# COMPANY MANAGED VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES IN GLOBAL BRAND STRATEGY

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## ABSTRACT

*Nowadays, many international businesses are experimenting with virtual communities of consumers in order to foster relationships between them and their customers. However, analysis of their strategies has rarely been considered in the existing literature. In this framework, our paper aims at providing a better understanding of the creation process and the management of these kinds of communities at an international level. To this aim, in the first part of the article, we propose a typology making it possible to distinguish between three types of international community strategies. After that, we follow a case study research design (DSA) and set the focus on the analysis of the creation process of two virtual communities coordinated by an international brand and implemented in the UK and in France. This allows us to highlight the strategic reflection, the tools and the roles of the people involved in the implementation of a community strategy. These elements are then considered under the lens of international marketing theories.*

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**KEYWORDS:** virtual communities, international strategy, DSA, consumption communities

## INTRODUCTION

Since the mid '90s, marketers have developed an interest in virtual communities, both in terms of psycho-sociological factors linked to the participation of internauts in these groupings (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; Dholakia et al., 2004) and their marketing implications (Algesheimer and Dholakia, 2006; Armstrong and Hagel, 1996; Kozinets, 1999; Brodin, 2000; Cova and Cova, 2001). Based on these analyses, numerous authors, mainly with a managerial background, consider virtual communities as a marketing tool that can be used by companies to foster the development of strong, reliable relationships with their customers (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996; McWilliam, 2000).

Beside these "C2C" virtual communities (which emerged from consumer initiatives), the Internet landscape is changing and numerous "B2C" virtual communities have been created and managed by brands in order to gather their consumers together and incite them to brand loyalty. Academic literature relating to virtual consumer communities is mainly focused on people, their motivation and the consequences of their participation in virtual gatherings. The academic debate has neglected the managerial aspects related to the implementation of these actions by companies. More particularly in the globalization context, the integration of virtual communities in the international marketing strategy of the brand raises the question of the specificities of the communal approach, which could be implemented in different countries.

This paper is articulated in 4 parts. First, we propose an overview of the literature about consumer communities. Secondly, we discuss the methodology used to implement our model. Then we set the focus on our case study, Organzettes. At last we discuss the conclusion and the limitations of the paper.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

B2C Consumer Virtual Communities

The virtual community is often defined as a socio-cultural grouping that emerges when an adequate number of persons take part in public discussions during enough time and with enough emotions to build a network of human relationships inside the cyberspace (Rheingold, 1995).

Previous research has set the emphasis on C2C virtual communities, but little has focused on consumer communities created by companies. Among these works, Armstrong and Hagel (1996) propose to categorize B2C virtual communities into 4 types depending on the needs they aim to fulfill: interest communities (allowing people to interact on the basis of a shared interest for a specific topic), relationship communities (inside which members share life experience and find emotional and social support), fantasy communities (allowing the consumer to get involved in a virtual world), transactional communities (which can foster commercial exchanges). Porter (2004) distinguishes commercial communities (related to the sale of products) from non-commercial communities. Ben Yahia (2006) spreads this typology by distinguishing non-commercial B2C communities that are brand- and product-based from those based on a theme related to the brand and its activity. Ben Yahia (2006) stresses that the latter do not constitute brand communities such as those defined by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001). Actually, these consumers share an interest for the same theme rather than for the brand sponsoring the virtual space in which their interactions take place.

Community strategies constitute a new kind of relational tool, allowing brands to get closer to their consumers through their passions and to foster the creation of intimate and genuine relationships with them leading to affective loyalty (Cova and Cova, 2001). Actually, previous research has often highlighted the benefits that can be generated by the implementation of this tool in relational strategies (Brodin, 2000; McWilliams, 2000; Li and Bernoff, 2008). Armstrong and Hagel (1996, p. 135), namely stress that "by creating strong on-line communities, businesses will be able to build customer loyalty to a degree that today's marketers can only dream of". Confirming practicians' experience, recent research shows the positive impact of B2C consumption communities on consumers' emotional involvement with the brand supporting the group (Casalò et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2008). This involvement with the brand is the first step leading to the development of a loyal relationship. Some authors have studied the motivations leading consumers to participate in this type of grouping (Dholakia et al., 2004; Raïes and Gavard-Perret, 2006). Dholakia et al. (2004) show that search for information, entertainment, social status and self-discovery are the main factors in members' participation.

International Consumer Communities

Many companies use this type of community to assemble their customers. They offer a virtual space of exchanges based on a theme often linked to a consumption activity and want to gather people sharing a real interest in this activity. Companies try to take advantage of what Kozinets has called (virtual) consumption communities enabling people to gather around topics like wine, motorcycles, photography, etc. These are defined as "groups whose online interactions are based on an enthusiasm and a shared know-how linked to a specific consumption activity" (Kozinets, 1999). The sharing of a common interest is the basis to members' identification and enables brands to assemble their customers (Sitz, 2006).

A literature review related to communities (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996; McWilliam, 2000; Algesheimer and Dholakia, 2006; Li and Bernoff, 2008), and the accurate observations of community initiatives on the Web show that most B2C consumer communities are initiated by international brands.

In their study of the Warhammer community, Cova et al. (2007) analyze a global *brand community* and pinpoint the opportunity of dividing the collective framework into national "sub-communities".
The authors highlight the differences between the way the two sub-communities (France and US) see the brand. As far as we know, there has not been any other research aiming to identify the specificities of consumer communities in an international perspective, and no B2C community strategies have been studied in an international context.

Regarding the literature as far as international marketing strategy and process are concerned, authors distinguish two different perspectives: standardization of the marketing strategy or adaptation to each local market. Beside the standardization degree, authors have also considered marketing process which relates to the degree of centralization of the decision-making process between the head office and the subsidiaries (e.g. Daniels, 1986; Ozsomer et al 1991). Above these two strategic extremes, authors highlight that the decision to go for standardization or adaptation and for centralization or decentralization is not a dichotomous choice. Indeed, managers have to find the right balance between these two situations (Quelch et Hoff, 1986; Harris, 1992; Vrontis, 2003; Croué, 2006).

Considering the lack of a sound theoretical background on this topic, we propose to highlight the specificities related to the implementation and management of B2C consumer communities in the international context. Our research will attempt to attain two objectives: First, by developing a typology, we will identify the different ways of managing virtual consumer communities that can be considered by global companies. Secondly, we focus on a particular type of B2C virtual community from the typology: coordinated local community. By identifying the actors involved and tasks completed, we will try to improve understanding of the creation and management processes of international B2C virtual communities.

**METHODOLOGY**

Methodological Approach

To improve understanding of a concept on which little research has been done, Yin (1994) suggests implementing an exploratory qualitative approach, namely by using case study methods. In the strategic process study context, Cova, Mazet and Salle (1994) show that an exploratory approach could be valuable in bringing about a better knowledge of the complex process of launching virtual communities.
In order to come up with an accurate and reliable approach, our research is based on the DSA method (Decision Systems Analysis), developed by Capon and Hulbert (1975) in their paper studying the dynamics of the decisional process. Information collected through in-depth interviews with actors involved in the different levels of the process enables us to implement a descriptive schematization of the process that could lead to theorization. Capon and Hulbert (1975) suggest researchers implement a preliminary model of the investigated process, developed in the following section.

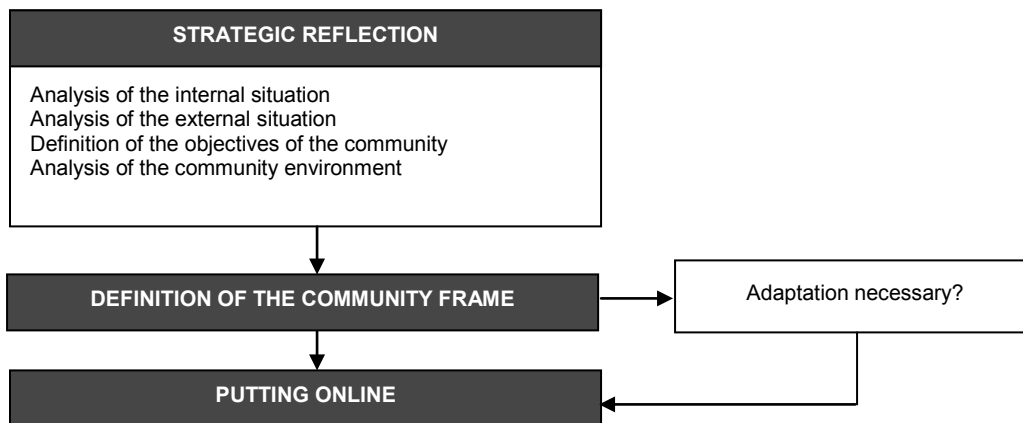Creating an International Consumer Community: Preliminary Model

The first step in implementing a B2C virtual community, similar to every other marketing tool, should follow a strategic reflection. According to general marketing management literature, the definition of the marketing plan and tools are derived from an analysis of the business's internal (objectives and available means, for instance) and external situations (competitors and consumers' needs, for example) (Croué, 2006; Kotler et al., 2006). In this framework, the selection of the virtual community as a tool depends on its ability to successfully contribute to the marketing objectives (O'Dell, 1966), which are derived from the global organizational strategy (Croué, 2006). After that, the virtual community will be assigned specific objectives and persons will be designated in charge of the coordination (McWilliam, 2000).

An analysis of the "community environment" within which the company will act should also be conducted in order to identify the existing consumption communities that may be linked to the company's activity (Brodin, 2000; Cova and Cova, 2001); the consumers that will be targeted by the company through the community and the needs that the virtual community could meet (McWilliam, 2000); the community's potential competitors (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996); the community's potential partners (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996; Kozinets, 1999; McWilliam, 2000).

Based on this analysis, Sitz (2006) asserts that the role of the company is to define a "community frame" pertinent to and consistent with the community environment previously analyzed. This frame should be appealing enough to generate the interest of potential members and lead them to join the community, interact and become loyal members. To this end, the community frame should avoid a commercial tone that would drive members away (Brodin, 2000). This community frame is made up of three dimensions. The first dimension is the *project*, that represents the community's goal(s) and mission(s), the purpose for which people will join and interact; the second is the *discourse,* that portrays the community's identity, its values, codes, traditions and hierarchy. In these terms, the discourse of the community influences the basis of members' identification; and the last dimension is the *space,* that hosts the members' interactions. According to Raïes and Gavard-Perret (2006), there are three ways of setting up the community's space: the company can host the virtual community on its official website or on a dedicated website or combine the first two options. Also, the definition of the community's space involves choosing the means through which members will interact with each other, whether it is only through online media or if face-to-face communication will also be promoted.

In an international policy framework, strategic reflection must take into account the relevance of using a global approach and identify the required degree of adaptation of the community frame previously defined. Elements such as language and cultural differences are barriers to the implementation of a whole standardized strategy (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 1999). This could lead to an adaptation of the community discourse, project or space. Moreover, the degree of centralization and the project coordination levels (international and/or local management) must be previously defined (Croué, 2006). Once those elements are settled, the community can be set online and managed by the persons in charge.

Figure 1: Creation of an International B2C Community



*This figure shows the preliminary model of the creation process of an international B2C community. It is divided in 3 basic stages retrieved from our literature review.*

**INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY STRATEGIES: TYPOLOGY DEFINITION**

Consumer communities are considered as a marketing tool for the company. Their implementation relies on the marketing department (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996; McWilliam, 2000; Li and Bernoff, 2008). In

the context of a global company, the degree of centralization of the marketing policy will influence the liberty offered to local divisions to define their own objectives, strategies and marketing tools (Croué, 2006) such as implementing a consumer community around the brand. So doing, in case of a decentralized marketing policy, each subsidiary could initiate the development of a community. A contrario, the company could assemble its customers by coordinating the community initiative globally.
In this context, we notice that the "non-geographical" dimension of virtual communities highlighted by several authors (e.g. Kozinets, 1999; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), can be limited by the choices made by the company initiating the community.

We can identify 3 factors that could affect the geographical spread of these communities: the reference language chosen by the community organizers; the geographical target and the extent of marketing efforts made to recruit members of the grouping; the organization of gatherings enabling virtual community members to meet each other face-to-face.

On the basis of these elements, we have analyzed company-initiated communities of 20 brands. This has led us to identify three types of international community strategies relying on two criteria: the geographical extent of the community (defined by its global vs. local characteristics) and the degree of centralization of the implementation (independently settled by a national subsidiary or coordinated by the parent company). These types of strategies are represented in *Figure 2*.

Figure 2: Typology of Community Strategies on an International Scale

| LOCAL MANAGEMENT | | GLOBAL MANAGEMENT |
|---|---|---|
| **Independent local communities**<br><br>Asics, Ben & Jerry's New Balance, Yves Rocher, Pimkie, Nutella | **Coordinated local communities**<br><br>Weight Watchers, Fiskars, Xbox, Fiat 500<br>*Organza* | **Single global community**<br><br>Laphroaig, Nike, Ray-Ban, Lego, Swatch |
| LOCAL COMMUNITIES | | GLOBAL COMMUNITIES |

*Figure 2 highlights the 3 types of international B2C communities*

Independent local communities are initiated by each national subsidiary on their own according to the local marketing policy. The analysis of the tool relevance, its implementation and its control are locally carried out without any interaction with the parent company. Several consumer communities could emerge from the same brand without any consistency regarding the identity, the project or the place of interaction *Ex.*: Asics - www.asicslovesrunning.fr (France) and www.myasics.nl (Netherlands);

A single global community is initiated and managed by the marketing head and aims to gather brand customers around a common project in a specific virtual space without any content or language adaptation regarding local specificities. The company wants to develop a unique identity. *Ex.:* Ray-Ban – Never Hide Community (www.Ray-Ban.com);

At a middle stage, we can identify local coordinated communities that are a network of local initiated communities managed by the international marketing manager. This aims to federate consumers from different markets around a common project and to foster the creation of a unique identity, by locally adapting the interaction space, namely regarding the language. The implementation is managed at a global level, local subsidiaries are in charge of day-to-day management, and if necessary, the adaptation of the community frame to the local market (in terms of language and content, among other things)

*Ex.*: Organza – www.Organzettes.fr (France) and www.Organzettes.co.uk (UK);

The company's choice as to the community strategy to implement relies on two factors: the opportunity to define a global community frame (depending on the uniformity of the international target and of the competitive environment, for instance) and the autonomy offered to local subsidiaries in the definition of their marketing policy.

## CASE STUDY: ORGANZETTES

Case Study Choice

The results presented in this paper derive from interviews analysis with different players involved in the implementation of a network of local communities coordinated by Organza (The identity of the community has been removed to guarantee anonymity), an international brand offering a wide range of sewing products and dry goods.  There are two local versions of the community, one in France and another in the UK: www.Organzettes.fr and www.Organzettes.co.uk.  These sewing-dedicated communities are globally coordinated at a European level and they are locally adapted, namely with respect to the language.  They consist of brand blogs, each of which is maintained by a local ambassador, highly knowledgeable in this field.

This successful initiative (based on the three criteria pinpointed by the interviewed managers: regular growth in membership, number of visits / day and number of contributions proposed by the members) regarding the target audience (sewing community) and the management techniques at a European level make this case study particularly interesting to investigate.  This allows us to bring about a better understanding of the coordinated management strategy of communities at a global level and to contribute to a theoretical framework still missing in this field of research.

Analysis of the Creation Process

The implementation of the Organzettes community in France and in the UK can be divided into two stages: the first step consisted in strategy definition at a European level; the second step was the management and adaptation of tasks at a local level (see *Figure 3*).

The implementation of the Organzettes community results from both internal and external analysis of the company at the global level. On the one hand, market analysis (1) should enable the company to value the community tool regarding its consumers and the relevance of implementing this strategy at a global level (are the customers homogeneous on this point?).

The external analysis also pertains to the competitive situation in order to allow the company to distinguish itself.  On the other hand, the implementation of such a tool relies also on the analysis of the internal situation (2) (marketing objectives, available resources and budget, for example).  This first step of the process gives the company an idea of the utility and the chance of success of such a community strategy (3).

The consumer community implementation must contribute to reaching company marketing objectives (5). For example, in the Organzette community, marketing managers allocated four specific overall objectives to the community tool: to reinforce consumer loyalty to the brand, to recruit new customers, to integrate the brand as 'the' partner of the sewing enthusiasts and to discretely put forward brand products. Marketing managers should ensure that the community tool is efficiently implemented and managed.  It is necessary to be sure that the company has the adequate skills to develop and implement the community

(6) (knowledge of the webplatform, of the community strategies, and so forth). If the company is not able to do that, it has to find external partners contributing to the success of the community (7).

Among these, choice of a qualified web agency is of prime importance. The implementation of Organzettes was from the start done in an international perspective, the marketing management opted for an international web agency able to ensure the implementation of the community in different countries.

Once the partners are selected, it is necessary to choose the persons (inside or outside the company) who will be in charge of developing, launching and managing the community (8). In order to guarantee the consistency of the project in the different countries where it will be implemented, a "community cell" composed of 2 persons (European marketing director and Web agency head) has to be settled at the European level. Its role is to ensure the project coordination, to guide global community policy, to define the common community frame to the locally-implemented community and to see that tool-specific objectives are reached.

The community cell is in charge of defining the community frame (discourse, project, space) (Sitz, 2006). As far as Organzettes communities are concerned, it was decided to implement a common community frame at the European level in order to guarantee the consistency of the strategy in the different countries where it will be carried out (9). It is composed of 3 elements:

The first element is the *global discourse* allowing members to identify each other (sharing the passion of sewing, values related to creativity, brand presence and non commercial tone). According to literature recommendations (Brodin, 2000; Cova and Cova, 2001), the discourse should avoid a commercial tone in order not to impact authenticity of the approach and should avoid leading the members to leave. *"This is an expert community. As a brand as such we are not too much present on the blog. Up to now we are present with some packages, or with articles written by ambassadors (advice, tips,…) about some products"*. [European Marketing Manager]

The second element is the *global project* to which the target audience could affiliate whatever its country of origin (exchange of information, personal work); At last, the third element is the *global space* allowing each member to express his own identity and to interact with other participants (Mairinger, 2008). Nonetheless, it is adapted in the different countries with the different languages.

However, the multiple implementation of community initiatives in the different countries is not always possible (for instance, lack of required resources or budget), so the company should identify the countries where it wants to implement the community as a priority (10).

The local market, its importance in the company's turnover and competitive situation are criteria that the company can use to value the local priority (11). *"France and the UK are the countries which offer the most important turnover for Organza in the sewing category […] it is interesting to notice that in these countries blogs generated by enthusiasts are highly developed. It's time to react"* [European Marketing Manager]. Once the countries are chosen, local actions can be carried out.

The local managers are only involved in the process when the countries are selected and the common community frame is implemented (12). At this stage, their role is to carefully analyze the community environment in the selected countries (existing C2C and B2C virtual communities, their strengths and weaknesses) (13) and identify potential partners (14). Indeed, the working of the community requires collaborations with partners from the consumption field concerned (Kozinets, 1999) such as dedicated events organizers, virtual and physical C2C communities involved in the community environment. At this level the European community cell, in collaboration with local managers, has selected the local community ambassadors that will be responsible for the organization and the maintaining the community's activity. Thereafter, the role of the local managers and the ambassadors is to maintain

relationships with potential partners and to ensure the integration of the community in the local community environment. *"The ambassadors are themselves popular bloggers in the sector, with online relationships networks and they can integrate the brand blog in the existing network"* [European Marketing Manager].

Moreover, besides the general objectives defined by the European management, the community can also play a specific part in the local marketing strategy (15). Based on the analysis of their "community environment" and on the local company's objectives, local managers can adapt some elements of the community. So doing, the Organzettes community content management in France or in the UK has been adapted in terms of local news of the brand (16).

*"At the European level the general guidelines to follow are decided, and after that they make the adaptations at the local level [...] it can pertain to newsletter content, or to a promotional plan specific to each country"* [European Marketing Manager].

Other adaptations related to the activity of the community (games, contests), to the environment (fairs dedicated to sewing), or members' local preferences (sewing, embroidering, patchwork) could also be implemented by local members in charge of the community (ambassadors and marketers*)."For example in the UK, at Christmas, we talk about that since September, while in France, this will not come up before October or November. We need to talk about that earlier on the English blog"* [Agency Project Leader]. All these adaptations are supervised by the European management, guaranteeing the consistency between both communities.

Finally, the virtual community can be set online (17) and its day-to-day management can be ensured by local teams (local marketing director and ambassador) (18). As a last stage the community is monitored at both local and European levels (19). Managers then assess the necessity to modify the objectives and the frame of the community.

**DISCUSSION**

Specificities of International Community Approaches

Internet is a very attractive tool for companies acting on international markets (Prashantham, 2003). While numbers of international companies interested in community strategies are growing, it seems interesting to bring insight into creation and management strategies of international B2C virtual consumer communities.

Strategic aspects of B2C virtual community management highlighted by McWilliams (2000) along with existing literature on international marketing strategies (e.g. Buzzel, 1968; Van Mesdag, 1987; Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 1999; Quelch and Hoff, 1999; Vrontis, 2003; Croué, 2006), have allowed us to identify different international B2C virtual community management strategies and to set the focus on their respective strengths and weaknesses. The choice among these strategies can namely be influenced by the characteristics of the target market of the company.

The case study highlights the implementation of a community segmentation (Kozinets, 1999) aiming to assemble consumers based on their passion for a given consumption activity. This type of segmentation can lead to the identification of an international market segment regarding which the company can carry out a united strategy (Hofstede et al., 1999). The implementation of coordinated local consumer communities could be relevant in this context.

Numerous international companies have launched their own virtual communities in order to federate their customers on a sharing and/or collaboration and/or exchange platform. Nevertheless, the implementation of the community tool at a global level requires a complicated decision-making process that has been neglected by the academic literature. In this context, our research aimed to reach two main objectives.

*O1: Typology of B2C international virtual communities*
The study of the strategies of a global brands sample leads us to identify three approaches to implement when creating a B2C virtual community at an international level: independent local communities, coordinated local communities and the single global community.

The typology we proposed in this paper is different from the previous research regarding classification (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996; Dholakia et al., 2004; Porter, 2004; Ben Yahia, 2006). Actually, we categorized B2C virtual communities regarding their strategic management characteristics. Moreover, we have included an international dimension and highlighted the importance of the non geographical aspect of the B2C virtual communities, whose implementation can be related to a local strategy.

The identification of these 3 management modes of B2C virtual communities allows us to bring a better understanding of the strategic choices of international managers. This choice can be influenced by the company's international structure, the degree of centralization of the marketing policy and the characteristics of the international target market.

The case study, Organza, highlights the implementation of a community segmentation (Kozinets, 1999) aiming to assemble consumers based on their passion for a given consumption activity. This type of segmentation can lead to the identification of an international market segment regarding which the company can carry out a united strategy (Hofstede et al., 1999; Bille, 2003).

Nevertheless, as shown in the case study of Organzette communities in France and in the UK, though sewing enthusiasts can be considered as an international segment, the analysis of the local community environment demonstrates some specificities (enthusiasts' expectations, local activities, rituals and traditions, competition between communities,…) and requires the implementation of differentiated approaches in each country. This reactivity is even more important in the virtual world where the local community environments can change quickly (emergence of new virtual communities – C2C and/or B2C – , local activities, evolution of the consumer needs,…). Therefore managers should be aware of the importance of a local management of the community and its activities. In this context, the most relevant choice would be to implement coordinated local consumer communities.

*O2: Process, actors and parts: identification through the DSA Method*

Community Frame: between Standardization and Adaptation

The study of the implementation of local coordinated communities, such as Organzettes, demonstrates a creation and management process at 2 levels, enabling us to precise our preliminary model: the global level aiming to define the common community frame of the local "sub-communities" and to guarantee the uniformity of the strategy on the different markets; the local level aiming to adapt the frame to the local characteristics of the market and of the environment, while respecting the boundaries previously defined by the European management.

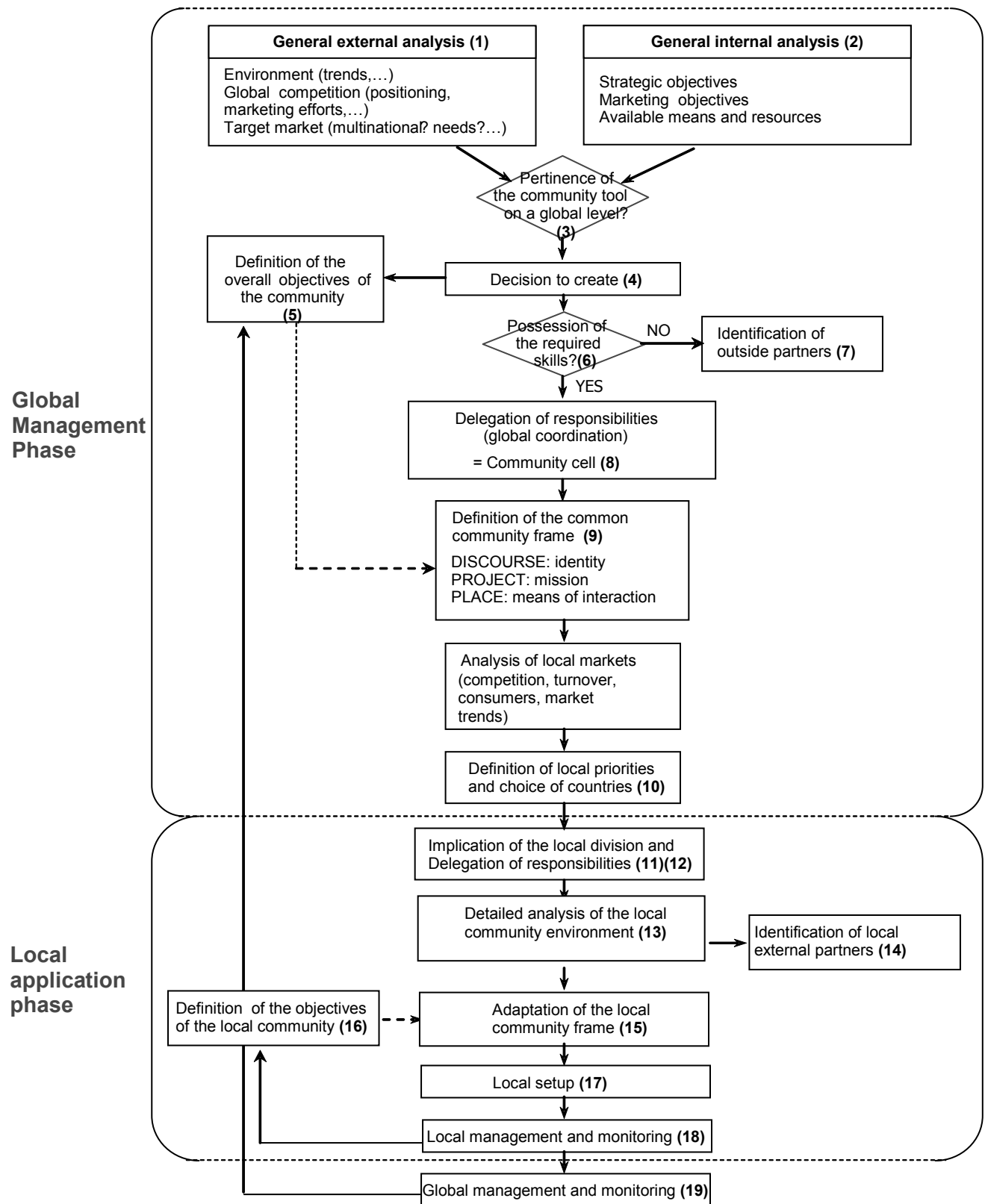Figure 3 – Coordinated Local Communities: Creation Process



*Figure 3 details the strategic process of the creation coordinated local communities. It is divided in 2 phases: global and local.*

The organizational structure highlighted in this case study sets the focus on the "Europeanization" trend of the marketing structure such as stressed by Lewi (1995). According to Quelch and Hoff (1986), interactions between the two levels of decision-making make it possible to maintain the balance between "standardization" and "adaptation" of the community frame. Despite what we have expected regarding our preliminary model, each element of the global community frame is not locally adaptable. Table 1 summarizes the constitutive elements present in the global community frame and those that can be adapted.

Table 1 – Global and Local Community Frames

|  | **Standardized elements**<br>**GLOBAL COMMUNITY FRAME** | **Adapted elements**<br>**LOCAL COMMUNITY FRAME** |
|---|---|---|
| **DISCOURSE** | Name of the community – Values, codes and traditions – Tone – Importance of the brand – Roles of the moderator – Content (general themes, calendar of events) | Partial adaptation of the *content* (depending on marketing objectives, members' local preferences, cultural specificities) |
| **PROJECT** | Sharing of a passion, exchanges | No adaptation |
| **PLACE** | Platform – Design – Arborescence – Functioning – Physical encounters | Language of interactions, organization of encounters according to local events |

*This table shows global and local community time frames across three dimensions: Discourse, Project and Place*

The balance of compliance between standardization and adaptation allows the company to conciliate local adaptation, global brand management and the minimization of marketing costs. The latter two are considered, respectively by 81% and 75% of the companies, as main concerns of the international policy (Vrontis, 2003).

*Global brand management.* Global brand building is a very tricky task to carry out. (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 1999). It becomes even more difficult when the creation of a B2C consumer community leads to a company's loss of control to the benefit of its customers. Those actively take part in producing content about the brand, which influences its building and its image (Mairinger, 2008). So, the lack of coordination between the different local communities could emphasize the differences between the brand image and its significations in the consumer's mind on the international market (Cova et al., 2007).
In this context, while allowing members to interact in the virtual space provided by the brand, the Organzette case study demonstrates that the creation of global strategic guidelines for defining the community frame makes it possible to concentrate the brand-hijacking mechanisms and to guarantee consistency at the global level. Moreover, the use of blogs as the main interaction tool between members allows a better control regarding the content, while letting the members act on their own in the virtual space.

*Cost minimization.* As far as budgets allocated to the building of a virtual consumer community are concerned, the development of the community platform is the most expensive part of the process. The definition of a uniform community space at a global level (design, structure, functions), as in the case of Organzettes, enabled the company to reduce costs by splitting the investment on the different local initiatives. The adaptation margin of local managers (integrated in the process once the platform is defined) is related to the elements that do not impact the economy of scale (Quelch and Hoff, 1986).

Process, Actors and Roles

The study of the Organzettes creation process in France and the UK allowed us to identify the actors and to clarify the tasks and processes related to the implementation of coordinated local B2C communities (summarized in table 2). Actually, three main points are emphasized through the Organzettes case study and enable us to precise our preliminary model proposed in Figure 2.

First, we notice that the implementation of an international B2C virtual community requires a two-stage process: global and local. Besides making an overall analysis of both internal and external situations of the company, managers should be aware of the need of an analysis of local situations. As virtual communities can play a part in both the local and global strategies, the attribution of specific objectives can be carried out at these two levels as well as in monitoring results.

Table 2 – Actors and Roles in Community Creation and Management

| | ACTORS | ROLES |
|---|---|---|
| **Global level** | European Marketing Directors | Evaluate the pertinence of the tool, define the objectives of the community, define the common community frame, coordinate local adaptations, define the budgets allocated to the community initiative, |
| | Web Marketing Agency | Develops the common community platform as well as local versions, manages the technical aspects, analyzes the community environments, guides the marketing decisions, accompanies the local management, makes statistical analyses (number of members, number of visits, etc.) |
| **Local level** | Local Marketing Directors | Define the local objectives, adapt the content and the calendar locally , identify local partners |
| | Expert Ambassadors | Write the first contents, provide new content (articles, photos and videos, answer questions), organize and facilitate contacts in the community (contests, encounters,…) on the basis of a calendar, recruit new members, get the community integrated into the world of consumption, legitimate and validate through expertise |
| | Local Events Organizers | Partnerships allowing face-to-face encounters among the members (stands for the brand during events), collaboration in contests, |
| | C2C Sewing Communities | Reference the community (hypertext links), participate n and contribute to the  content, legitimate the community as a partner in the world of consumption |

*This table shows actors and roles in community creation and management at the global and local levels.*

Secondly, the study of local community environments is prominent regarding the consumer communities belonging to a specific consumption universe. Actually, the priority of the countries to target and the specificities of the local approach (e.g. adaptation of the community frame) are defined on the basis of this analysis. We can stress that the role of local actors (managers and ambassadors) is particularly important to integrate the B2C community into the existing community environment. The relationships with local partners such as C2C (real or virtual) groupings and event organizers are managed from this local level. Even if Internet makes it possible to implement the virtual platform from the parent company, it is necessary to carry out local action in the local community environments. As far as local community environment analysis is concerned, it could be relevant to involve local managers.

Considering the importance of local actors, especially with respect to analyzing the local community environments that influence the selection of countries to prioritize, it would be advisable for Organza to involve local managers further upstream in the marketing process. Moreover, the necessity to define the community frame will be decided on the basis of the results of the analysis of these environments.

In other respects, if local adaptations are always made under the control of the European marketing director, the launching of Organzettes communities in other countries in Europe, may complicate the supervision of different local adaptations. Then it would be appropriate to inform local actors of their degree of freedom in adapting the community frame by clearly and precisely defining the elements that can be adapted and those that must absolutely remain unchanged. This precaution would make it possible to remedy the lack of clarity that sometimes characterizes decentralized decision-making structures (Quelch et Hoff, 1996).

**CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS**

Analyzing the implementation of Organzettes communities in France and the UK sheds new light on the managerial aspects of the creation and management of consumer communities. More particularly, this analysis makes it possible to highlight the particularities of these strategies on an international scale. Also, despite their international anchoring (based on being online on the Web and their accessibility to an international public), B2C virtual communities do not escape the principles of adaptation and standardization, characteristics of international strategies.

Our goal is not to propose a standardized model to be used as a recipe ready-made for managers, but to bring to light the tasks and the actors implicated in setting up B2C virtual communities. The managerial orientation of this research is certainly a valid contribution both for its theoretical and practical aspects.

Nevertheless, we must underline the fact that the results reported in this article have two major limitations. First, the typology is of an exploratory nature and its construction is mainly based on the observation of efforts set up by companies that do not make it possible to precisely define the strategic reflection that underlies their implementation. In this context, further study of the different international community strategies identified, could constitute an interesting contribution that would give managers and academics a more precise view of the different strategic options of international community approaches.

Secondly, the elements put forward in this research come from a single case study and may not be representative. The diagram presented could differ according to the structure of the company, the sector of activity or the environment in which the company operates. Other studies would enable us to refine our empirical analysis and bring to light possible differences. It would also be interesting to identify the implementation processes specific to other types of international B2C virtual communities in order to identify the differences they present with respect to the processes highlighted in our work.

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