proliferation of kitsch: a breakdown of the distinction between &quot;high&quot; and &quot;low&quot; culture</td>
<td>Our culture has been inundated by trashy, kitsch, mass-market products, which contribute to our society of simulation and consumerism. &quot;Postmodernists, have, in fact, been fascinated precisely by this whole 'degraded' landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Reader's Digest culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, [and] so-called paraliterature&quot; (F.J.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simulacra and simulation: a whole new culture of the image</td>
<td>The depthlessness manifests itself through literal flatness and qualitative superficiality. In theory, it manifests itself through the postmodern rejection of the belief that one can move beyond the surface appearances to some deeper truth; we are left instead with &quot;multiple surfaces&quot;. Our models for the real have taken over the place of the real (F.J.).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The waning of affect

The general depthlessness and lack of affection is countered by outrageous claims for extreme moments of intense emotion, similar to schizophrenia and a culture of addiction. These new ways of experiencing the present can be "described in the negative terms of anxiety and loss of reality, but (...) one could just as well imagine [them] in the positive terms of euphoria, a high, an intoxicatory or hallucinogenic intensity" (F.J.).

Consumer society

A culture of consumption has so much taken over the ways of thinking that all reality is filtered through the logic of exchange value and advertising. "Our society thinks itself and speaks itself as a consumer society. As much as it consumes anything, it consumes itself as consumer society, as idea. Advertising is the triumphal paean to that idea" (J.B.).

A whole new technology

Computers, digital technology, virtual culture, etc. are more concerned with reproduction rather than with the industrial production of material goods. Such technology is "itself a figure for a whole new economic world system" (F.J.).

Although very complex and diverse in its nature, and strongly criticized for its intrinsic plurivalence, postmodernism can be easily recognized as one of the dominant organizing concepts –if it is a concept– across the social and human sciences today (Brown, 2003). The postmodern condition has to do with ideas and subjectivity, how individuals think and signify. Its declaration is supported by two key assumptions: first, that there is no "objectively" discernible material reality, or in any case, not one situated beyond thought and signification (McGuigan, 2006). Second, the assumption that all human systems operate like language, being self-reflexive rather than finite referential systems (Routledge, 1998) hence built in interaction.

Given the high variety of theories that the postmodern literature comprises, it is necessary to present the most significant contributors to the field. Therefore the following section will discuss the main authors that will be considered in this study.
1.2. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO POSTMODERNISM

THE POSTMODERN CONDITION (JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD)

Despite the inherent critiques to its duplicity, postmodernism is a reality within which the contemporary society has been unfolding its existence for several decades now. The term “postmodernism” first entered the philosophical lexicon in 1979, with the publication of “The Postmodern Condition” by Jean-François Lyotard (1979). ‘I define postmodern as incredulity towards meta-narratives’ said Lyotard (Aylesworth, 2009) announcing the beginning of a new postmodern order.

Lyotard’s specific interest was in the effects of the “computerization of society” on knowledge: he argues that the loss of knowledge in postmodernity should not be mourned, as it points to a replacement of narrative knowledge by a plurality of language games, and universalism by localism (Featherstone, 2007). Scientific knowledge loses its use-value as it stops being an end in itself. Transformed into “information” due to the technological developments of postmodernity, scientific knowledge becomes easily accessible and maneuvered by anyone. This raises the problem of legitimation and it affects the balance power between state and corporations on one hand and state and the civil society on the other: “When we examine the current status of scientific knowledge at a time when science seems more completely subordinated to the prevailing powers than ever before and, along with the new technologies, is in danger of becoming a major stake in their conflicts – the question of double legitimation, far from receding into the background, necessarily comes to the fore. For it appears in its most complete form, (…) that knowledge and power are simply two sides of the same question: who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided? In the computer age, the question of knowledge is now more than ever a question of government” (Lyotard, 1979).

This leaves place to different interpretations of reality, and leads to what previously was mentioned as increased skepticism towards a total and universal truth. Lyotard (1979) sees as a result of this, the imminent split between the scientific and the ethic or moral discourse, and announces the rise of new hybrid disciplines which have no connection with old traditions, especially philosophy. The dissolution of epistemic coherence, the ‘loss of meaning’ (Lyotard, 1984), and a decisive rupture with the past strongly reflect the
“revolutionary” spirit that dominated the French philosophy and Lyotard’s discourse, at a time of social and moral restructuring following the Social revolution of 1968³.

**CHALLENGES TO THE CONSUMER RESEARCH FIELD (STEPHEN BROWN)**

Stephen Brown (2003), professor of Marketing Research at the University of Ulster, Ireland, is one of the postmodern theorists who signalized most the inadequacy of past theories and practices to the current historical moment. He discusses mainly within the marketing field, arguing for the revolutionizing of the research and communication practices as a response to the major informational and technological changes that the society has undergone in the last decades. Many of the postmodern features, says Brown, are discernible in today’s consumption environment. The consumers are changing dramatically, certainties, uniformities and unambiguities of the modern era – where mass production produced mass marketing which produced mass consumption which produced mass production – being now replaced by the individualities, instabilities and fluidities of the postmodern epoch. Postmodernity, in his view, is a world with no rules, only choices, no fashion, only fashions. The logic, order, and rationality of the modernist research tradition seem totally inappropriate in the postmodern scape, says Brown (2003) and wonders how is it possible to understand, represent or describe postmodern marketing phenomena, when postmodernism challenges the very premises of conventional research. Is it really possible to capture the exuberance, the flamboyance, the incongruity, the energy, the playfulness of postmodern consumption in a standard research approach?

Research professor of communication and sociology Norman Denzin (1997) describes three contemporary crises of the research field:

- a **crisis of representation**, where established modes of depicting “reality” (e.g. theories, metaphors, textual genres) are inadequate to the task;
- a **crisis of legitimacy**, where conventional criteria for assessing research output (validity, reliability, objectivity etc.) leave a lot to be desired; and
- a **crisis of praxis**, where academic contributions signally fail to contribute to the resolution, or even clarification, of practical problems.

³ The French revolution of May 1968 refers to a general strike of the French workers that paralyzed the entire country and especially its economy, threatening the stability of the Charles de Gaulle’s government. The striking forces represented left-wing ideals, opposite to the consumerist and technological society and strongly against authoritarianism and capitalist domination.
Although formulated with regard to the human sciences mainly, these concerns are highly relevant to the state of late twentieth-century marketing and consumer research as well. The current models, claims Brown (2003) are outmoded, the theories undertheorised, the laws lawless. Reliability is increasingly unreliable, the pursuit of reason unreasonable, and there are increased objections to objectivity. In his opinion, one of the most significant benefits that postmodernism has brought is the major turn in the methodology, domain and source material of consumer research. Methodologically it opened the road to a series of qualitative/interpretive research procedures based in hermeneutics, semiotics, phenomenology, ethnography and personal introspection. In terms of domain, it focused attention on issues previously considered marginal to the managerial interest, such as brand choice and shopper behavior and has further encouraged researchers’ interest in other peripheral and previously ignored themes such as consumer resistance, conspicuous consumption in the developing world, and others. With regard to source material, moreover, it has given rise to the realization that meaningful insights into marketing and consumption can be obtained from non-traditional sources like novels, movies, plays, poetry, newspaper columns, comedy routines and so forth (Brown, 2003).

**THE MAJOR THEMES OF POSTMODERNITY (VENKATESH AND FIRAT)**

With the arrival of new technologies of communication and information and the postmodern conceptions of reality, there is no doubt that various marketing activities have changed. As such a new paradigm needs to be considered as the communication environment transformed. In addition to the communication environment, people’s notions of reality and how the individual subject is constituted are also changing (Vekantesh & Firat, 1995).

The modern dichotomies that separated processes, functions, categories and concepts are all dissolving either into new dichotomies or new forms of postmodern realities. For example, the male-female distinction is changing with the changing of roles. This has also altered the shape of the work force and the notions of work culture. With the new technologies of information and telecommunication the work and leisure processes are also transformed. Moreover, with the emergence of virtual reality and virtual environments, the concepts of reality are changing. Postmodernists use the term hyperreal to define new visions of the real. Similarly, the categories of produces and consumer are being altered as more and more consumers are producing and reproducing new symbols of consumption and reconstructing their roles as consumers.
But one of the most striking features of the postmodern life remain the dominance of marketing and advertising over everyday life, which transforms the social culture into a real marketing culture (Venkatesh & Firat, 1995). In a lengthy article on the 're-enchantment of consumption', marketing scholars A. Fuat Firat and Alladi Venkatesh (1995), state that postmodern marketing is characterized by five main themes: hyperreality, fragmentation, reversed production and consumption, descentred subjects and the juxtaposition of opposites. Considering the role of marketing in the life of postmodern beings, a proper understanding of consumer behavior cannot be attained without acknowledging these basic principles (Table 3: Conditions of postmodernity).

Postmodernism favors the idea of hyperreality that follows from the argument that reality is not something out there, but something that more often is created than offered. The notion of hyperreal distinguishes from the modernist notion of reality as uncontested and singular. Truth is regarded as a construction instead of a generalized notion of universalism, the postmodern conceptualization of truth implying localism and particularism (Venkatesh & Firat, 1995).

Unlike in modernism, which views the consumer as a cognitive agent, Venkatesh and Firat (1995) propose viewing him as a communicative, symbolic being. In the field of consumer research this implies the adoption of multiple theories of consumer behavior rather than a single theory that silences all other theories. More important when studying the postmodern consumer is to acknowledge that the contemporary society is a "society of generalized communication". Fostered particularly by mass electronic media, all experience in this world is on a real-time basis, and the world is continuously making itself in the present (Venkatesh & Firat, 1995). But this aspect will be further developed in the next section of the chapter which touches upon postmodern consumer’s behavior.
Table 3: Conditions of postmodernity (Vekantesh & Firta, 1995)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hyperreality</th>
<th>Fragmentation</th>
<th>Reversal of production and consumption</th>
<th>Decentered subject</th>
<th>Juxtaposition of the opposites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reality as part of the symbolic world and constructed rather than given. The emergence of symbolic and the spectacle as the basis of reality. The idea that marketing is constantly involved in the creation of more real than real. The blurring of the distinction between real and nonreal.</td>
<td>Consumption experiences are multiple, disjointed. Human subject has a divided self. Terms such as “authentic self” and “centered connections” are questionable. Lack of commitment to any (central) theme. Abandonment of history, origin, and context. Marketing is an activity that fragments consumption signs and environments and reconfigures them through style and fashion. Fragmentation as the basis for the creation of body culture.</td>
<td>Postmodernism is basically a culture of consumption, while modernism represents a culture of production. Abandonment of the notion that production creates value while consumption destroys it. Sign value replaces exchange value as the basis of consumption. Consumer paradox: Consumers are active producers of symbols and signs if consumption, as marketers are. Consumers are also objects in the marketing process, while products become active agents.</td>
<td>Human subject as a self-knowing, independent agent Human subject as a cognitive subject Human subject as a unified subject Postmodernist notions of human subject: Human subject is historically and culturally constructed. Language, not cognition, is the basis for subjectivity. Instead of a cognitive subject, we have a communicative subject. Authentic self is displaced by made-up self. Rejection of modernist subject as a male subject.</td>
<td>Pastiche as the underlying principle of juxtaposition. Consumption experiences are not meant to reconcile differences and paradoxes but to allow them to exist freely. Acknowledges that fragmentation, rather than unification, is the basis of consumption.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PART CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, postmodernism is of interest to a wide range of practices and social sciences because it directs the attention towards the changes taking place in the contemporary culture. These changes can be observed in:

1) the artistic, intellectual and academic fields (changes in modes of theorization, presentation and dissemination of work as well as changes in specific competitive struggles occurring in particular fields);

2) changes in the broader cultural sphere involving production, consumption, and circulation of symbolic goods which can be related to broader shifts in the balance of power and interdependencies between groups and class fractions on both inter and intrasocietal levels; and

3) changes in the everyday practices and experiences of different groups, who as a result of some of the processes mentioned above, may be using regimes of signification in different ways and developing new means of orientation and identity structures (Featherstone, 2007).

Emerged as a reaction to modernism’s narrative of one objective reality which can be discovered by human beings through science, postmodernism proposed a liberated perspective over society and the world in general, where complexity is appreciated, paradoxes allowed to co-exist and subjectivity and language are recognized as means by which people make sense of their world.
CHAPTER 2. POSTMODERNIST INFLUENCES ON CONSUMPTION

The study presented so far how postmodernists invite to a rethinking of principles of science in general and of marketing theory in particular. It will further continue with a description of efficient consumer communication which, it is argued, has to start from understanding consumption culture and consumer behavior. This implies a look at the postmodern way of understanding consumption, an overview of the Anglo-Saxon and Latin perspectives over what is relevant in this respect, the description of a new method for studying consumers – the consumption studies, and the implications of postmodernism in consumer communication.

2.1. AN ARGUMENT FOR DISCUSSION

In modernism, people lived, trained and built institutions according to one paradigm: that of the hierarchical structure. This was what felt well, what provided a solid order and got humans to develop and win market shares and build strong organizations. The model can be represented as a pyramid. However, the society has changed now and people are faced with a new marketing paradigm that may feel chaotic:

Figure 3: The modern vs. postmodern societal structure

The disappearance of a strict closed societal model has brought also a re-organization of companies in a more flat way and a new conception called open business model. In much the same way that open source software makes it easier to find and eliminate coding errors in computer programs ("many eyes make all bugs shallow"), an Open Business model would allow the benefit of...
Chesbrough makes a case for this, when he demonstrates that useful knowledge is no longer concentrated in a few large organizations and business leaders must look outside the company’s boundaries for ideas and knowledge (Chesbrough, 2007): “Open models create value by leveraging many more ideas, due to their inclusion of a variety of external concepts” (Chesbrough, 2007).

Thus, more companies are becoming increasingly conscious about the need to open up and to add value allowing external stakeholders to have a say. Marketing and communication should support the creation and development of open organizations. At the base of open collaboration stays the same principle of giving up the control, if one wants to engage people in their full autonomy and creativity. Postmodern communication with consumers means community creation, collaboration, talking with them and not at them.

In consequence this study assumes some of the challenges of postmodernism can find a solution in the form of virtual communities. Briefly said, virtual communities imply a new way of marketing and a new model of communication with consumers. This argument however will be further developed in the fourth chapter of the study.

2.2. THE CONSUMER IN POSTMODERNISM

When looking at what is specific about these times, many voices mention consumption and the special relationship people have developed with material possessions. So much as it can be talked now of a culture of consumption, which acts as a framework in which consumer behaviors can be studied and understood. The next idea, first appeared in the work of Douglas and Isherwood (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979), comes to support the previous affirmation: the individual human being, stripped of his humanity, is no use as a conceptual base from which to make a picture of human society; no human exists except steeped in the culture of his time and place.

The utilitarian and rational aspects cannot explain consumption, as in various areas such as food and clothing, purchasing activities have become highly symbolic. Goods become means of conveying messages among individuals and groups of individuals. Baudrillard (1981) mentions the consumption of images and the society of spectacle as characteristics of postmodern times, while Vattimo (1992) mentions also the implications

*many eyes* monitoring the corporation's activities, planning, and health, towards the twin goals of avoiding bad decisions and maximum benefit.
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of technology: “the new technologies of information and communication permit spectacularizations that have not been possible before” (Vattimo, 1992).

The consumer’s perception is now liberated of the modernist ideas of rationality and market’s logic. He is a communicative and symbolic being, who besides satisfying basic needs through consumption, is interested in the intangible benefits of the consumption. As Levy (1959) observed, people buy goods not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean. Consumers become now “prosumers” that engage actively in the production of new symbols, text, products and other kind of consumption activities.

In order to understand the postmodern consumer, it is relevant to stress how he differs from its versions of the past. If labor and tradition defined the modern perspective over consumer, postmodernism came with the idea of “an ongoing project in continuous flux between the past and the status quo” (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Therefore, the identities are not fixed, the past is reinterpreted continuously and the social dimension of consumption is recognized as well.

Firat & Venkatesh (1995) offer a new key in which to understand consumers, as shown in the previous chapter. They see him as an active member of a community, whose buying decision need to be correlated to the culture to which he belongs. In short, postmodern consumer is defined by:

- Symbolism, he is a creator of meaning, regardless of producers’ intentions; he enjoys getting involved in product design development.
- “Consumico, ergo sum” (I consume, therefore I exist), which by contradiction to the modern “cogito, ergo sum” (I think, therefore I exist) stresses the spread of consumerism and its relevance to people’s lives.
- Communication or social interaction is the way in which people make sense of the world they live in. Ideas or concepts like truth are circumscribed to specific culture and result from conversation inside social groups.
- Fragmentation, there is no such thing as one representation over one self, but a collage of multiple roles or “masks” people have in their lives. Therefore, the old segmentation model based on socio-geographic characteristics fail to grasp the fragmented identities of postmodern individual.
- Decenteredness or the loss of coherent sense of self, shows the capacity of postmodern consumer to choose from a wide range of identities what he or she want to become in every given moment.
These five characteristics paint a total different view on consumer than the modernist one. Faced with the loss of predictability and control they used to have, theorists and practitioners strive for a model to break down the complexity and understand this new reality. Even though consumer culture provides many opportunities to play with identities, there are still some constants: self-knowledge, self-normative and personal projects. These are structured by long studying cultural and cognitive models.

Firat and Venkatesh (1995) for example, pointed out that “as the hegemony of the market decreases and postmodern culture gains ground, consumers, as producers of their self-images and (hyper) realities, will find a new freedom that is partly possible to predict and partly yet to be discovered”. One way to predict might be discovered by looking on how people live their lives in postmodernity and what is important for them.

In reaction to postmodern deconstruction of modern metanarratives and the overabundance of information available on the new media, a new thinking current hypermodernity or super modernity emerged. The second modern revolution or hypermodernity reflects a deepening of modern ideas of humanity’s ability to understand, control, and manipulate every aspect of human experience together with a commitment to science and knowledge. It is not concerned with building the Truth, but instead with selecting the useful information from superabundant sources from Internet (Dictionary and Encyclopedia Directory, 2010).

The work of postmodernists has been continued lately by Gilles Lypovetsky (2007), who in his book, “Le bonheur paradoxal, essaisur la société d'hyperconsommation”, states that humanity have entered in a new capitalist era, one dominated by hyper consumption, where every aspect of life is touched by the market logic. His book reveals the paradoxes of the system: although it promises happiness and satisfaction, by stimulating the hedonist needs in people, although affluence is growing, people feel unsatisfied and anxious. Lypovetsky sees the hyper consumer as liberated by the social class to which he belongs to, volatile, infidel, difficult to categorize as before, an emotional consumer, seeking pleasure and eager to have as many experiences as possible. Even personal identity is built around brands, which people use as symbols for their real or desired self. Lypovetky’s view over consumption society and the postmodern consumer is surely putting the subject in a new light and serves the marketing and communication specialists.
To sum up, conception over consumer fluctuated from modernism’s rational and utilitarian subject, to postmodernism’s symbolic and communicative subject to a crystallizing hypermodern active producer, informational subject.

2.3. THE ANGLO-SAXON VERSUS LATIN OR THE INDIVIDUAL VERSUS COMMUNITY

The postmodern consumer is viewed as decentered, fragmented and liberated from previous social constraints. The rising affluence and the liberation meant that every person can take action, so as to produce and show one’s own individuality (regardless of social class or gender). This age of individualism and the developments of industry and commerce determined fragmentation of the markets. The specificity and customization are more and more detailed and so the requests of uniqueness from part of customers.

In the same time with uniqueness, there is an increased isolation. Products and services have freed people from many practices which involved community, even shopping itself. In the Internet era, one can be sitting in his home, and without any social interaction obtain everything one desires. The technologies increase physical isolation, while permitting one to be in virtual touch with the whole world. The wide spread of computers in all aspects of human lives is said to have induced narcissism or at least an increased attention towards one’s own self.

However, reactions to this unnatural situation were not late to appear. People who have finally managed to liberate themselves from social constraints are embarking on a reverse movement to recompose their social universe (Cova & Cova, 2002). This results in active quests for alternative social arrangements and new communities (Goulding, Shankar, & Elliott, 2001).

The meaning of goods and role of consumption in people’s lives differs between the Anglo-Saxon and Latin perspectives. If the first sees the consumption as a self-defining act, where products are extensions of the self, the later emphasizes the role of bondage with others that people appreciate in products. The idea that “the link is more important than the thing” is supported also by one study on consumer culture and happiness. Costely et al. (2007) found two major themes in subjects’ response on what makes them happy: relationship with others and nature. Consumption was not important in itself, but rather it was part of the relationship with others. In this view consumption plays an instrumental role.
Therefore, there is a need for analyzing economic activity not as an independent activity, but as one embedded in a social context, which at the same time encompasses it and renders it possible (Cova & Cova, 2002). The purpose of products and services needs to be extended from only instrumental to social as well. The Latin tradition stresses on the relevance of others in consumption, especially in the context of a general tendency of rebounding and connections among people. One special consequence of this state of facts combined with technical advancement is the born of virtual communities. Virtual communities combine people’s need of social interaction with their love of technology and reconstruction of reality/identity.

How does this affect the communication with consumers? In this new view over society as a network of micro-groups, in which individuals share strong emotional links, a common subculture and a vision over life, products and services can be positioned as symbols of affiliation.

One might argue that this demarcation is too simplistic and postmodern consumers cannot really be separated according to this criterion. However, the aim is not to replace one with another, the self with community, but rather to have more ways of interpreting reality. The Latin perspective focuses on a micro-social level (Cova & Cova, 2002), something neglected by the other approach who stresses the individuality.

2.4. CONSUMPTION STUDIES

The isolate study of the consumer cannot provide the satisfactory answer, and for a long time the relevance of others, the influence people have upon each other has been ignored. The culture to which one belongs, the story of reality that a social group constructs about life, its conditions and requirements, has an influence too big to be ignored. The globalized and highly connected world of today is a proof in this sense. For those who want to build brands and have a successful communication with consumers, it is important to acknowledge that “consumption is a social act and a cultural event too, implying traditions, rituals and symbolism, socialization, status hierarchies and ideology” (Ostergaard & Jantzen, 2001).

As a result, in the ’90-s a new method of studying the consumer emerged called consumption studies. This one emphasized the role of interaction and states that people do not know what they want, but they are sure about what they do NOT want. Products
are used to create a metaphysical universe where they are looking for recognition from other members of their network.

Ostergaard and Jantzen (2001) analyzed historically the four main perspectives of consumer: buyer behavior, consumer behavior, consumer research and consumption studies. In their view, there is an evolution from the study of the single consuming individual, even if through different aspects, characteristic to the first three approaches, to a new understanding that goes beyond the individual present in the last. There is a change in the way consumption is perceived, going from utilitarian value to consumption as a fundamental part of living and meaning in humans' lives.

The authors offer an interesting insight in the motivation of people, who consume goods not only for what they mean for the individual, but also for what they can communicate to the others, to the other groups of consumers and to the consumers of their own group. Therefore, products and services serve a communicative function by maintaining the stable meanings of culture (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979) and by integrating consumers in certain groups, instantaneously differentiating him or her from others.

To sum up the findings of the article (Ostergaard & Jantzen, 2001):

- Consumers’ preference for certain goods is a highly patterned social activity, following a recognizable and classifiable scheme or habitus;
- Taste is specific for each social group as their way of preferring specific goods and of explaining these preferences;
- People do not know what they want, but they are very clear about what they do not want;
- Motives for consumption are socio-cultural by nature.

Taking all these into consideration, it appears clearer the necessity of companies to work strategically with their virtual communities. Even though there is no face-to-face interaction, influence, contagion and meaning construction can happen in this virtual social groups. And when as much of the consumption behavior is rooted in social interaction, it is even more important to be able to understand and influence the process.
2.5. THE IMPLICATIONS OF POSTMODERNISM IN CONSUMER COMMUNICATION

Postmodernism brought a new perspective over consumption and consumer profiles which have significant implications for communication managers. The role of consumption goes from expressing individuality to showing the belonging to a group. Why is this relevant?

In order to be efficient and to respond to the challenges of the environment, communication needs to be based on these actual ideas. The perspective over consumption is broader now and it comprises ideas like the consumer as a communicative and symbolic being who is an active producer of symbols and meanings (prosumer). Brands, products and services are important for consumers’ self-identity creation processes and they appreciate and are willing to engage in the construction of hyperreal consumption practices.

Rejection of authority and meta-narratives in postmodernity should indicate to companies the need to open up and to change from “control” to involve, engage, communicate and create together with customers the products and services that suit best their needs. Acceptance and attachment to a company’s values and symbols is built in cooperation and dialogue.

The Latin view and consumption studies both indicated the need for products to have more than a use value, to have a linking value, to connect people with others. The symbolic connection role of things in postmodernism is valuable when conducting communication with consumers. The social link is one of the most relevant aspects that will drive consumers towards a brand.

PART CONCLUSIONS

The role of consumption in the capitalist system has been re-evaluated and declared as prevalent in the consumption society. The postmodern consumer was depicted as a communicative, symbolic being that searches in products and services more than just utilitarian objective values. He uses brands to express himself and to symbolize his belonging to a group or a chosen lifestyle. This idea drove the study of marketing and consumption studies more in the social and cultural area, as it is shown by the Latin perspective.
CHAPTER 3. FACEBOOK: AN EXAMPLE OF A COMMUNICATION TOOL SUITED TO POSTMODERN CONSUMERS

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate what is it that made Facebook such an attractive channel in the social media landscape and what can it offer to companies in terms of online communication with postmodern consumers. Furthermore, this part is looking to establish the Facebook position in the larger context of social media and to paint a realistic picture of its advantages and limits. In this way, the thesis will build on further on the issue of communication with a postmodern consumer in a highly unpredictable and uncontrollable environment of social media.

3.1. A SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNEL FOR COMMUNICATING WITH POSTMODERN CONSUMERS

Postmodernism, as a culture of consumption and as an era dominated by technology (cf. Table 2: The "symptoms" of postmodernity) created a new type of consumer, one that is more in control, empowered by the new sources of technologies. Once with the revolution of the Internet to Web 2.0 conversations about companies, brands and products moved in big part on cyberspace, whether companies approve it or not. A study from 2009 of Anderson Analytics found that 46% of US social media users said something good about a company and 23% said something bad about a company (Anderson, 2009). Communication in social media is challenging for companies from the perspective of two way communications, loss of control and extended word of mouth among consumers. In the same time, the proportions to what it extended make it very attractive for communication professionals. This determined an increase on the number of articles and studies that treat the subject. Different from the traditional push-technology communication vehicles, social media main characteristics can be summarized as:

- From a company perspective, the aim of social media should be the dialogue and the establishment of long-term relationships with current and potential customers (Weber, 2007);
This new medium makes the traditional segmentation techniques (geographical, gender, age, social) irrelevant, because on the Internet consumers aggregate according to attitudes and interests (Weber, 2007);

On the contrary to the traditional channels where communication took place only between company and customer, the social media allows customer-to-customer communication, transformed in an extended word-of-mouth communication (Mangold & Faulds, 2009);

Due to the ‘democratization of information and media’ by social media (Maymann, 2008), companies cannot have complete control over the content of the message, their brands, and the communication process (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Some authors point out that the higher the level of consumer control is, the higher the level of engagement with a company, a brand or a product (Maymann, 2008). Consumers become active subjects, since they are able to participate in online forums, write their own blogs and comment on others, become and follow opinion leaders, boycott brands, broadcast videos and audios, link and tag information, and share content with others.

Word-of-mouth, also called “word-of-mouse” on the Internet (Goldenberg, Libai, & Muller, 2001), becomes truly relevant. Consequently, companies aim to be recommended by Internet users. As Mark Zuckerberg, creator of Facebook states: “Nothing influences people more than a recommendation from a trusted friend. A trusted friend’s referral is the Holy Grail of advertising” (Maymann, 2008, p. 38).

The new understanding on consumer brought once with postmodernism, is now completed with the perspective of its consumer online behavior. One of the most influential books written on the topic belongs to Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff, (2008) “Groundswell: winning in a world transformed by social technologies”. The book is not an academic treatise, but a result of its authors’ observations by practice, as both of them are vice-presidents of Forrester Research company and draw heavily from that company’s social marketing research. However, this study is given a special attention because of its valuable insights in an area poorly researched until lately. The main concept of the book, the groundswell is described as a “social trend in which people use technologies to get the things they need from each other, rather than from traditional institutions like corporations” (Li & Bernoff, 2008). This is based, according to them, on a fundamental emotion or desire to connect, to create, to stay in touch and to help each other and on the technological breakthroughs which allow this to happen at a large scale.
Li and Bernoff (2008) believe that for the private sector the challenge is, on the one hand, to ensure that these new technologies are used effectively to attract customers and improve profits, while on the other hand, they need to ensure that social networks do not become tools that are used to drive away customers. Being such a hectic environment, with numerous challenges, companies need to have a communication strategy crafted specifically for social media. This strategy should be able to deliver the social media promises of engaging customers and lower the vulnerabilities, like having an online attack upon a company’s image and reputation.

From the social media realm, this thesis chooses to concentrate specifically on the segment of social networking website Facebook. This website was founded by Harvard student, Marc Zuckerberg in 2004 on a campus intranet, but soon its potential as a social network site (SNS) was acknowledged and Facebook gained huge success worldwide. Named person of the year 2010 by Time magazine, Marc Zuckerberg was recognized as a visionary that created a global phenomenon that is “connecting more than half a billion people and mapping the social relations among them” and “creating a new system of exchanging information and changing how we live our lives” (Grossman, 2010).

Facebook is a SNS where people can connect and communicate with friends, upload and share pictures and videos, join groups of joint interest, take tests and compare test scores with friends and so much more. Its own “About Facebook page” states that Facebook is a social utility that helps people communicate more efficiently with their friends, family and coworkers, whose mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected.

A study of Hagelskjær and Busk (2009) made its goal from studying the postmodern consumer on the social network site Facebook and its interpretation as a sign of postmodern consumption. The previous chapter introduced the discussion of the postmodern society and the liberated perspective it brought on the human being (cf. Section 2.2.). That included a different understanding of consumption and of consumers, who are depicted as complex beings, with fragmented identity and sometimes paradoxical wishes. In consequence, communication was extended to portray products and services as symbolic and cultural objects, which not only contribute to the consumers’ self-image, but constitute symbols of belonging to a specific group or an adherence to a certain lifestyle. This view on consumption as a highly symbolic activity

5 URL: http://www.facebook.com/facebook#!/facebook?v=info
correlates to postmodern consumers’ fascination with Facebook as a social space, in which consumption as well as production takes place.

The findings of above mentioned study (Hagelskjær & Busk, 2009) concluded that Facebook offers a variety of opportunities to satisfy the needs of the postmodern consumer, who uses it as a tool to display, create, and produce the “hyper-I”, a persona which is enabled to enter a variety of relations and to communicate a multiplicity of meanings. The consumer is viewed as an actor in a complex and diffuse world, in which he tries simultaneously to cope with the complexity and to thrive. Through identifications of cultural categories and practices and by examining and exemplifying the practices conducted by the users on Facebook, the study showed that Facebook is not just a way for the postmodern consumer to express his multitude and diversity, but a way for him to reduce the complexity in the world (cf. Section 1.1.). The user on Facebook acts in accordance with cultural rules and norms, and displays a coherence and consistency, in the logic of the context created by this platform.

Faced with the decline of traditional mass media and the migration of consumers towards social media, especially Facebook (which responds better to the needs of the postmodern consumers as it was shown), companies are pushed to enter an environment less controllable and predictable than what they were used to. Thus, the need for new strategies and tactics adapted to the new conditions.

3.2. **WHAT IS FACEBOOK’S RECIPE FOR SUCCESS AND WHAT DOES IT HAVE TO OFFER TO COMPANIES?**

Facebook changed in one of the most powerful platforms on the Internet, being the second most visited website on the Web (Grossman, 2006) and that represents a powerful opportunity for business. As its founder declared, he succeeded to create a phenomenon that placed sociability at the core of the Internet. At the beginning it used to be just for college students. But that’s no longer the case. Currently this social networking platform has well over 500 million active users. But important for business is the fact that Facebook’s demographic is expanding, including 35 years of age and older. This mass of people is connecting, communicating and spending, and business needs to be where its customers are.

This part of the thesis wants to demonstrate how Facebook Pages provide a unique opportunity for companies to build active communities around their business. For this, it
will be needed to tap into what Facebook has to offer to the businesses and to reveal some of the new skills that are essential to community managers in order to create engagement and dialogue, and to tap into trends and fashions. All this will serve to show that although many businesses are creating a Facebook fan page the simple act of doing this is not enough. Posting something once in a while, with no regard to the content will definitely not help build a community of engaged users. Social media sites attract a large number of people, but having “friends” on Facebook doesn’t necessarily mean one will accomplish business goals or it will impact on the profit. Although the development of a vibrant business community is within the reach of anyone with the passion, will and drive to create outstanding results, a crucial point remains the strategy.

The first step in formulating a strategy for Facebook is to understand what defines it, the opportunities and limitations it brings with. Kent Lewis (2009) analyzed six of the major social media platforms and identified that Facebook has a “mind set” of connection, is suited especially for entertainment, lifestyle brands and has a primary demographic of 25 to 45 years. Moreover, “the social network that helps people communicate more efficiently with their friends, family and co-workers” (Stone, 2010) has grown exponentially in the last years, establishing itself as a powerful tool of getting people together (Facebook Statistics, 2010):

- More than 500 million active users
- 50% of active users log on to Facebook every day
- Average user has 130 friends
- People spend over 700 billion minutes per month on Facebook

Lewis identified as the biggest challenge the fact that advertising is appreciated by few people in these communities, idea that is expressed also by other researchers (De Valck, Van Bruggen, & Wierenga, 2009), who showed in their studies that marketing messages affect the overall atmosphere of the community. People must care about the issue, have opinions about it, and be enthusiastic enough to share their views (McWiliam, 2000). Advertising on Facebook is not appreciated, instead companies should adopt the strategy of creating communities around their values, from which members could initiate conversations or improve their self-image (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).
This is one of the reasons why early in 2009 Facebook released a new version of Pages. Business Pages, or Fan Pages as they are also known, represent public profiles that enable companies to share their products or services with Facebook’s 500 million users, to leverage connections and to engage and interact with their fans in new and creative ways. The primary benefits and opportunities for companies can be summarized as follows (Facebook Pages Guide, 2010; Fletcher, 2010):

a) Pages are profiles for brands: this service allows companies to build a profile for their business in the same way every person can build its personal page. As with any other presentation tool, it is important to pay attention to the image and communication that takes place here, especially as in contrast to the company’s website, this one has the potential of two way permanent dialogue with consumers.

b) Pages are indexed by all the major search engines and provide businesses with new opportunities to develop customer relationships.

c) Pages have access to users’ feeds: this is one of the most important features within the Facebook Pages product. This means that when Facebook users press the “like” button of a branded page, they will be notified of status updates anytime someone changes the status, via the primary news feed on the homepage. In this way, companies can get their message across easier, every time a person logs on to check on his friends.

d) The news feed is real time: the news feed is designed to stream stories as they are displayed on the branded page, and are not being filtered in any way. The updates can take the form of text, photos, videos or links, all of them appearing in real time to members who have subscribed to the page, an important advantage compared with a more static official website.

e) Pages can integrate multiple applications: this allows the customization of the page containing pictures and formatted texts that make use of the interactive functions from Facebook (chat, forums, games, virtual gifts).

f) Brands can join the conversation: social media has always been about joining the conversation and for now on Facebook, brands can now be a significant part of the conversation. These conversations can take place within a
Facebook Page as well as in a user’s news feed. Interactions on a Page can spread like a virus; and that’s a good thing for marketers.

Besides bringing the possibility of anytime dialogue with consumers, a Facebook page can be utilized to form a virtual community around a brand. The platform offers every possibility to companies in order to do that and many of the strategies for creating and managing pages are compatible with the idea of a virtual community. This aspect will be developed in the next chapter of the study.

Altimeter Group (Owyang, Tran, & Webber, 2010) did a research in July 2010 in which it analyzed 30 top brands according to 8 success factors that they identified form the input of various vendors, agencies and experts. Their intention was to determine some criteria for success and a model of Facebook page best practice. This was an independent research founded in totality by the group. This study threw a new light on the topic of Facebook page strategy and will be used in this thesis as well, to guide the analysis of the case study.

The above mentioned study revealed that although many brands open pages, they use them to send out their message, but lack on leveraging the social features, which are the core of the social media. Instead they should build their strategy in line with the idea that consumers lean on each other to make purchase decisions, “the whole premise of the site is that everything is more valuable when you have the context about what your friends are doing. That's true for ads as well. An advertiser can produce the best creative ad in the world, but knowing your friends really love drinking Coke is the best endorsement for Coke you can possibly get” (Stone, 2010). Word of mouth and consumer advocacy represent essential elements in every social media strategy.

Owyang, Trand and Webber (2010) identified a number of eight factors of success, which can be considered a good strategy to follow for Facebook pages. The model will be presented here as it is significant for the analysis of Toyota Sienna’s Facebook page, in the second part of the study.

- Set community expectations. A set of rules are absolutely necessary for conversations to take place in a decent manner, and the authors recommend companies to voice out the scope of the page. In this way, fans can know what to expect and what is expected from them. Most of these guidelines are placed under the “Info” section of a page.
• Provide cohesive branding. Such a page should be considered a tool that can serve very well to reinforce the company’s image and reputation, and should be consistent with other promotional efforts. Therefore, it needs to include profile information, branded logos and a customized landing page, where new visitors can recognize the brand and experience it in a familiar way.

• Be up to date. One of the main advantages of Facebook is its availability anytime and anywhere, therefore pages should be updated regularly with fresh content. New visitors need to know that the brand is present, and actual members need incentives to stay engaged. One way to insure that this is done right could be creating a content calendar, with attention to provide a mix of conversational and promotional posts.

• Live authenticity. In Facebook, almost everyone uses his real name and provides authentic information about themselves, thus brands should allow fans to connect with some real people on their page. The study showed that allowing fans to have conversations with actual page administrators have the best chance at creating deeper relationship and brand loyalty.

• Participate in dialog. Conversations with fans should follow the manner in which conversations take place on Facebook. It is advised to participate in existing conversations and create new ones. Olgivy’s 360 Digital (Titus, 2010) recommends to influence dialog by “rewarding the individual for participation and publicly thanking them for being a fan” while Lithium advises companies to resist the temptation to flood the Facebook wall with canned marketing messages that will cause fans to tune out your messages.

• Enable peer to peer interactions. This is the natural behavior in such social networks, but many companies ignore it. The study recommends for companies to ask fans to respond each other, to showcase fan contributions and recognize the top contributors on the wall. Features such as discussion boards can enable people to ask questions and answer to one another, while a moderator can guard that the peer to peer interactions are positive and do not take an unwanted turn.

• Foster advocacy is an essential strategy for businesses, as prospect trust customers more than they trust brands. It can be done by simply asking people to “like” a post or better, create themselves something worth sharing with others. In the same logic enter contests, polls and other means of self-expression. To add value in the
customers’ lives with this community, people should be able to tell their stories to their friends.

- Solicit a call to actions. Simple call to actions can vary from engagement to purchasing incentives, such as to like a page, sign up for e-mails or newsletters, or try products. E-commerce experiences are possible, but first one needs to reassure that the community agrees and expects such activities.

To sum up, Facebook pages represent a good way for companies to be present on this large platform with numerous daily users and centered on the idea of openness, connection and empowerment. Furthermore, the pages have incorporated all the features necessary to build and grow a virtual community. Companies using Facebook need to understand and respect the aim and values of this platform: “Most brands tend to want their presence to be all about them – as if Facebook were no different from a billboard or television ad. Smart brands overcome this temptation providing customers something useful that can tie into how they use Facebook to share with friends” (Barenblat, 2009). Companies have the possibility to carry friendly, entertaining or informational conversation directly with their customers via Facebook, an important step into humanizing the face of the company.

3.3. **What does it imply to choose Facebook as a communication tool?**

The specificities of communication on Facebook can be inferred by looking at what it mean to communicate in social media, social network sites included. Mangold and Faulds (2009) studied this aspect and explained why a new communication paradigm, where both traditional and nontraditional forms of communication coexist, is necessary in order to reach the postmodern consumer in the actual context. The article offers some solutions for communicating in “a manner that is consistent with the organization’s mission and performance goals” in a hectic and uncontrollable environment (Figure 4: The new communication paradigmFigure 3: The modern vs. postmodern societal structure).
In the perspective of Mangold and Faulds (2009), communication in social media takes two major forms:

A. It allows companies to talk to their customers, but in contrast to traditional media, the communication is two-way, direct, in real time and less strict.

B. It allows customers to talk to one another, in a magnified word of mouth which was proven to have an influence on aspects of consumer behavior including awareness, purchase behavior or post purchase evaluation. Therefore, managers need to accept that they have lost total control over communication and focus more on how they can be part of discussions and influence them in a manner that serves the company.

This article offers also a number of methods by which a company can shape the discussions, gleaned from a review of business literature and discussion with advertising agencies, public relations firms and corporations that have begun to use social media successfully. Their strategy includes, both practical advices (provide networking platforms, use blogs and other social media tools to engage customers, use both traditional and Internet-based promotional tools to engage customers) as well as indications regarding the content and type of message (provide information, be outrageous, provide exclusivity, design products with talking points and consumers’
desired self-images in mind, support causes that are important to consumers, utilize the power of stories).

These ideas can serve when deciding whether or not to choose Facebook as a communication platform and how to use it as a support or complementing element with other channels. The guidelines for content drive mostly form everyday social life, where good social skills include information, exclusivity or storytelling. Furthermore the traditional and nontraditional methods can mutually support each other, while social media’s different tools can be coordinated to achieve a unitary effect.

Lastly a very interesting perspective on social media will be presented. McKinsey Global Institute (Zeisser, 2010) proposes thinking of word of mouth generated on social networks as a distinct form of media. In their opinion, word of mouth is a form of marketing that must be earned, unlike traditional advertising, which can be purchased. The key of earning it is being genuinely useful to the individuals who initiate or sustain virtual world-of-mouth conversations. This can be done in two ways: first, by conferring social importance to the users and second, by providing “virtual items” which are critical to stimulating social interactions that may in turn generate word of mouth. This view is relevant because it brings a new light in the discussion upon how worth of mouth can be obtained online.

**PART CONCLUSIONS**

Looking at the entire chapter, it can be concluded that the big societal changes like digitalization of the public sphere and an empowered consumer forced companies to adopt a new communication strategy that would support the mission and goals. Networking, feedback loop and social intelligence are at the very heart of the new strategy. In this globalized connected world, where Facebook dominates the virtual space, this thesis went in depth to understand its specific and inner logic. What was found showed that relevant and reliable information from the company’s part is not enough, but more than in other social media, excellent social skills are required. Shaping the consumers to consumers’ communication is a challenging task, but the most important in the same time. Facebook offers companies the possibility to create pages inside the website, which they should take further and transform into virtual communities. This is what the thesis proposes in order to create a virtual place where consumers want to join and to which they would freely return another time.
CHAPTER 4. BUILDING VIRTUAL BRAND COMMUNITIES WITH FACEBOOK

So far the study has illustrated how changes in the social and cultural sphere (cf. Section PM) conducted to the evolution of new consumption trends and preferences (cf. Section PM consumer). All these were linked in the second chapter (cf. Section 2.1.) with the emergence of Facebook as the best platform from the social media scape, for companies to interact with the postmodern consumers.

The discussion now goes further in investigating why companies should build virtual brand communities with Facebook. The premises are given by the fact that online interactions are becoming more often an important supplement to traditional social and consumption behavior (Kozinets, 1999) and thus companies need to understand the importance of bonding (with) their consumers through the means of Web 2.0. (cf. Introduction).

4.1. WHY IS THE CONCEPT OF VIRTUAL BRAND COMMUNITY RELEVANT IN THE CONTEXT OF POSTMODERN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION?

E-tribes or virtual communities: whatever one chooses to call them, at least one thing seems assured. With 51 per cent of Internet users using the Web daily, and exponential global growth rates for new users, prodigious growth in the quantity, interests, and influence of virtual communities is guaranteed (Kozinets, 1999).

Virtual brand communities or communities of users, or user groups as they have been called, have a long history in the business-to-business world. Although they have been more often associated with science and technology, virtual communities exist now in many other business sectors. Their rapid spread in diverse fields is due to the multiple functionalities they have for users: from sharing experience, to solving problems, to meeting peers or exploring companies and career opportunities, keeping in touch with new technology developments or updating with the latest mass media gossip (McWiliam, 2000), virtual communities provide users the right medium for information exchange.

Increasingly now the consumer-goods companies started to create online communities too for their brands, as it was proved their efficiency in fostering new relationships with
customers and enabling consumer communication (McWilliam, 2000). Many famous brands host online communities, under diverse forms: CNN (http://community.cnn.com) and Disney (http://family.go.com/boards) use bulletin boards for example, Shell International Petroleum (www.shell.com) and Bosch tools (www.boschtools.com) created forums for consumer’s meetings, while Pentax (www.pentax.com) chose to develop a chat room. Heineken (www.heineken.com) instead allowed its consumers to build their own virtual bars where they can chat with other visitors and meet their friends; similarly, Nescafé built a virtual café for its fans (http://connect.nescafe.com).

The cyberspace is central to the postmodern condition, as it gives rise to various kinds of simulacra (such as virtual environments, digital images and sounds) and to new understandings of the relationship between the natural and the artificial, creating what Baudrillard called a place “realer than real” (cf. Section 1.1.). The postmodern consumer, well informed and highly skeptical towards authority, uses the Web to freely exchange information in regards with brands and companies. Hence by building a community centered on customers and led by them, but subtly branded nevertheless, companies can develop a powerful strategy to sustain brand equity and attain customer loyalty (Resnik, 2001).

Virtual communities can be formed spontaneously by consumers. Usually they are created by groups of local enthusiasts such as the Harley Davidson fans or the Macintosh computer users. But these spontaneous communities can endanger a company’s public image and harm its reputation, as in the case of Harley Davidson and its fans’ outlaw behavior (McWilliam, 2000). Lately however companies have begun to realize the value of supporting community creation themselves. It allows the company to attain a whole range of advantages while engaging the audience in an active, non-intrusive environment and fostering bi-directional conversation.

Focused mainly on the customers’ needs, virtual communities accomplish several important things for a business (Anderson, 2009):

- They connect companies with customers or prospect customers to solidify loyalty;
- They connect existing customers with each other to improve product adoption and satisfaction; and

6 Harley Davidson’s fan community, Hell’s Angels, has been constantly associated with illegal manifestations of its members. The most notorious “episode” consumed in 1969 in the stages of a music concert, where one of Harley’s fans stabbed to death another man in the crowd. Despite charges being dropped, the incident made significant negative press and damaged Harley-Davidson’s reputation for good.
They connect existing customers with prospects and prospects with each other to stimulate advocacy and word of mouth.

Besides, the on-line communication can provide the firm valuable information about its environment from directly observing the flow of interpersonal communication in the community (McWiliam, 2000).

For all these reasons and for the notoriety the subject has gained, it is worth understanding better the concept of virtual brand community. It can help comprehending the business scape's evolution and how companies adapt to ongoing socio-cultural and technological changes.

4.2. DEFINING THE VIRTUAL BRAND COMMUNITY

The term *community* is a central concept for a wide range of social sciences which study the interactions and group behavior of individuals. The notion refers to a particularly constituted set of social relationships based on something which the participants have in common – usually a common sense of identity. As such, the term is frequently used to denote a wide-ranging relationship of solidarity over a rather undefined area of life and interests.

Marketing researchers Albert Muniz and Thomas O'Guinn (2001) studied the interpersonal influence of actors within such a structure in the consumption context and launched the notion of *brand community* to define “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand”. The authors applied the concept of community to the consumption behavior to understand what drives people from different cultures and with different backgrounds to converge in their affinities. They found that at the center of these affiliations stays a powerful symbol such as the brand, provider of strong social and cultural significations, so they defined brand communities “specialized”, to point at the precise scope of these structures. Further, they established that brand communities have certain rituals, traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility and group consciousness, which gives them the structure and sense of community. Finally, they specified that such groupings are set in the commercial and mass-mediate environment whose final purpose is the promotion of the commercial brand.

The recent rise of computer mediated communication and a growing evidence of intense social interactions in the “cyberspace” highlighted the evolution of a new concept, the
virtual brand community. It was described as a group of people characterized by a common interest in a specific brand which, with the help of interactive communication technology, create a parallel social universe (or subculture) that runs its own myths, values, rituals, vocabulary and hierarchy (Mortara, 2007). So the initial concept of community has kept its core meaning, adapting only in shape to reflect the cultural and communicational changes undergone in the last decades reflected by the appearance of interactive computer technology.

Even though the cyberspace has brought major changes in the way people communicate, it did not change however the way the human brain works. Social networks are not a new structure. They existed in different forms for thousands of years before; people have formed into groups, built strong and weak relationships with each other, formed allegiances, and spread rumor and gossip. The virtual brand community is just an “updated” version of the earlier concept, and hence it presents similar features with an “offline” social community:

a) consciousness of kind expressed by the intrinsic connection of members towards each other, and the collective sense of difference from others outside the community;

b) shared rituals and traditions which perpetuate the community's shared history, culture and consciousness and establishes visible public definitions; and

c) a shared sense of moral responsibility felt as a kind of duty or obligation towards the community as a whole and to its individual members in particular (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001).

It is true that virtual brand communities cannot assure all the conditions of an “offline” community – they actually contradict the basic principle of physical proximity – but they do however offer their members a shared (virtual) space, a shared language, and an intimate communication space. People develop online friendships and lasting intimate connections, they give and take advice, they share their thoughts and opinions to similar others. Moreover, virtual communities offer a culture of freedom: freedom to access information, and freedom to travel. The “cybertraveler” as it was called, can enter the world of others without intruding them and without being intruded by others. In fact, this might be the mere essence of the virtual community: individuals can build empathetic identities since such a social structure is supportive and non-threatening (Vekantesh, Firat, & Meamber, 1998).
Looking at the meaning of virtual brand communities one can wonder how does Facebook fit into this framework? Why should companies consider this social networking platform of all, when building relations with their customers?

4.3. **WHY BUILDING A VIRTUAL BRAND COMMUNITY WITH FACEBOOK?**

From a company-consumer perspective, the virtual brand communities, if properly managed, represent a source of benefits for both parts involved. Among the most advantageous points for consumers are (Resnick, 2001):

a) the freedom to look for and share impartial information about experiences with a company’s product or services;

b) the possibility to communicate (in support groups or fan pages, for example) with other customers and share opinion and thoughts regarding a company, its products or its brands;

c) the possibility to join entertaining activities, such as online games, contests, quizzes or any other form of divertissement; as well as

d) the provision of assistance and support for consumer creativity which can result in improved ideas of product design. This can of course benefit both the customers and the brand owner through the improvement or development of new product features.

For companies too, a virtual brand community is useful as it can (Resnick, 2001):

a) help associate the brand with images of expertise, enjoyment, empathy, and other strong emotions, depending on the types of community services provided and the usability and sociability designed into the community;

b) provide non-intrusive and inexpensive touch points through which information about consumers’ demographics, preferences and lifestyle can be directly observed;

c) allow the company to learn about the consumer’s needs and to predict industry-specific cultural shifts that might suggest needed changes to product design; and

d) help the company to keep its name in the minds of consumers by reducing significantly the time these could use in interacting with other brands.
It was said previously (cf. Section 3.1.) that Facebook is a place where people can connect and communicate with their friends, entertain themselves uploading and sharing pictures and videos, join groups of joint interest, and so on. Through providing these services, Facebook covers many of the virtual communities' features and benefits mentioned previously. Besides, through its special features it fosters community growth facilitating internal and external consumer interaction. But to fully understand how Facebook contributes to community development, it is necessary to discuss about the structure and dynamic of a virtual network.

Consulting recent field work (Krebs & Holley, 2005; Chung, Hossain, & Davis, 2005; Pintilie, 2009) it can be argued that the basic elements of a virtual community are the nodes, the ties, the social prestige (or social status) and the social capital.

- **The nodes** represent the basic entity of the network and in social networks are mostly comprised of individual accounts but they can as well be departments, organizations, families or any kind of groups.

- **The ties** are the relationships between the nodes. Actors form social networks to exchange information, goods, services, social support or financial support. For example, on Facebook the nodes are connected for friendship. The strength of their tie may range from weak to strong, depending on the number and types of resources they exchange, the frequency of exchanges and the intimacy of the exchanges.

- **The social prestige or status** is the differentiating value of a node vs. other nodes. In the offline world it can be the size of the house, the number of partners one has, the type of car, the job one holds, and so on. In online networks the social prestige is given by the number of followers on Twitter, the number of connections on LinkedIn, or the number of friends on Facebook. It has to be mentioned that a virtual social network cannot exist without a social prestige indicator.

- **The social capital** is the value that a node is getting out of the community participation. It is reflected by the new friends one makes through Facebook, or the new information he gets from Twitter, or the new business deals enabled via Linkedin.

Understanding the constitutive elements of a virtual community is relevant in this context as each of them can be easily identified and strategically utilized on Facebook.
For a company on Facebook, the nodes are represented by individual users, or “fans”. Due to the page’s design and its internal policies, companies can easily attain demographical information about their community members (or nodes). Data about users’ location, age, sex, education, workplace, gender interest, language and relationship status as well as personal interests and likes are easily downloadable from the people’s personal pages. This allows companies for example to realize very fine and precise targeting by drawing out keywords from a person’s biographical information (Fletcher, 2010).

Information about the ties, or the relationships between diverse Facebook users, are also available to companies owning a Facebook Page. Through the Graph API tool, Page owners can have a consistent view of the Facebook social graph, uniformly representing objects in the graph (e.g., people, photos, events, and pages) and the connections between them (e.g., friend relationships, shared content, and photo tags)\(^7\). Referring strictly at the relationship between nodes, Facebook provides a series of applications (Social Graph, Touch Graph, etc.) which create a real time, dynamic map of the fans’ connections.

Understanding the ties between the nodes is the corner stone of community development. The ties of a network can be strong or weak. Their strength depends on the level, frequency, and reciprocity of interactions between two nodes. In business, tie strength is usually estimated by frequency of contact (since determining actual intensity is intrusive and time-consuming). Strong ties are the high-trust people that one can rely on. They are more likely to facilitate high flows of information between users and they become very dependable as they have the property of passing over only necessary information for the individuals. Weak ties on the other hand, are much more superficial and do not require high levels of involvement on the part of users. Due to their undependability, they appear frequently in most social networks and they have the property of efficiently transmitting information and the ability to connect different clusters of a network.

The strong and weak ties are called direct ties, as they represent the immediate contacts of users, the people that one recognizes as trustworthy. They are important in the critical areas of a network as they allow important information to travel quickly and reliable between the nodes. However, the real power of a network stays in the indirect ties; they

\(^7\) URL: [http://developers.facebook.com/docs/api/](http://developers.facebook.com/docs/api/)

have the property of “multiplier”, enabling network members to increase their reach substantially by gaining access to new information and resources in distant parts of the network. Indirect ties multiply by many times what is available through direct ties. Diverse, far-reaching networks provide more information benefits by maximizing the amount of non-redundant messages provided (Krebs, 1996; Krebs & Holley, 2005). So a company which succeeds to pass over its messages in a network with many indirect ties will benefit from increased word of mouth inside that community and probably will create high consumer awareness as well as attract new users inside the community.

On Facebook, interactions are the lifeblood of the Page. When someone performs a public action (i.e. an action that is let be seen by others), this action usually shows up in a variety of places: on the users’ wall, in the news feed of the friends, or, if it is a popular action, it can be displayed in aggregate in the Highlights section of one’s friends’ home page (cf. Section 3.2.). In the case of Pages, each mention in a news feed contains a link to the Page and has the role to direct friends of fans to visit the Page and connect. This helps to connect to indirect ties and hence grow the community, by maximizing the number of interactions (Fletcher, 2010).

The social status and the social capital are the “fuel” of virtual communities as they allow a user to see the value of its membership and, when positive, can stimulate its level of involvement. Understanding members’ level of participation in a community is important, as it can indicate the Page owner what is the perceived social status and the social capital attained by each of its fans.

There are regularly identified three levels of participation in a community, which further gives way to three types of members:

**Figure 5: Member types according to participation level (McDonald, 2003)**

- key contributors
- participants
- eyeballs
o The key contributors are the central members of a community; the doers, those actively involved who welcome and help the new members to integrate.

o The participants are the people who join a network, occasionally participate in conversations but much more rarely start one.

o Finally the eyeballs, or the lurkers, are the people who enroll in a social network but who never actively engage in interaction with other members.

According to marketing professor Robert Kozinets (1999) there are two major factors that affect the degree of participation of a member in virtual communities: (a) the relationship one has with the consumption activity [of the brand] and (b) the intensity of one’s social relationships with other members of the virtual community. These two factors are often interrelated but each taken separately can help distinguishing between four specific types of community members:

a) Tourists, the users who lack strong social ties to the group, and maintain only a superficial or passing interest in the consumption activity;

b) Minglers, who maintain strong social ties, but are only superficially interested in the central consumption activity;

c) Devotees, the opposite of this, who maintain a strong interest in and enthusiasm for the consumption activity, but have few social attachments to the group; and

d) Insiders, who have both strong social ties and strong personal ties to the consumption activity.

From a marketing strategy perspective, it is the devotees and the insiders who tend to represent the most important targets. The reason for this is found in the classic ‘Pareto’ rule which is operative in almost all consumer marketing areas (Barabási, 2003). Basically what the model claims is that in most product and service categories eighty percent of the products are consumed by twenty percent of the customer base. For example, in the US beer market, 16% of the beer drinkers consume 88% of the beer on the market. This segment of heavy—or loyal—users is the core of any industry and business, and it usually stays at the heart of successful marketing strategies.

Preliminary research shows that this important core segment is represented in virtual communities by insiders and devotees. Hence, it follows that the main communication and marketing efforts will be oriented towards the most involved members. And this is because the devoted and loyal users tend to join or create virtual communities of
consumption much faster. Besides, they have the power to propagate the development of loyalty and heavy usage of a product by culturally and socially reinforcing consumption inside the community. In this way, tourists and minglers can be socialized and ‘upgraded’ to the level of insiders or devotees (Kozinets, 1999).

It is important to understand the users’ typology in order to stimulate community participation. Facebook facilitates this providing statistics about Active Fans (described as any fan who has made an interaction over the past seven days) (Fletcher, 2010) and which can be identified as “key contributors”. The analysis of users typology can go in depth to create more fine categories of members, as companies have at their disposal social network analysis tools that accurately picture each node’s position in a network and the frequency of its interactions. This provides valuable insights into which segment of the community is interacting most with the content and it becomes relevant for understanding how influence takes place inside the community.

All in all, Facebook Page and its side applications offer a company the perfect medium for community building as it enables communication and consumer bonding. Moreover it eases the management process providing a more “scientific” way of measurement and control of the actions taken online, through a series of tools and features included in the platform.

**Part Conclusions**

Virtual brand communities are significant for the image and reputation of a company, as they represent important contributors to the brand’s larger social construction and play a vital role in its ultimate legacy (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Postmodern consumers are increasingly leaning towards the use of virtual social networks, as they offer freedom to look for and share information about a company’s product or services, the possibility to communicate with other customers and share opinions and thoughts regarding a company, its products or its brands in an intimate communication space with a shared language (Vekantesh, Firat, & Meamber, 1998; Resnik, 2001).

As it can be seen, Facebook supports the management of virtual communities, providing the medium for consumer dialogue and moreover, it provides the tools to make this process more efficient. Understanding the place and roles of consumers (nodes) in a virtual community, as well as the structure and intensity of their ties, can provide important information for the company which can positively influence the communication
inside the community as well as stimulate and engage the latent users. This is perhaps Facebook’s “competitive advantage” in respect to other social media platforms: it incorporates both the social and technical aspects needed and, above all, it has a greater efficiency than any other SNS, as it is the largest interactive communication platform at the moment (cf. Section 3.2.).
CHAPTER 5. ILLUSTRATIVE CASE STUDY: TOYOTA SIENNA

This chapter's purpose is to investigate Toyota Sienna’s promotional campaign in order to exemplify how Facebook can be used as the main communication channel with postmodern consumers. The focus will be on how Toyota Sienna made use of Facebook in communicating with the postmodern consumers, assuming that this campaign is a good example of the utility of Facebook in building communities of engaged consumers.

5.1. TOYOTA’S SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVITY

Toyota Motor Corporation (Toyota) is the world's biggest automobile maker\(^8\) and one of the largest conglomerates in the world\(^9\) (Toyota Motor Corporation, Inc., 2010). It is recognized worldwide as a model of business innovation due to its original production system\(^10\) and it seeks to become leader in car safety and sustainability through constant investments in manufacturing\(^11\). Concomitantly, Toyota has been noted for its new communication approach meant to leverage the company’s unique corporate values and attain consumer fidelity in the long run. The goal is to build sustainable relationships with the stakeholders by engaging them through social media platforms:

> "If you are going to engage, you have to have a plan and make sure that resources are available. Because you can’t gracefully exit – once you’re in, you’re in. The days of walking away from a campaign are over – once we engage, we have to commit to it"

Denise Morrissey, Online Community Manager at Toyota

In 2008 Toyota Inc. launched its first YouTube channel where video materials were uploaded. It followed Twitter as a channel for communicating the corporate values and

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\(^9\) In 2009, Toyota Motor Corporation employed 71,116 people worldwide affiliated in 320,590 companies (Toyota Motor Corporation, Inc., 2010).

\(^10\) Toyota is known for its “Lean Manufacturing” which is based on several key principles: Just in Time, World Class Manufacturing, Stockless Production, and Demand Flow Technology, describing the efficiency and performance of Toyota’s production system.

\(^11\) An overview of the major technological investments at Toyota from 1990 until present can be consulted in Appendix 1: Toyota’s technological development
vision and later came into stage Facebook as a space for the company to promote its brands, Lexus and Prius. With YouTube, Twitter and Facebook as main communication channels, the company was feeling pretty confident manifesting high control over the public content and precise targeting of the most engaged stakeholders (Wetpaint & Altimeter, 2009).

Even though Toyota is relatively new in the social media scape, it managed to integrate this channel very fast in its overall corporate strategy. In the recall crisis in 2010 for example, Toyota chose to build a social-media response room, staffed with up to eight people constantly monitoring and responding to their stakeholders’ demands. Jim Lentz, president of U.S. sales, answered questions directly through Twitter. The company's U.S. blog, Our point of view, offered a first-person discussion of the issues and published questions from the press along with Toyota's responses (Capsule, 2010). Two new platforms, one with Digg and one on Tweetmeme called “Toyota Conversations”, were launched to concentrate the online conversations and allow the company to respond directly to all its fans.

Toyota's social media manager, Doug Frisbie said that the dialogue on Digg attracted almost 1 million views in the first five days after launching (Dada, 2010). Moreover, four official Facebook pages of Toyota registered a 10 percent fan-base growth between late January and early March which suggests Toyota managed to keep its consumers loyal and avoid major reputational costs (Matherne, 2010; McDevitt, 2010).

»We certainly have learned a ton, and those learnings, like creating a social-media response team and opening multiple platforms where we can communicate directly with customers, will be part of our strategy going forward. And, eventually, those things will give us an advantage«

Doug Frisbie, National social media and marketing integration manager at Toyota

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12 Toyota’s corporate strategy focuses on clearly expressing its identity of a leader in global regeneration and in the application of IT in automobiles for better and safer monitoring. The company wishes to be seen as a truly global player that transcends nationalities and ethnic belonging and is respected by all people around the world (Cornelissen, 2008).
13 A number of about 300 thousand Toyota Prius were recalled from the US market, due to some errors in the braking system. URL: http://www.inewscatcher.com/2010/04/toyota-sienna-recall-in-us-and-canada-toyota-recall.html
5.2. **TOYOTA SIENNA’S INTEGRATED MARKETING CAMPAIGN**

In 2009, continuing the promise made earlier, Toyota Motor Sales USA \(^{15}\) (TMS) launched the “Swagger Wager” ad campaign for the promotion of the new minivan series Sienna SE. The campaign consisted of a music video centered on the *Sienna Family*, “two self-absorbed parents and the only vehicle that matches their awesomeness” (Toyota USA, 2005) featured on the company’s YouTube channel (URL: http://www.youtube.com/user/Sienna) and on the TV channels MTV and VH1 (McKay, 2010).

The video was so popular that it soon became viral – in only 4 days from its release, half a million of users have been watching it (Marketer, 2010).

At the moment of the campaign launch Toyota was facing two stringent market problems. The American automotive industry under severe decline for about two years (Plunkett Research, 2010) and the minivans market shrinking considerably due to the global financial crisis that hit its target consumers (young families) most (Stiver, 2010). Therefore the aim of the Swagger Wagon video was to make a twist in the perception of minivans, tagged as “un-cool” and “for soccer moms” (O’Neill, 2010), in a time of unprecedented crisis\(^{16}\).

> Toyota has chosen to embrace the minivan and all of the stigma attached to it «

> The videos are designed to make the concept of owning a minivan a little more appealing to men and women alike« (Web, 2010).

The Sienna Family story was received so well by the public that Toyota soon developed the idea to an integrated multimedia campaign which could offer extended interactive tools for consumers to engage with the brand. Integrated marketing communication, as

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\(^{15}\) Toyota Motors USA Inc. (TMS) is part of Toyota Motor Corporation Inc., representing Toyota’s US sales and marketing division in 49 states.

\(^{16}\) Toyota was facing not only the effects of the global financial crisis but also an image crisis (cf. Section 4.1.) caused by repeated recalls of its vehicles over the past years. URL: http://chrisstenberg.com/2010/05/toyota-sienna-swagger-wagon/
part of corporate communication, is an audience driven business process of strategically managing stakeholders, content, channels and results of the brand communication program (Kliatchko, 2008). Therefore, in order to gain a better understanding of Toyota’s campaign, each of these elements will be further presented (cf. Appendix 2)

**CONTENT AND KEY MESSAGES**

Through this campaign, Toyota aimed to re-examine the role of the minivan and push even harder against the traditional boundaries of the car’s identity. The core idea was to create a functional family vehicle that firmly dismisses the notion that to drive a minivan is to sacrifice personal style in favor of family functionality. The Sienna slogan, “always for kids, now for parents too” is trying to express the identity of this “life stage car”: a vehicle that along with the flexibility and spaciousness of its segment possesses also stylish features not previously seen in the minivan. In this way, although it prioritizes the need of the children, it becomes also a car that the adults can proudly drive (cf. Appendix 3: Bob Carter vice president at Toyota Motor Sales USA presents Toyota Sienna 2011).

Toyota’s brand has always been about putting the customers first (Morrisey, 2011). The idea of this campaign came from listening to their customers, learning not only what they need and desire in a vehicle, but how it should match the changes in their busy lives. With the minivan market losing share and other manufacturers leaving the segment, Toyota could spot an opportunity by directing their attention towards young families. They have found that today’s young families are looking for capability, but in the same time for features and style that help them enjoy time together. By anticipating consumers’ needs and changes in lifestyle, Toyota was able to design and market the new Sienna as a car that responds to both this requirements.

**TARGET GROUPS**

Traditionally the minivan has been a vehicle for families, who looked for a spacious practical car to help them with all the mundane activities of everyday life. Toyota understood that for the young families of the present this was not enough, so they tried a rebound in the minivan’s perception.

Young parents from Generation X and Millennial families are looking for the size and flexibility of the minivan, because they see themselves as proud, active participants in

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17 Generation X, the generation defined as those born after the baby boom ended. The term generally includes people born in the 1960s and 70s, ending in the late 1970s to early 80s, usually not later than 1982.
their children’s lives and they are open to any vehicle that meets their needs. In the same time, they are sensitive to a car that also provides a contemporary sense of style and self-expression.

Besides them, a number of empty-nest Boomers\(^\text{19}\) are taking a second look at the minivan because it fits their changing lifestyle as well. Many remember the advantages of a minivan from when they raised their children and want the same flexibility now, for interacting with their grandkids. Many also like to travel with friends in the comfort and style that only a minivan can provide (cf. Appendix 3: Bob Carter vice president at Toyota Motor Sales USA presents Toyota Sienna 2011).

**CHANNELS**

Besides the official YouTube channel (cf. Section 5.2.), the company created also a microsite (URL: [http://toyotaswaggerwagon.com/](http://toyotaswaggerwagon.com/)), a webpage (URL: [http://www.toyota.com/sienna/](http://www.toyota.com/sienna/)) and a Facebook page (URL: [http://www.facebook.com/#!/sienna](http://www.facebook.com/#!/sienna)). The microsite is not a real webpage, as the name also suggests. Its role is to direct the consumers to the YouTube channel, by presenting the “Swagger Wagon” video in frontline, and to the Facebook community secondarily by inviting people to “Like them on Facebook”. Additionally, it allows consumers to download ringtones for their cell phones and the Mp3 format of the “Swagger Wagon” song. On Toyota US’ website the brand has its own page which familiarizes the consumers with the “coolness” of Sienna through an interesting design that offers many interactive features: 360 degree views of the interior and exterior of the car, a customizable view competition page, and the ability to examine and add customized specifications to the model. This page also links to the YouTube channel. The Facebook page, which seems to be the company’s primary communication channel with its consumers, allows easy access to Toyota’s website for those who wish to build their own Swagger Wagon or to attain more information on the vehicle, and it links to the YouTube channel where consumers can follow the “Mommy like/Daddy like” series – thirty viral videos with the Sienna family unveiling the products’ special features.

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\(^{18}\) Generation Y, also known as the Millennial Generation (or Millennials) has birth dates ranging somewhere from the mid-1970s to the early 2000s.

\(^{19}\) Baby Boom Generation is the generation that was born following World War II, about 1946 up to approximately 1964, a time that was marked by an increase in birth rates.
In November 2010 the campaign was extended to an independent Webisode “Frenemies”, hosted on MSN.com. The series continue Sienna’s family story, focusing on the mother and her personal conflict with a childhood rival which she encounters at their moving in the suburbs (Wong, 2010).

RESULTS

- The YouTube video has registered over 7 million views in eight months (2 million in the first month of the release) and the Sienna channel counts 11 thousand subscribers and 4.5 million viewers since 2005.

- On Autotrader.com, Sienna reached number 5 most-viewed new cars in June 2010; just a month before it was on the 43rd position on the same website and a year before, June 2009, on the 50th position.

- The Facebook page registered almost 30,000 fans in one year, 159 fan pictures were uploaded, and the posts and comments registered on the wall have a relatively high frequency (on average 10 fan posts/week).

- On the networking website Twitter, the Swagger Wagon registered 241 tweets (mentions) among which 11 were influential, despite the company not being present on this channel.

- In December 2010 the “Swagger Wagon” campaign was ranked among the 10 most innovative viral ads of the year, according to the public’s opinion.

It can be argued that the campaign’s success was due to the company’s ability to find the right message and use the right tone when addressing its consumers (Warner, 2010), coupled with a fine understanding of the target’s preference for “bite-sized mobile and Web content” (Wong, 2010).

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20 A webisode is a short episode which airs initially as Internet television, available either through download or streaming, instead of airing first on broadcast or cable television.
21 URL: http://www.youtube.com/user/Sienna
22 Autotrader.com is an online certificated automotive “market”, with the largest selection of vehicles from dealers and private sellers in the USA. URL: http://www.autotrader.com/
24 URL: http://www.facebook.com/#!/sienna?v=wall
5.3. **Analysis of Toyota Sienna’s Virtual Community on Facebook**

Toyota Sienna’s Facebook page represents an attempt of the company to offer its target group, young families, a space of interaction around the brand. In the same time, it represents a good example of Facebook integration in a marketing campaign. This page became a virtual community where fans could socialize and network with each other, discuss family life and related issues, show their own pictures and videos and be in contact with the Sienna Family members. In this way, Toyota puts the basis for online conversations with consumers, even though, as Altimeter Group’s study suggests (cf. Section 3.2.), they also have to improve some of the social features. Toyota declared that the purpose of its page was to be in contact with the customers and learn more about them:

» *Join our community and continue the dialogue. We look forward to getting to know you better* «

Extras from Toyota Sienna’s Facebook mission

To better understand Toyota’s activity on its Facebook page, the analysis will be guided by Altimeter Group’s research, one of the few and most recent studies on the topic. The presentation will follow thus the eight factors identified there and look at how much of this Toyota accomplished.

**Set community expectations.** Toyota sets the expectations for this community, establishes its purpose in getting to know better its customers and encourages fans to contribute to the conversations and share their stories:
Figure 6: Toyota's Facebook mission

Toyota is as committed to quality as it is to its customers. We value your opinions and wouldn't be here without your support. Please join our community and continue the dialogue. We look forward to getting to know you better.

Toyota USA Social Team:
- Quentin Holmes (^QH)
- Heather Lyons (^HL)
- Kasra Fardoost (^KF)
- Scott DeYager (^SD)
- Jackie Chen (^JC)
- Thomas Goldberg (^TG)
- Rob Funk (^RF)

Are you a fan located outside of the United States? Be sure to check out our worldwide websites by visiting http://www.toyota-global.com/select_region/.

It continues with a disclaimer, which establishes clear rules and delimitates the company's position in respect to the fans. Taking into consideration that everyone is free to post on the page and express a point of view, the company takes some safety measures. However, they do not make it clear if posts of the page’s administrators are to be seen as official points of view.

Figure 7: Toyota's Facebook disclaimer

The thoughts and views expressed here are only the thoughts and views of the person who posted them. They are not representative of the opinions of Toyota, nor do we confirm, guarantee or warrant the accuracy, completeness, or usefulness of any post. In an effort to keep this page as family-friendly as the new Sienna, we reserve the right to remove comments that are profane, derogatory or verbally abusive. While we appreciate our fans who like to show off their swagger, please do not participate in any solicitation of any sort.

The company states the purpose of the page, it sets a demarcation between the official opinions and those expressed by other members and it expresses the intention to remove comments that do not respond to the atmosphere of the page. In this way,
Toyota lets its fans know what is expected from them and what can be expected from the company’s part.

**Provide cohesive branding.** Create a holistic experience that matches the brand.

This aspect highlights the importance of integrating the page with other communication and promotion efforts, so that a consistent message is sent and the brand gets strengthen. It can be done by offering complete information to the visitors of the page, and redirecting them to richer sources of information, such as the company’s web site or official YouTube channel. Toyota posts a link to the micro-site created especially for the promotion of the new Sienna.

**Figure 8: Toyota’s profile information**

| Website: [http://www.toyota.com/sienna](http://www.toyota.com/sienna) |
| Company Overview: Toyota Motor Sales, USA, Inc. |
| Features |
| Panorama Camera with integrated backup guides. | Available on XLE and Limited models only. |
| Available Dual-View Entertainment Center (1). | Limited models only. |
| Dual moonroof (2). | Limited models only. |
| Power 60/40 Split & Stow 3rd Row™ seat (2). | Limited models only. |
| Available Dynamic Radar Cruise Control (DRCC) (2). | XLE only, long-slide on Limited only. |
| Tip-up and long-slide second-row seats (3). | Available on XLE, standard on Limited. |
| Available Smart Key System (4). |

Other indicators of a holistic approach to the Facebook page are the branded logos and customized applications or tabs that resonate with the overall campaign and the “family life” theme. Besides adding the brand’s logo Toyota created a customized application for its fans, the “Minivanimal”, that allows them to create avatars for their children.
Very important also is where the new visitors land at their first contact with the brand. In the case of Toyota Sienna it is a customized page that introduces new visitors with the Sienna Family through a video (“Meet the parents”) and links to the YouTube Channel.

Toyota Sienna offers its customers a holistic experience on their page through the choices they made to represent their brand. First of all, it provides technical information about the car with a link to the official website, secondly, they have an optimized profile picture with a banner logo, thirdly, they direct new visitors to their video channel on
YouTube, and lastly they create a customized application, the “Minivanimal” that resonates with the ideas of the minivan and family.

**Be up to date.** New visitors want to know that the brand is present while existing followers need a reason to stay engaged.

Here is relevant whether Toyota Sienna keeps the page up to date by posting frequently and adding fresh content. Moreover, a variety in conversation topics counts as well, as the 80/20 rule suggests: 80% of the content should be informational, educational or entertaining and 20% of the content specific, mentioning the brand/product.

This page is updated regularly (Image 3), at least once a week, and the social media team makes an effort into creating content that is relevant to people’s everyday lives, such as community celebrations or family events (Cooper, 2010).

**Image 3: Captures of a promotional and a non-promotional posts**

Toyota succeeded to maintain the page up to date, posting with an average frequency of once a week. The content includes contests, invitations or incentives for customers to talk about their family as well as about the car. The 80/20 rule is not applied, but the
company manages to provide interesting, fun and relevant updates focusing on the Sienna Family. Posts with communal orientation, aimed to encourage people share their experiences an opinions appear as well, but not too often.

**Live authenticity.** Build trust by personalizing interactions with a “human touch”.

Facebook requires its users to reveal their real identities and stresses out the need of authentic people-to-people connections. Brands are advised to provide the names of the persons behind their Facebook page.

Toyota Sienna allowed the conversations to take a more personal voice, when they revealed the names of page administrators and made that each new post will be signed by the person who wrote it.

An authentic impression was attained by writing in the first person, using a conversational tone, offering information about the page administrators and offering signatures. Moreover, Toyota tries to engage customers by providing the opportunity to directly address questions not only to page administrators, but also to Sienna parents.

**Image 4: Capture of a post where the company enocurages fans to interact with he Sienna Family**

```
Toysa Sienna Hey Fans, are there any questions that you wish you could ask the Sienna Parents? Well, now is your chance! Visit the Sienna YouTube page, and you can ask them almost anything (within reason). All you have to do is just submit your question! http://bit.ly/augjK
```

Toyota demonstrates authenticity by disclosing the names of the persons behind the page, by signing each intervention and using a friendly tone in their communication. In addition, they use also their Sienna Parents characters as interface for consumers-company communication. Consumers are invited to send messages and connect with the Sienna Family directly by addressing questions or submitting videos.
Participate in dialogue. Connect with customers by fostering two-way dialogue

For this, the company should on one side, initiate dialogue and respond to comments, and on the other side, further discussions with back and forth dialogue.

Toyota Sienna encourages people to write on their page, responds to comments, thanks the customers who express their appreciation for the brand and takes the time to address negative posts as well, showing that they are an approachable company. Allowing negative opinions to be expressed and not trying to control what people have to say proved Toyota as an open and honest player in the social media context.

Doug Frisbie explains their “customers first” approach: “We're just trying to provide relevant information, we're not trying to guide it or steer it in one way or another; we're just trying to answer questions our customers may have. Rather than being our side, it's our customer's point of view” (Bush, 2010).

On Toyota Sienna’s Facebook page everyone is allowed to address any complain and to ask questions about the company's activity, as the next post proves.

Image 5: Capture of a fan’s post

- **Chris Foster**: Great... This didn't take long...
  - **Toyota Vehicles**: Toyota 2011 Sienna Voluntary Recall Announcement / Toyota
  - pressroom.toyota.com
  - Toyota Announcement: voluntary recall of certain 2011 Sienna vehicles to replace brake light switch bracket / Toyota
  - 14 December 2010 at 00:48 • Like • Comment • Share

- **Chris Foster**: I still have faith in Toyota and LOVE my Sienna. Much better than the Chrysler, hands down!
  - 14 December 2010 at 00:50 • Like • 1 person • Flag

- **Chad Kunz**: Dodge = crap
  - 14 December 2010 at 12:24 • Like • Flag

- **Dani Ross**: Why didn’t Toyota post this???
  - 14 December 2010 at 14:47 • Like • Flag

- **Toyota Sienna**: Hi all, We’ll do a better job keeping everyone in the loop. Thanks for the feedback. *RF*
  - 15 December 2010 at 23:41 • Like • Flag

- **Alysa Potts**: I work building the sienna and even the employees were informed of this defect. By the way chrysler, volkswagen and honda also had same defect and it is covered. Quality is key in our plant at times they are working on making sure all problems are resolved.
  - 21 December 2010 at 12:10 • Like • Flag

Write a comment...
Listening to what its customers have to say is a core factor of success for Toyota, because it allows the company to learn not only what they (customers) need and desire in a vehicle, but also how the car could match the changes in their lives (cf. Appendix 3: Bob Carter vice president at Toyota Motor Sales USA presents Toyota Sienna 2011).

Image 6: Two captures of Toyota responding to its fans
Toyota succeeds to initiate dialogue with members and it responds to solicitations from customers and rewards them verbally for their contributions on the page. In this way they establish a two way communication and dialogue.

**Enable peer to peer action.** Enable the crowd help.

Besides creating a space for customers to talk to each other, the company could assume an active role of encouraging peer to peer interactions. The Altimeter Group research identified several methods for this: asking fans to respond to each other, showcase fans contributions, recognize top contributors on Facebook wall, developing discussion boards features (like questions and answers).

*Like various other brands from the Altimeter Group’s research, Toyota doesn’t prioritize this aspect. There are no explicit encouragements of peer to peer interactions, no rewarding of the community’s top contributors, no discussion boards and in this way they fail to leverage the crowd’s potential.*

**Foster advocacy.** Empower fans to speak on behalf of the brand.

This aspect is very important as members’ opinions are considered more influencing than those of the company’s representatives who may have a financial interest in doing this. This is acknowledged also by Doug Frisbie: “Look at any sort of research study, and endorsements from friends and family is always one of the primary drivers of purchase, so that’s a huge opportunity area” (Bush, 2010).

The company tries to foster advocacy by encouraging members to share stories from their family lives, in a contest for Toyota fans, for example.

**Image 7: Capture of a post in which the company invites its fans to action**

![Post Invite](image-url)
Furthermore, Toyota encourages fans to be creative and involved, and rewards them with an appearance in their next promotional video. This stimulates their need for social prestige and recognition (cf. Section 4.3.).

Image 8: Capture of a promotional post

The next post is a proof that fans appreciate and identify themselves with the values of the Sienna campaign. People enter the game and enjoy the opportunity to “show off”.

Image 9: Capture of a fan post

Toyota acknowledges the power of friends and family influence over purchasing. Therefore, it creates the context and encourages members to express how they are proud, active participants in their children’s lives and how the car allows them to meet that need next to a contemporary sense of style.

Solicit a call to action.

Calls-to-action are very important to drive more word-of-mouth marketing. It can be done simply by creating posts about an event and ask people to share it, by asking for recommendations, solicitations to make something on the wall (vote for something, sharing video, and photos), through contests or applications.

Toyota solicits many calls to action this being one of the most used methods to get fans to participate, like the following post illustrates.
Call to actions served in order to get input from owners and potential owners of minivans regarding the features, equipment, options or configurations for the new car. Toyota asked people to vote on what they would like to see in the new car.

Toyota very often solicits actions and asks for members’ opinion in subjects related to product design or development. In this way, they empower people, who feel that the company takes their opinions into account. In fact, in the design of the Toyota Sienna Supreme the company considered specifically the ideas voted on the Facebook online community (cf. Appendix 2: Toyota USA Press Release).

All in all, a look at Toyota Sienna’s Facebook page showed a constant²⁷ preoccupation for improving the features of the page. They included the mission of the company and of the community, they revealed the name of the administrators of the page, they intensified the interaction, by responding to fans more often (Bush, 2010). The page allows peer to peer communication.

²⁷ It is referred to the period of the analysis.
peer interactions, direct discussion between the company and its customers and even co-creation of products, thus a possibility to address some of postmodern challenges. The reverse of production and consumption is illustrated when the opinions and direct suggestions of fans contributed to the creation of the Sienna Swagger Wagon Supreme. Toyota utilized its Facebook community as a resource of insight, asking people to vote on various aspects: the name “Swagger Wagon Supreme”, the wheel design for the vehicle as well as the name for the custom Blue color (cf. Appendix 2: Toyota USA Press Release).

Furthermore Toyota ties in a harmonious way the promotion of its new car with topics related to family life, which might be of interest for the community. However, the focus is mainly on utilitarian aspects (providing information to help customers with some of the car related issues). The social status and recognition that a person might get from interacting in such a community (cf. Section 3.3.) are strong motivators for joining and participating. Therefore, Toyota could introduce more actions with the aim of enabling the crowd help.

These being said it is time now to overview the results of the analysis in relation with the theoretical background developed in the first part of the study, in order to see the connection between theory and the practice field.
CHAPTER 6. OUTCOMES AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate the applicability of the theories and concepts discussed before by correlating the results of the case analysis with the theoretical framework. This discussion will allow the thesis to highlight the factors that govern strategic communication in the context of Facebook, while attempting to offer new insights into this matter. The next section will thus answer the question:

*How does Toyota use its Facebook virtual community to reach postmodern consumers?*

In order to do so, the following discussion will be divided in three specific questions, as follows:

6.1. **WHAT WAS THE ROLE OF TOYOTA SIENNA’S FACEBOOK COMMUNITY IN THE OVERALL CAMPAIGN?**

**Delimitation:** The analysis was made from the third party perspective, focusing on the overall development of the campaign. It does not include primary data or feedback from the company’s part nor from the consumer’s side. The results are therefore limited to the authors’ personal observations and interpretations of the public data available online.

Looking at Toyota Sienna’s campaign it can be seen that great visibility at the beginning was driven by the YouTube promotional video “Swagger Wagon” (cf. Section 5.2.). The increased popularity however determined the company to develop in parallel with its YouTube channel a Facebook Page, as a place where fans can freely express their opinions (Frisbie, 2010) and where discussions could come across the Sienna brand lately.

The scope and benefits of building virtual brand communities were highlighted in the fourth chapter of the study (cf. Section 4.3.). For Toyota, the main focus was on continuing the communication with consumers within a virtual community which could better leverage the enthusiasm in regards with the campaign and eventually transfer it towards the brand. As the analysis has shown the company managed to cover most of these conditions (cf. Section 5.3.) and thus it is assumed it managed to build a true online community for its fans.

It is difficult however to precisely show the Facebook Page’s contribution, as the return on investment in social media is hardly measurable. And according to some voices
(Hines, 2010), this should not even constitute the purpose of the companies who chose to communicate in this way, as the online space is meant for transparent and trustful dialogue and relationship building, and not for profit boosting. Toyota’s US social media manager reinforces this idea:

» ROI is certainly important to us in the long run, however we don’t plan to wait to define it before advancing initiatives we know are important. Over time we will definitely evaluate our efforts in order to determine how they are impacting key metrics. […] We certainly want to account for influence in our publishing and outreach efforts, however it’s also important to us provide all of our customers a voice. The DNA of the Toyota brand emphasizes respect for people, so we want to ensure our channels are open to everyone (including our detractors) «

(Frisbie, 2010)

Companies however do have certain strategic benefits from building virtual brand communities, as it was shown previously (cf. Section 4.3.) and Toyota Sienna is not an exception from this. According to the same Toyota official, the company has actually grown its Facebook fan base more than 10% since late January 2010, around the time of the company’s recall announcement (cf. Section 5.1.) which shows that social media, driven by Facebook, has a strong positive impact on the company’s image (Dada, 2010).

Moreover, Toyota Sienna’s Facebook Page had driven higher brand awareness reflected by the overall growth of subscribers on both the Facebook Page and the YouTube channel (on the later the number of subscribers has tripled in the past two months28). In addition, the importance of the Facebook community in Sienna’s integrated campaign is reflected by the credits the company has given to its Facebook fans in product design and development (cf. Appendix 2: Toyota USA Press Release):

» In the creation of the Sienna Swagger Wagon Supreme, Toyota recruited Sienna fans via Facebook to help with the project. Since the start of the build, the Facebook community has been asked to provide input, allowing them to vote on various items for the project. For example, the name “Swagger Wagon Supreme” was chosen by the Facebook community as well as the wheel design for the vehicle, and is currently voting on a name for the custom Blue color «

28 URL: http://vidstatsx.com/v/Sienna
Furthermore, Toyota shows its interest and commitment to the Facebook community responding to its fans’ devotion, with constant status updates upon the Swagger Wagon Supreme evolution at the SEMA Show\(^{29}\) (cf. Appendix 3: Bob Carter vice president at Toyota Motor Sales USA presents Toyota Sienna 2011).

6.2. **To what degree did Toyota Sienna manage to form a community on Facebook?**

**Delimitation:** The assumption is that a well-managed Facebook Page results in a virtual community. Toyota Sienna has proved to be covering most of the management aspects described in the analysis, and hence it is inferred the company's Facebook Page it has the valence of a virtual community.

In order to understand whether Toyota Sienna managed to build a true community on its Facebook page, it is necessary to return to the literature review and see which are the characteristics of a virtual brand community.

In chapter 4 (cf. Section 4.2.) the virtual brand community was described as a group of people characterized by a common interest in a specific brand which, with the help of interactive communication technology, create a parallel social universe (or subculture) that runs its own myths, values, rituals, vocabulary and hierarchy (Mortara, 2007). Moreover, the virtual community’s members were associated with a special kind of consciousness and a collective sense of difference from external others, manifesting shared rituals and traditions and a particular moral responsibility towards the community and to its individual members (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Looking at Toyota Sienna from the perspective of these definitions it can be seen that the following conditions are respected:

- A common interest in a specific brand: Toyota Sienna brand
- The use of interactive communication technology: Facebook and YouTube platforms
- The presence of a particular form of (sub)culture: the Sienna “Swagger” culture, defined by

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\(^{29}\) The SEMA Show is the premier automotive specialty products trade event in the world, where Toyota participated with the new custom-built Sienna Swagger Wagon Supreme.
• Its own myths, values, rituals, vocabulary and hierarchy: the myth of the “cool” suburban family; the presence of parenting values; the valuation of comfort, safety, feasibility, luxury; and the use of a particular “hip-hop” slang language.

A special note remains to be made in regards with the absence of a certain hierarchical structure inside the community. It can be argued, that a vertical ordination of the community members, including the community owner, cannot exist in a space dedicated to free two-ways dialogue. In consequence, the study assumes that the last condition of the present virtual community definition it is inadequate and thus intentionally omitted.

In regards to the community members’ characteristics it is hard to tell whether they hold certain convictions or not (consciousness of kind, moral responsibility towards others, etc.) from only the observation of their postings. A further investigation on the users’ perception of the community would be necessary in order to clarify this aspect, as this was not the specific purpose of the current study.

From the current analysis it can be stated that from the company’s part clear efforts have been made in order to stimulate community creation (cf. Section 5.3.): fans are allowed to communicate and interact with each other on the Sienna Facebook Page, with the discussion remaining within the limits of the brand topic; the company has constantly improved its online behavior, posting and interacting more often with the users, and making its profile more transparent to the public; the community members were also empowered and stimulated to participate in brand meaning creation and product development.

The weak point of Toyota’s Facebook strategy remains the limited peer-to-peer interaction. As highlighted in the analysis (cf. Section 5.3.), the company should assume a more active role in encouraging dialogue between community members.

From the declaration “Join our community and continue the dialogue. We look forward to getting to know you better” (cf. Section 5.3.) it can be inferred that the company does take responsibility for developing dialogue inside the community, at least at a declarative level. It lacks however a materialization of this declaration through clear actions like directly asking fans to respond to each other, or highlighting the fans’ individual contributions to the community dialogue. Also, recognizing the merits of the “top contributors” on the Facebook wall, and creating a discussion board to allow free dialogue flow, can contribute to the improvement of consumer to consumer communication (cf. Section 5.3.).
6.3. **How did this communication campaign centered on the Facebook community manage to reach the postmodern consumers?**

**Delimitation:** to cover this aspect of the discussion, the study will apply Venkatesh and Firdat’s (1995) model (cf. Section 1.2.) on the Toyota Sienna case in order to understand whether the company’s Facebook communication respects the preliminary conditions of postmodernity.

**Hyperreality**, the first condition identified by the two authors, refers to the creation of environments that are ‘more real than real’, such as the virtual worlds in cyberspace, or the pseudo worlds of theme parks, hotels and heritage centers (Brown, 2003).

The Sienna brand is promoted as a fictive story built around the Sienna family: “a very classic half corny couple that has some high thoughts about themselves as being the coolest parents in the world” (Social media marketing case study: Toyota’s “Sienna Family”, 2010). The brand story begins on the YouTube channel with the Swagger Wagon video, and the mini-series "Mommy like/Daddy like" but it continues in the Facebook community (a virtual world by definition), where the company addresses itself through the voice of the fictive Sienna characters.

The hyperreal element is thus highly present in Toyota’s Facebook communication, through both the employment of channels and tools that enable the construction of virtual spaces (Facebook Page and its applications) and the projection of the minivan as a symbol of the contemporary (family) values.

**Fragmentation** refers to the disjoined, multiple consumption experiences. These can be assured through a personalized product design, or through the enhancement of unique customer experiences.

On Facebook Toyota tries to ensure diverse consumer experiences through the use of games, applications, and other entertainment tools (cf. Section 5.3.) included in the platform’s design. It also encourages consumer-company dialogue (cf. Section 5.3.) which has the role to improve the quality of customers’ brand perception. These techniques can be considered a way to personalize each fan’s interaction with the brand.
More could be done perhaps by organizing direct trials or driving tests in which the consumer can experience the product directly.

Limited to the online community however, this analysis comprises only the company’s actions in the Facebook space which, as reflected in the analysis, responds in a certain degree to its fans’ need for authenticity and interaction through the employment of diverse rhetoric techniques: “like this post if..”; “help us choose the car’s new wheel design”, etc. (cf. Section 5.3.).

**Reversal of production and consumption**, the third condition of postmodernity, is about consumers becoming active producers of symbols and signs of consumption, just like the marketers.

In this respect it can be argued that Toyota has done significant effort. Using the Facebook applications, the company creates regularly polls and quizzes which allow consumers to express their opinion and generate new ideas for product development. Moreover, consumers were stimulated to get involved in the creation of brand meaning by revealing what “swagger” means to them in a personal video for Sienna 2011 (cf. Section 5.3.). These techniques enhance the consumer empowerment which sees the added value of his participation in the Facebook community.

Encouraging consumer involvement in the creation of new brand significations and custom-built design elements, the company reaches two strategic goals: it benefits in terms of consumer insight and product design (cf. Section 4.3.) and it stimulates customer loyalty triggered by the opportunity of self-expression (cf. Section 4.1.).

**Decentered subject** refers to the individuals’ historical and cultural belonging. It is claimed that identity is formed through language, and not through cognition. This implies that the company should be able to mold the consumers’ identity through language and/or through the promotion of a particular (sub-)culture.

Along the entire campaign Toyota Sienna employs a unified language with a noticeable particularity – the use of rap music clichés. The pseudo-name of the brand itself is taken from the hip-hop urban slang: swagger refers to one’s personal style, the way one presents himself through walk or talk, while “wagon” in the urban slang suggests a massive posterior (Jackson, 2005).

It can be argued thus that Toyota intends to change the minivans’ perception through the use of language games and project this image further to its customers. Sienna develops
a particular language code adopting the hip-hop clichés and consumers support this game, responding in a similar manner in their posts on Facebook. Hence the fourth condition of postmodernity is reflected in the company’s Facebook activity.

Finally, the last condition identified by Firat and Vekantesh is juxtaposition of the opposites, which says that consumption experiences are not meant to reconcile differences and paradoxes but to allow them to co-exist freely.

Toyota has come to the realization, that what used to constitute the minivan’s image problems might as well be something on which they could capitalize. The problem with minivans was that they are “a vehicle for parents”, “the official vehicle of the suburbs” meant for families to “transport children to their playdates” (Guy, 2010). Instead of denying these product values, Toyota speculated exactly the minivans’ intrinsic nature in a daring and innovative manner, and encouraged its fans to freely express the contrasting sides of their personality. This aspect is very well reflected through the Sienna Swagger Wagon lyrics (cf. Appendix 4: Sienna Swagger Wagon Lyrics).

To summarize, Toyota Sienna’s Facebook page have contributed positively to the overall appreciation of the brand, as it is stated by the Toyota officials (cf. Section 6.1.) and reflected by the Facebook graphics (cf. Appendix 5: Facebook statistics) which show constant growth of the community fan base. In addition, the Facebook community attained a strategic importance for Toyota, who uses it as a source of consumer and market insight as well as new ideas for product improvement (cf. Section 5.3.).

The Facebook Page’s structure and Toyota’s management efforts sustain the idea of a virtual community (cf. Section 6.2.) where fans are gathered around a brand, share common norms and values and mutually support the new symbolism of the minivan, i.e. “functional but cool”.

Finally, it was shown that Toyota Sienna respects the postmodern conditions through its communication campaign. The brand story constructs a hyperreal context, a sort of mirrored world of their fans’ life-stories, it encourages fragmented consumption experiences enabling direct connections between Sienna family members and consumers, it employs a certain degree of co-production in the development of product features and brand meaning, it encourages a reconstruction of the self-identity through the promotion of a particular lifestyle and it proposes an interesting knitting of contradictory values such as family care and hip-hop coolness.
6.4. **THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FACEBOOK VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES AND POSTMODERNISM**

The final part of the discussion will provide the arguments necessary to answer the problem statement of the thesis, highlighting the theoretical connection between postmodernism, virtual brand communities and the social networking site Facebook.

### 6.4.1. **VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES: THE CONNECTION BETWEEN POSTMODERN INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS**

It was pointed in the first chapter that postmodern consumers have become highly skeptic towards authority and strongly reject the idea of a unique universal truth. Instead, they accept (and crave for) a multiplicity of realities, each of them created according to the social, historical and cultural context of the moment (Section 1.2.).

Unlike in modernism, Venkatesh and Firat (1995) proposed viewing the consumer as a communicative, symbolic being instead of a cognitive agent. This idea derives from the observations regarding consumers’ interest in the intangible benefits of the purchasing process. The authors claim that the postmodern consumer should be seen as an active member of a community, whose buying decision is correlated with the culture to which (s)he belongs. Following this line, Vekantesh and Firat (1995) suggested five characteristics of the postmodern consumer (cf. Section 2.2.).

First of all, they claim that consumers are **creators of meaning**, regardless of the producers’ intentions. In the era in which individuals **define themselves through consumption**, the act of participating into the product design and development is key for understanding their purchasing motivations. There is no longer possible the categorization through old methods of segmentation, as postmodern consumers hold a **fragmented representation of their own selves**; they perceive themselves as individuals with multiple roles at different moments and in different contexts. This links to the next characteristic according to which consumers form their **identity through communication and social interaction**, having the possibility to **choose from an unlimited range of identities**. Put all together, these ideas picture a strong individual
liberated from the institutional control and the linear logic of the economic system, who can decide for himself who to be and how to relate to a company or a brand.

This changed perception of the marketing field and of the consumers’ role in general, is directly connected to the epistemological and ontological assumptions of the postmodern philosophy (cf. Section 1.2.). As said, the postmodern condition has to do with ideas and subjectivity, how individuals think and signify. The rejection of authority and the belief in meta-narratives indicate that companies need to open up and change their business model, from one dominated by the idea of “control” to one more involving, engaging, and interactive, in which consumers communicate and create together with companies the products and services that suit them best (cf. Section 2.1.). That because, to postmoderns, there is no “objectively” discernible material reality, no universal truth and no certainty. All social structures are self-reflexive and hence are built through language (communication) and interaction (cf. Section 1.1.).

These philosophical ideas are very well reflected by the realities of the 21st century, as it was shown also in the analysis of the illustrative case. Several fields of practice have been affected by the socio-cultural restructuring; among these, the changes in the mass communication channels, the changes in the marketing field and consumption behavior and consequently the changes in the business communication practice are relevant for the current study.

**A CRISIS IN MASS-MEDIA**

Postmodernity, is the condition of coping without the absolute common denominators of modernity, especially without the idea of a neutral and homogeneous time and space (cf. Section 1.1.). This understanding of the world has impacted on the perception of the communication system and especially on the utility and efficiency of the mass-communication channels. Transformed into “information” due to the technological developments of postmodernity (especially the rise of the Internet access worldwide), knowledge became easily accessible and maneuvered by anyone (cf. Section 1.2.). In this context, the authority of the traditional communication channels (TV, radio, press) begins to decline, as their capacity of reaching clusters of target consumers declines too.

In a “society of generalized communication” (cf. Section 2.2.) Baudrillard (1981) talks about the consumption of images and spectacle as characteristic for individuals’ behavior. Vattimo (1992) completes this idea saying that “the new technologies of information and communication permit spectacularizations that have not been possible
before (cf. Section 2.2.). Postmodern consumers’ need for unique experiences and added value is reflected in the rise of new (interactive) communication technologies. As the illustrative case has shown too, traditional channels of communication are not sufficient to reach target consumers. A good control of the alternative communication channels (social networking sites) has to supplement old marketing strategies, to ensure a good consumer interaction. This state of facts was largely signalized by marketing practitioner Stephen Brown, who argued for a restructuring of the marketing field.

A CRISIS IN MARKETING

The consumers have changed dramatically. The certainties, uniformities and unambiguities of the modern era have been replaced by the individualities, instabilities and fluidities of the postmodern epoch (cf. Section 1.2.). The utilitarian and rational aspects cannot explain consumption anymore and the idea that “the link is more important than the thing” gains more ground every day. New consumer studies have showed that the act of consumption is not important in itself, but rather is seen as a part of individuals’ relationship with others (cf. Section 2.4.).

In this context, Brown (2003) argues that the marketing field finds itself in a severe crisis of all aspects: from theoretical inadequacy to practical inaccuracy and methodological invalidity (cf. Section 1.2.). Postmodernity has opened way to new research methods, and new fields of investigation unknown or ignored before, bringing into light the rise of new consumer communication channels created in the hyperreal, interactive medium of the Web.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS THE SOLUTION TO BOTH CRISES

In this new view over society as a network of interconnected people, the business world realized the need for reassessing its economic activity not as an independent activity, but as one embedded in the social context. The purpose of products and services needs to be extended from only instrumental to social as well. Collaboration with stakeholders (consumers especially) needs to be the key driving principle in the new economy. At the base of open collaboration stays the principle of giving up control, if companies want to engage people in their full autonomy and creativity (cf. Section 2.1.).

One special consequence of this paradigmatic change is the appearance of a particular form of online communication, the communities of fans (usually called brand communities). The virtual brand communities combined people’s need for social interaction with their love for technology and the reconstruction of reality and self-identity.
Their non-intrusive structure, their non-geographical and timeless nature, high visually, flat hierarchy and increased freedom of expression transformed them into both a favorite place for interaction between consumers and a great (but challenging) opportunity for companies.

For businesses who want to build strong brands and have a successful communication with their consumers, it is important to acknowledge that consumption is a social act and a cultural event too and that its developments have moved in the online world of the social networking sites. Therefore, products and services should serve a communicative function as well, by integrating consumers in certain groups, instantaneously differentiating them from others. This is perhaps the most challenging characteristic of the postmodern consumers: a contradictory need for both group belonging and individual differentiation.

In this process, of great help is the social networking site Facebook. The study highlighted this idea through both theoretical and practical discussions along its chapters. It will now retake this argument in order to underline the arguments for integrating Facebook in the business strategy.

6.4.2. FACEBOOK – A TOOL FOR BUILDING STRONGER AND BETTER VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

This thesis have explained so far how virtual brand communities, as important contributors to the brand’s larger social construction (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001) influence the image and reputation of a company. In addition, virtual communities have been depicted as spaces re-building the connection between companies and postmodern consumers, in a context of mass media diminishing influence. In this section, the focus will be on how to build stronger more efficient virtual communities.

In her study about virtual communities, De Valck (2009) differentiates between “traditional” virtual communities of consumption (consisting in databases, forums, chat rooms) and more recently originated forms of communities like blogs, wiki’s and social networks as Facebook. With rapid developments in online communication network technology it was relevant for this thesis to address the topic of building a virtual community with Facebook.

The reasons for this choice are represented by the next facts:
- Facebook is the most powerful platform on the Internet, being the second most visited website on the Web (cf. Section 3.2.);
- Facebook started a phenomenon, which is socializing Internet “connecting more than half a billion people and mapping the social relations among them” and “creating a new system of exchanging information and changing how we live our lives” (cf. Section 3.1.);
- Facebook offers businesses a complete tool kit to create and grow virtual communities on its pages (cf. Section 3.2.);
- Few companies can compete with Facebook in attracting people towards their separate virtual communities, as the SNS is already part of many people’s daily life on social media.

The last idea can be illustrated with the recent social media project of Aarhus School of Business. ASByou was a social media networking platform, which was developed for students to communicate with each other about their personal matters and other aspects related to student life. ASByou faced a tough competition from Facebook, which eventually determined its closing, in November 2009. The school explained this situation by their inability to make students move their daily social life from Facebook to ASByou (Garnyte & de Ávila Pérez, 2009). This case proves once again that Facebook can be a very strong rival to independent virtual communities.

A strategic communication solution, one that would address both the increasing importance of virtual communities on consumers’ behavior and the migration of people towards social network site Facebook, would be to tie these two elements together. Facebook virtual communities will differ from other types of virtual communities. The interactive communication technology that is used by people with a common interest to create a parallel social universe with its own myths, values, rituals, and vocabulary (cf. Section 4.2.) has a specificity of its own, and choosing Facebook over others will both impact and limit the variety of topics that can be addressed. Virtual communities created on Facebook should integrate in the logic of this platform, because people have particular expectations and previous experiences with it.

From the realm of social media, Facebook occupied a specific segment that gives its advantages and disadvantages. It has a “mind set” of connection, is suited especially for entertainment, lifestyle brands, has a primary demographic of 25 to 45 years (cf. Section 3.2.) It is primarily used to reanimate/maintain existing social ties and its real life scrutiny
of members' consumption practices might have a more significant effect on need recognition, actual behavior, and post-purchase evaluations (De Valck, Van Bruggen, & Wierenga, 2009). The authentic experience of Facebook, as many people provide real data about themselves and their connections, makes it even more influential.

The potential of integrating Facebook in the real life and the real life in Facebook was proved by a Coca Cola event in summer 2010 (Fitzsimmons, 2010). “The like machine” project found a way to bring virtual and physical world together through an innovative method of sharing with Facebook friends events and experiences from reality. Teenagers attending Coca Cola Village were offered some bracelets, so that after logging in on their Facebook profiles, they could “like” various attractions from the park and be tagged in photos taken by the park photographers.

Another similar feature called “Places”, with location-based functionality has been recently developed by Facebook. The application functions with any kind of smartphone and it allows the user to share with others his location, to check who else is nearby his location and most interesting, it allows the user to get certain discounts and offers in different public places by simply “checking in” from his phone via Facebook. This implies a previous agreement between Facebook Places and the respective business unit who makes the discount or offer.

As it can be seen, Facebook offers already many possibilities to connect businesses with their consumers and is currently developing more features to enable connections between the virtual and real contexts of consumption.

In order to systematize the information on Facebook and understand its usefulness in building virtual communities, the discussion will further focus on the strengths and weaknesses of using Facebook. This will serve to understand the advantages as well as the limitations or pitfalls of this approach.

If a virtual community needs a shared interest or passion and an interactive communication technology to exist and thrive, Facebook can be utilized to create and grow one. The most common mistake when building a community with Facebook is using it for advertising instead of communication (Li & Bernoff, 2008).

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30 A smartphone is a mobile phone with several special features like: an operating system that allows it to run interactive applications, a complex software that enables advanced features like f.e. documents editing, better internet access at higher speed, and a QWERTY Keyboard, which means the keyboard is identical to that of a computer. URL: http://cellphones.about.com/od/smartphonebasics/a/what_is_smart.htm
31 URL: http://www.facebook.com/places/
The fact that communication should weigh more than advertising on this web site is suggested by the scope for which it was created. Facebook is a place where people can connect and communicate with their friends, entertain themselves uploading and sharing pictures and videos, join groups of joint interest, and so on (cf. Section 3.1.). Even with this clarification, some companies, like Toyota (cf. Section 5.3.) place more importance on advertising and instrumental messages than on communal massages and group conversations.

Among the main advantages brought up by Facebook can be mentioned that it provides companies with a possibility to join the conversation with 500 million people all around the globe, at no cost, on a website which is already integrated with the rest of the Internet (socializing the Web meant that most of the sites have introduced a “like” or “share with friends” box that links with Facebook). Pages, on which companies gather friends on a voluntary subscription, give their administrator the possibility of targeting and planning in a scientifically way their community. The “page insights” button plus other Facebook applications (Social Graph, Touch Graph, etc.) offer companies demographical information about their community members (location, age, sex, education, workplace, gender interest, language and relationship status as well as personal interests) and the possibility to access the social network structure of their community. This would allow very fine and precise targeting by drawing out keywords from a person’s biographical information and the creation of a real time, dynamic map of the fans’ connections (e.g., friend relationships, shared content, and photo tags) (cf. Section 4.3.).

In what regards the weak points, it can be mentioned the fact that using Facebook to create virtual communities means also being in somebody else’s field and playing by their rules. If Facebook is focused on friendly, entertaining conversations, the content created on a page should take this into account. The value of each post will be judged by its ability to bring new, funny, relevant data in the community, which people would like to share with friends. Besides, such a community requires a level of involvement and resources (time, people), which in time can build relationships and trust, that will eventually impact the ROI (cf. Section 6.1.).

The following table summarizes the main “pro and contra” arguments for the proposal of using Facebook to build and grow a virtual community:
Table 1: Arguments for and against using Facebook for community building

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facebook</th>
<th>Pro arguments</th>
<th>Contra arguments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cheaper than a virtual community on a new build platform.</td>
<td>It is a long term investment.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>It is embedded already with other websites and other social media</td>
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<tr>
<td>channels (many have a like or share box for Facebook).</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Companies have access to a large pool of people (over 500 million).</td>
<td>New engaging content is required.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 % of people log in every day.</td>
<td>In order to add value in people’s social life, the company needs to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>restrict conversations to its specific.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s more intrusive than the company’s website (the message appears on</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the person wall).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pages offer the possibility to integrate all forms of online communication (videos, chat, e-mails, forums, discussion boards).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pages are indexed in the entire search engine.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting with a company on Facebook is done through a voluntary</td>
<td>CRYPTOGRAPHY, ISO/IEC 22480-3, 2010</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>subscription.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The administrator of the page has access to demographical information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and feedback over the rate of interaction from the page.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The possibility to see the social network structure of the page.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can be used to leverage offline activity (Coca Cola case).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PART CONCLUSIONS

This chapter made the connection between postmodernism, virtual communities and Facebook, putting all the parts together in order to address a present communication challenge. Virtual communities were depicted as possible solutions to a demanding postmodern consumer, who increasingly rejects traditional marketing and mass media proposals, but still enjoys consuming and bonding with others. In a less controllable, hectic online environment, companies should make the effort of reconnecting with their consumers on virtual communities. Even with the consumer more in control and acting as influencer in the group, there are methods of directing the conversation in a manner that is consistent with the organization’s mission and goals. Many of the tools for doing this are offered by Facebook, which allows companies to join the online conversations armed with meaningful insights on the social structure of the community. Being the largest platform for socializing in the world makes it even more appealing for the project of building a virtual community.
CONCLUSIONS

Preliminary investigations highlighted there was significant literature on the role of social media and in particular of the virtual communities for the companies’ strategic communication. This high interest in the topic is given by the social, cultural and technological realities of the postmodern times.

In the 21st century, people make use of interactive communication technology not only to communicate with one another but to communicate with and about companies. As such, more and more businesses started to think about building virtual communities, hoping to reach the postmodern consumer more efficiently and gain concrete benefits (cf. Section 4.1.).

The problem is that companies, willing to attain immediate benefits, forget to look at what their consumers want. How, why, when, where and which social media they use, it is very important to understand for being able to create effective consumer dialogue.

It was noted that individuals today have a preference for social networking sites like Facebook (cf. Section 3.1.?). Increasingly, virtual communities have extended all over the Web, and Facebook is home to many of them in the form of Facebook Pages. The dominance of this web site, which includes the biggest number of people, is determinant also in companies’ decisions to build a vibrant virtual community. This comes from the basic rule of “being where the customers are”. That is why,

it was assumed thus that business-to-consumers companies like Toyota, should seriously focus on understanding this SNS' logic and the way consumers make use of it in their daily life, as it could represent a great opportunity for the company’s success in communicating with consumers. Therefore the focus of the thesis' investigation was on

**How and why should a business-to-consumer company utilize Facebook to create and grow a virtual brand community?**

The argument for this problem statement was given by the observations made prior to the thesis writing, which were formulated in three theoretical assumptions, each of them corresponding to a research question, as follows:

**Assumption 1:** Postmodern consumers changed their consumption behaviour; they see now consumption as an expressive and social act and in consequence they use products and brands to express themselves.
Starting from the presumption that understanding is not about finding one universal truth, the study looks at postmodern consumers and how things become meaningful to them, how they perceive the world and how they use brands, goods and services to tell stories about themselves. Therefore the first research question asked,

**RQ1**: What defines the postmodern consumer and what drives his consumption behaviour?

To answer this question a theoretical analysis of postmodern influences on economy, on marketing and on communication (cf. Section 1.1. and 1.2.) was conducted. Further the matter of the social meaning of consumption for the postmodern consumers and the related emergence of e-communities on the web (cf. Section 2.1.-2.5.) was approached, among which the social networking site Facebook was considered most relevant. In this context, the second assumption of the thesis was formulated:

**Assumption 2**: Shared interests drive consumers to join virtual communities in the social media (with or without the support of corporations) where they influence each other and express their power in relation to the companies. Among these, the most influential and attractive channel at the moment is Facebook.

This thesis focused in particular on Facebook to gain in-depth knowledge about its opportunities and limitations, both through theoretical investigations and through the illustrative case. The aim was to understand,

**RQ2**: What does Facebook offer to companies in terms of online communication with consumers?

The second question found its answer along the 3rd and 4th chapter, where different academic texts and scientific investigations, as well as a series of non-conventional texts and studies such as e-books, podcasts and audio registrations were used. The topic of Facebook remains very poorly represented in the specialized literature, despite its large spread through the population, and thus a major work was necessary to systematize the knowledge in a coherent theoretical discussion. The argument is that such an activity was necessary as,

**Assumption 3**: Many companies involved with Facebook do not make proper use of its potential to stimulate consumer dialogue and interaction and this makes them lose visibility and credibility in the long run.
The last step in responding the problem statement was to explore the literature on virtual brand communities and on Facebook and connect them all with the case of Toyota Sienna in order to attain sufficient information on this topic. Based on the postmodern interpretation of consumers and the expansion of online communication, Facebook virtual brand communities are assumed to be a strategic solution for the communication in this hectic and unpredictable environment. It was thus important to understand,

**RQ3:** *What is the relevance of virtual brand communities in the context of online communication and how does Facebook fit into this?*

The first theoretical discussion indicated that virtual communities are generators of word of mouth and consumer advocacy, both extremely valuable in the context of today’s communication and marketing activities. As this thesis showed, the value of virtual communities expanded to include product development, customer relationship management or online research (cf. Sections 4.1. and 4.3.).

Moreover, the theory collected highlighted the fact that Facebook supports the management of virtual communities, providing the social context for consumer dialogue and the strategic and technical tools to make this process more efficient (cf. Section 4.2.). As such, the thesis argued that a certain importance in the creation and management of virtual brand communities has to be credited to Facebook, as this is a channel preferred by most postmodern consumers these days.

The magnitude to which it has expanded, the possibility to have an ongoing real time dialogue with consumers, its possibility to integrate with other channels (YouTube, Twitter, Blogs) along with the possibility to leverage real world events, makes Facebook a platform that not only addresses all possible needs of postmodern consumers, but allows the creation and extension of vibrant virtual brand communities.
APPENDIX 1: TOYOTA’S TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

Toyota’s manufacturing investments form 1990 until present (Toyota in the World, 2010).

- Technology related to environmental measures:
  - **Driving/braking suspension**: from Active Four-Wheel Steering System, to Electric 4-Wheel Driving System.
  - **Body**: from Bumper made with Toyota super olefin polymer to Bumper Recycling Technology.
  - **Electronics**: from combustion pressure sensor to eco-driver motor and solar ventilation system.
  - **Materials**: From air-conditioner with new refrigerant, to Toyota Eco-Plastic, and finally to package tray and door trim made out of the Kenaf plant and anti-mite allergen seat plastic.

- Technology related to safety measures:
  - **Driving/braking suspension**: from active Four-Wheel Steering System to Electronically Controlled Braking System and to Pre-Crash Safety system with driver monitoring, pedestrian detection, steering and obstacle-avoidance system included.
  - **Body**: from front-passenger seat airbag, to seatbealts with force-limiter, and to pedestrian-injury-lessening body.
  - **Electronic**: tire pressure Warning System, to Night View System and to Night View System with pedestrian detention function.
Capitalizing on the success of the all-new 2011 Sienna SE and the popularity of the YouTube Swagger Wagon video that has attracted over seven million views, Toyota wanted to further re-examine the role of the minivan and push even harder against the traditional boundaries of the minivan identity. So, together with B.A.D. Company, Toyota has created the Sienna Swagger Wagon Supreme for the 2010 SEMA Show. Even Sienna’s online community of fans was engaged in providing suggestions and making decisions for this special build.

The creation of the Swagger Wagon Supreme began with a 2011 Toyota Sienna SE V6 with interior attributes from a Sienna XLE. This special van was stretched and modified to create a functional family vehicle that firmly dismisses the notion that to drive a minivan is to sacrifice personal style in favor of family functionality. The Sienna Swagger Wagon Supreme dutifully demonstrates the meaning of the 2011 Sienna slogan, “always for kids, now for parents too”.

B.A.D. Company started the project by stretching the Sienna by nearly four feet (44 inches) and expanding the wheelbase to lengthen the interior cabin space and add more “swagger” on the outside. A custom acrylic roof replacement approximately eight feet long was installed to help bring in natural light and create a warm and stylish environment. An airbag suspension system was installed allowing ground clearance to range from 2.5 to 6.5 inches, maximizing curb appeal and providing appropriate ground clearance for day-to-day driving. The sporty SE theme was amplified with the installation of 20-inch chrome wheels designed by KMC around Nitto 255/40R20 tires in the rear and 245/45R20 tires in the front. Final exterior applications include a custom fabricated rear spoiler, shaved door handles on the automatic sliding doors, custom chrome exhaust
tips, and a multiple-step exterior paint process employed by using a custom Blue Swagger Opal color applied over a pearlescent base.

The interior of the Sienna Swagger Wagon Supreme was designed to provide functional versatility with two distinct environments: the quintessential experience for parents out for a fun evening or event without the kids; and all the utility of a traditional van with functional and aesthetic features for the entire family.

Among the modifications are functioning power windows on the stretched section of the vehicle allowing easy access to accessories in the passenger area. The custom seats feature reversible cushions for multiple tastes. On one side the cushions feature single-color leather for an upscale, adult look. Flip the cushion and you will find bright upholstered colors that appeal to the kids. The passenger area includes two swiveling captain’s chairs. One captain’s chair is also a “Spa Seat” equipped with a multi-function, programmable massage unit. A hideaway table can be folded out in between the captain’s chairs sitting area.

Complementing the seating area is custom cabinetry for added storage finished in cherry veneer with an integrated glass-front refrigerator and DuPont Corian countertop that can have multiple uses such as food and drink prep, a kid’s activity area, a mobile office, etc. The floor was lowered, leveled and finished in Brazilian cherry hardwood to provide a cozy environment for the family as well as for mom and dad.

Entertainment is in abundance inside and out. In addition to the many technological features found in the stock Sienna, the Swagger Wagon adds a 23-inch HP TouchSmart computer featuring multi-touch support in Windows 7, mounted on a custom bracket to allow for multiple viewing positions both inside and outside the vehicle; an Xbox 360 gaming system with DVD player; and a custom JBL audio system specifically designed and tuned by JBL sound engineers to provide a home theater atmosphere. The JBL system consists of the Toyota Original Equipment head unit through a JBL MS8 signal processor. It has 10 JBL GTO 428 speakers (eight in the main cabin and two more in the rear hatch), two JBL GTO 804 sub-woofers, and four amplifiers with 1700 watts of power.

In addition to the many aftermarket suppliers that contributed to the creation of the Sienna Swagger Wagon Supreme, Toyota also recruited Sienna fans via Facebook to
help with the project. Since the start of the build, the Facebook community has been asked to provide input, allowing them to vote on various items for the project. For example, the name “Swagger Wagon Supreme” was chosen by the Facebook community as well as the wheel design for the vehicle, and is currently voting on a name for the custom Blue color. Toyota will continue to provide frequent Facebook updates about the Swagger Wagon Supreme throughout the SEMA Show.

After SEMA, the Sienna Swagger Wagon Supreme can also be seen at upcoming major auto shows including Los Angeles, Detroit and Chicago.

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**Sienna Swagger Wagon Supreme Features**

- Base Vehicle: 2011MY Sienna SE & 2011MY Sienna XLE

**Mechanical**
- Performance: 3.5L V6 with 6-Speed Automatic Transmission
- Mechanical Modifications: Body extension of nearly 4 feet (44”)
- Airbag suspension system: ground clearance range from 2.5 to 6.5-inches
- 20-inch chrome wheels designed by KMC
- Nitto 255/40R20 tires in the rear and 245/45R20 in the front
- Functioning power windows on stretched section of vehicle

**Exterior**
- Custom fabricated rear spoiler
- Multiple-step exterior paint process
- Shaved door handles on automatic sliding doors
- Custom acrylic roof replacement (approximately eight-feet long)
- Custom chrome exhaust tips

**Interior & Audio**
- Custom seating with reversible cushions
- Two swiveling captain’s chairs in passenger area
- “Spa Seat” equipped with a multi-function, programmable massage unit
A Case of Strategic Online Communication in Postmodernism: Using Facebook to Create Virtual Brand Communities

Corina Diana Iamandi & Petronela Postolache
February 2010

- Foldable hide-away table in sitting area
- Custom cabinetry with a cherry veneer finish and DuPont countertop
- Glass-front refrigerator
- Lowered and leveled floor finished in Brazilian cherry hardwood
- 23”-inch HP TouchSmart computer mounted on a custom bracket allowing multiple viewing positions both inside and outside the vehicle
- Xbox gaming system with DVD player
- Custom JBL surround sound audio system
  - Toyota Original Equipment head unit through a JBL MS8 signal processor
  - Eight JBL GTO 428 speakers in the main cabin
  - Two GTO 428 speakers in the rear hatch
  - Two JBL GTO 804 sub-woofers
  - Four amplifiers totaling 1700 watts of power

Released November 1st 2010 by Toyota USA Pressroom

Bob Carter: Good morning everyone and thanks for joining us today.

It has been a difficult year and an half for consumers and the industry… but we’re starting to see signs of a slow recovery.

After a long stretch of recessionary sales resul, November provided some positive news for Toyota and the rest of the industry. For the mon, industry sales rate hit 10.9 million, compared to 10.4 last year.

November was the second month of the year that industry sales exceeded last year’s pace…and it was the first month this year sales were up without any direct automotive stimulus like Cash for Clunkers. Sales for Toyota were up nearly 10 percent from 2008.

Toyota’s success has always come from listening to our customers, learning not only what they need and desire in a vehicle, but how it matches the changes in their busy lives. Today, a number of young families are looking not only for capability but also features and style that help them enjoy time together. It’s these young families that are beginning to see the advantages of a minivan.

While the minivan market has been losing share and other manufacturers have been leaving the segment we seen an opportunity:

For example there are 12.6 million minivan units currently in operation and for many of these owners a minivan is the only vehicle that meets all their needs.

With the line starting to blur between minivans and crossovers we believe the minivan is poised for a rebound and young families will be leading the way.
Sienna is a life-stage vehicle and new Gen X and Millennial families are looking for a vehicle with the size and flexibility they need and the value they want. They also see themselves as proud, active participants in their children’s lives and they are open to any vehicle that meets their needs but also provides a contemporary sense of style and self-expression.

A number of empty-nest Boomers are taking a second look at the minivan because it fits their changing lifestyle as well. Many remember the advantages of a minivan when they raised their children and now want the same flexibility for interacting with their grand kids. They also like to travel with friends in comfort and style that only a minivan can provide.

The all-new Sienna is an example of Toyota’s commitment to lead the marketplace as it anticipates consumers’ needs and changes in lifestyle. The 3rd generation Sienna combines a contemporary style with features not previously seen in a minivan and a fun-to-drive spirit that will surprise many, along with the flexibility, spaciousness and features that have defined the segment.

Ladies and gentlemen…it’s my pleasure to present the world debut of the third-generation 2011 Sienna.

(REVEAL)

In developing the new Sienna we talked to thousands of minivan owners and potential owners. We asked them what features, equipment, options, and configurations appealed to them most.

I’m happy to say that the new Sienna is the direct result of talking to these consumers. Sienna will be available in five different grades, two engine choices, seven- or eight-passenger seating, front- or all-wheel drive and a great mix of standard and optional features.

Even though the new Sienna has a wide array of choices, packaging and model-complexity have been reduced by 80 percent from the previous generation, more than any other vehicle we’ve ever redesigned. The simplicity will be appreciated by buyers who research extensively and come into a dealership knowing what they want.
The new Sienna was designed by Calty here in Southern California. It was completely engineered and developed at Toyota Technical Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and it will roll off the lines at our manufacturing facility in Princeton, Indiana.

Now, I’d like to take a moment to introduce the people responsible for making Sienna the most American minivan of all:

Sienna Chief Engineer Mori.
Kevin Hunter, the President of Calty.

Joining us from Toyota Motor Manufacturing in Princeton, Indiana – where the all-new Sienna will be built – President Kaz Oi and Senior Vice President Wil James.

Sienna has been built exclusively in the U.S. since it was introduced in 1998, first in Kentucky and moving to Indiana in 2003. The third-generation Sienna was influenced by the Calty-designed F3R concept vehicle we showed in 2006. Aimed at young buyers, it represented a new direction in expressive design with a living room-like interior. While some elements were considered impractical or too polarizing, it succeeded in giving us an indication that style could help redefine the minivan’s image.

Drawing on the F3R design, Calty gave Sienna a unique yet approachable style that is distinct. The front has a bold face and special care was given to conceal the sliding-door rails to keep the profile clean and flowing. The sculpted rear corners and detailed lighting with LED elements give a muscular and upscale appearance. And like a living room, the interior is relaxing and inviting. Underneath the boldly shaped hood, the Sienna will offer two capable powertrains that deliver performance and efficiency. A 3.5-liter V6 will generate 266 horsepower, with a towing capacity of 3,500 pounds.

It will also have offer improved fuel efficiency as compared to the previous generation Sienna. A 2.7-liter four-cylinder engine, which is new to Sienna, will appeal to those who place a high priority on fuel efficiency. Both engines will be mated to a six-speed automatic transmission and will achieve an impressive 26 mpg on the highway, the best of any seven- or eight-passenger minivan. This will be achieved while still producing better overall drivability than some V6 competitors.

The 2.7-liter engine is the same popular four-cylinder powerplant in the Venza that accounts for half of its sales. The Limited featured here on stage will appeal to customers who want all the amenities that might be found in a luxury SUV but also need
greater space and flexibility. Standard features include second-row Lounge Seating that supports the legs and feet for a true luxury-like experience, a dual moonroof, power-stow third row, parking sonar, and our new Safety Connect system.

Our base Sienna grade will offer strong value at a competitive price, while our volume leader LE will come with a solid list of standard features that will make it an attractive buy.

The XLE – which we also have on display today – builds on the LE’s standard equipment, adding such features as leather-trimmed seats and moonroof.

And by the way, the Sienna is the only vehicle in its class to offer all-wheel-drive which is available with the V6 on LE, XLE and Limited models.

Overall, the new Sienna has improved handling and stability with changes to the suspension stiffness and improved aerodynamics. The adoption of Electric Power Steering allowed for a fine-tuning of steering characteristics for a more solid, direct feel.

The new Sienna will ride well and track cleanly through corners but for those who really want to redefine a minivan’s looks and capabilities, the new sporty SE will be their choice.

Here’s a video of Chief Engineer Mori in the SE on his way to In-n-Out Burger. It sits lower, on a sport-tuned suspension for quicker feedback and better handling. Check it out.

The SE rides on unique 19-inch wheels with low-profile tires, with specially tuned steering for more spirited driving. It features a sport-mesh front grille and larger lower grille, low and wide rocker molding, and more aggressive front and rear bumpers. Exclusive instrumentation and sporty, unique interior trim provide for a dynamic interior look.

Inside, all Siennas provide the spaciousness, flexibility and technology features that fit various lifestyles. It can handle up to eight-passengers, a load of plywood and supplies, or a combination of people and gear, that really separates the Sienna from three-row crossovers and SUVs.

A new second-row tip-up and long-slide feature maximizes cabin space and seat-position flexibility without compromising comfort like second-row seats that stow in the floor. The third-row, which has been moved back two inches for more legroom, is a 60/40
split-and-stow seat that folds flat with one easy motion manually or is powered on the Limited. With the third row up, there’s still enough storage space in the back to hold five golf bags or four large suitcases.

Adults will enjoy the contemporary new styling and dynamic handling and they will appreciate our latest options, such as a new navigation system with XM NavTraffic, iPod® interface via USB, Bluetooth® hands-free phone capability and music streaming...And the world’s first Panorama Camera rear monitor, which provides two views behind the vehicle, including a 180-degree view and on-screen back-up guides.

Dynamic Radar Cruise Control will allow for a more relaxed drive on long trips and it partners with a Pre-Collision System that will bring peace of mind.

Of course, all parents appreciate safety features like seven airbags including side-curtain airbags for all three rows and a new driver’s-side knee airbag. Vehicle Stability Control…and Toyota’s Star Safety System.

In addition to the roomy cabin and comfortable seating, kids and other passengers will enjoy the rear-seat sliding moonroof, a three-zone air conditioning system, and an industry first rear-seat Dual View Entertainment system. This new system has a wide-format 16-inch drop-down screen that can play a movie or it can be used as two individual screens, each with input from separate sources. One passenger can watch a movie while another watches or plays a video game.

The 3rd generation Sienna will go on sale next February, with the SE and four-cylinder following a couple of months later. While we will announce pricing at a later date, I can tell you that the all-new Sienna will continue to offer great value with a starting price lower than the current model.

When the Sienna goes on sale early next year, we believe it will make people rethink their image of a minivan because it’s a vehicle that truly offers something for everyone in the family.

Thanks again for joining us this morning!

I invite you to take a look at these three beautiful vehicles.

Enjoy the rest of the show here in L.A!
APPENDIX 4: SIENNA SWAGGER WAGON LYRICS

[DAD]
Yeah
This one goes out to all you minivan families out there.
Sienna SE...in the house.

[MOM]
Where my mother, fathers at?

[DAD]
Where my kids at?

[MOM AND DAD]
Where my kids at?
Where my kids at?

[DAD]
No, seriously honey where are the kids?

[MOM]
They’re right there, see?

[DAD]
Oh, cool beans.

[VERSE DAD]
I roll hard through the streets and the cul-de-sacs,
Proud parent of an honor roll student, Jack.
I got a swing in the front, a tree house in the back,
My #1 Dad mug says, Yeah, Im the Mack.

[VERSE MOM]
I’m the world’s best nurse when my kids get sick,
I make a mean gel-mold, I perfected my tricks,
Back when I used to party as a college chick.
Now I’m cruising to their play dates lookin’ all slick...

[CHORUS]
In my Swagger Wagon,
Yeah, the Swagger Wagon,
It’s the Swagger Wagon,
I got the pride in my ride.
In my Swagger Wagon,
Yeah, the Swagger Wagon,
It’s the Swagger Wagon.
APPENDIX 5: FACEBOOK STATISTICS

1. Statistics provided by Facebook, showing the fan base’s growth rate from 13th of December 2010 to 12th of January 2011.
2. Statistics provided by Facebook, showing fan base growth between 2007 and 2009 structured according to the demographic data extracted from their Facebook profile info.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>As of 10/22/07</th>
<th>As of 6/18/08</th>
<th>As of 1/04/09</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Users</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Males</td>
<td>8,075,960</td>
<td>40.5%</td>
<td>10,095,740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Females</td>
<td>9,778,140</td>
<td>49.0%</td>
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<td>Unknown</td>
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<td>Total US</td>
<td>19,951,900</td>
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<td>Users</td>
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<td>0-17</td>
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<td>12,331,560</td>
<td>61.6%</td>
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<td>2,826,660</td>
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<td>35-54</td>
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<td>55+</td>
<td>164,620</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
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<td>134,260</td>
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<td>Users</td>
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<td>Users</td>
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<td>Liberal</td>
<td>2,806,500</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>Feature Removed</td>
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<td>Moderate</td>
<td>1,937,420</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>Feature Removed</td>
</tr>
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<td>Conservative</td>
<td>2,181,300</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>Feature Removed</td>
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<td>Unknown</td>
<td>13,026,680</td>
<td>65.3%</td>
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<td>Users</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>664,180</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>1,081,680</td>
</tr>
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<td>Chicago</td>
<td>470,000</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>721,640</td>
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<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>247,200</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>390,800</td>
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<td>Miami</td>
<td>177,940</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>333,500</td>
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<tr>
<td>Houston</td>
<td>137,940</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>372,880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atlanta</td>
<td>349,800</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>502,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington DC</td>
<td>203,500</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>326,540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>262,080</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>361,980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>239,520</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>310,380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>114,860</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>159,120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current Enrollment</th>
<th>As of 10/22/07</th>
<th>As of 6/18/08</th>
<th>As of 1/04/09</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Users</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>4,148,460</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>4,765,320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>5,767,800</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
<td>6,608,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumni</td>
<td>4,680,800</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td>4,470,260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>5,354,840</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
<td>10,635,920</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interests</th>
<th>As of 10/22/07</th>
<th>As of 6/18/08</th>
<th>As of 1/04/09</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Users</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>Users</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>462,020</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>51,040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>20,620</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>23,820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rock and Roll (Music)</td>
<td>2,016,100</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>2,439,060</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contact: Peter Corbett, Peter@IStrategyLabs.com
Source: Facebook’s Social Ads Platform
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