Participation and Engagement of Members in a Virtual Brand Community: (a Case Study of the Virtual Brand Community MON PARI 2020 of the Pari Mutuel Urbain Camerounais (PMUC))

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Abstract: *This article aims to analyze the determinants of members' participation in virtual brand communities and to highlight the influence of this participation on their commitment to the brand. In order to test the links of associations of the proposed model we opted for a quantitative approach to the research. An online survey using a self-administered questionnaire was conducted on Facebook with 111 members of the virtual brand community of the PMUC mon Pari 2020. The data collected was subjected to descriptive analysis and the analysis of Pearson's correlation coefficients via the SPSS software version 18. The results show that emotional commitment to the virtual brand community is positively associated with community participation. In addition, the consumer's engagement with the brand is positively associated with their affective commitment to the virtual brand community.*

Keywords: *Virtual brand communities, brand, participation, commitment, emotional commitment.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Today, individuals seek to group in tribes, or through various characteristics, to share certain values, passions, and concerns. Thus, through the proliferation of social media, the Internet is becoming a veritable gathering place. Consumer behavior is changing as they participate in the social Web. What's more, through information sharing, interactivity, and access to information, the consumer is becoming more of a consumer-producer or consumer (Tapscott et al., 2008). The social web has become the new strategic and digital ecosystem for brands, given the many possibilities offered by the Internet, particularly with social networks. Virtual brand communities will emerge following the emergence of these social networks. These virtual brand communities enable consumers to exchange information and forge social relationships (Makloul and Ouida, 2020).

However, Cameroonian companies are gradually moving towards this dynamism. To do so, faced with consumer power and ever-increasing competitive pressure linked to the creation of businesses by local entrepreneurs and the market entry of multinational companies following the signing of the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) in 2014, companies are going to digitalize their brand communication to create a strong relationship between their brand and their target audience. They are increasingly deploying their strategy on digital and new information and communication technologies to meet the challenges imposed by the market. Today, we can see their brand presence on digital platforms (forums, blogs, websites...) and social networks, with the emergence of virtual brand communities. One example is Pari Mutuel Urbain Camerounais (PMUC), with the creation of its virtual brand community "MON PARI 2020". The latter integrated "MON PARI 2020" into its brand communication because of the competitiveness it faces (notably with the arrival on the market of gaming companies such as 1Xbet, ROISBET, and others) and its concern to win over a younger target aged between 21 and 34.

In the case of emerging countries, and Cameroon in particular, very little research has focused on member participation and engagement in branded virtual communities. This research aims to analyze the determinants of members' participation in branded virtual communities and to highlight the influence of members' participation in the virtual community on their commitment to the brand.

This article is divided into three parts: the first part presents the theoretical background to the concept of branded virtual communities, the second part highlights the methodological approach adopted to conduct the study, and the third part presents the main findings on the participation and commitment of members of the said branded virtual community.

II. Literature Review

2-1 The notion of virtual brand community

2-1-1 Definition of the virtual brand community concept

To understand the notion of brand virtual community, we first need to grasp the concepts of community and virtuality.

The notion of community was born out of the sociology of the great upheavals that marked the 18th and 19th centuries: the political revolution in America and France; the industrial revolution in Great Britain, and later the rest of the world. It comes from the Latin "cummunis", derived from cum (with, together) and "mucus" (charge, debt). It thus refers to a social relationship characterized by mutual obligations. From Emile Durkheim's work, Brint (2001) has identified the traditional, structural and cultural elements defining a community. The structural elements are: dense, engaging social ties, social attachment and commitment to institutions, and ritual events. The cultural elements, on the other hand, are perceptions of physical, expressive, or experiential similarity: we observe commonalities in linguistic expression, such as a common language, similar language games, an identical metaphorical system, and extralinguistic similarities, such as similar body signals.

For Levy (1995), the word "virtual" comes from the Latin "virtualis", itself derived from "virtus" (strength, power); to virtualize an entity is to go back to its essence. According to the author, by freeing human activity from the constraints of matter, space, and time, we have opened up hitherto unseen possibilities: the virtual is "hyper-reality". Web technologies open a door to the full richness of reality.

From these previous definitions, virtual communities find their creation and origin in the advance of ICTs. Digital technology enables people to come together in communities, free from time and space constraints, and exchange ideas. The question of the virtual community has been addressed by several authors. Each of them gave a distinct and enriching definition of this concept.

Hagel and Armstrong (1997) define a virtual community as: "Groups of people with common interests and needs who come together online. They do so with the aim of sharing a sense of community with like-minded strangers". For Casalo et al, (2008) the virtual community can be envisaged as "a group linked by a common desire to interact, a common interest, shared norms, the use of web tools to exchange and ensure group cohesion".

In his work, Proulx (2010) has highlighted the various characteristics of virtual communities: a sense of belonging, active participation, passive participation, a sense of moral responsibility, and shared values.

- **The feeling of belonging**: An online community is recognized by the feeling that binds its members together. It's the recognition of a collective identity and a common cultural code, derived from the constant interactions between different members.
- **Active participation**: A virtual community is considered active when its members share their experiences in the form of comments.
- **Passive participation**: This is characterized by participants seeking information without actually contributing ideas.
- **Sense of moral responsibility:** This refers to members' moral commitment to the community and the rules of conduct to be followed. This feeling helps to integrate and retain members.
- **Shared values (rites and traditions**): a virtual community is considered as such if there is knowledge of the community's norms, traditions, rules, and conventions.

The literature on virtual communities highlights two typologies of virtual communities, set out respectively by Armstrong and Hagel and Guillou Benjamin: the motivational typology of virtual communities and the relational typology of virtual communities.

Armstrong and Hagel, in their studies of virtual communities, have identified 04 types of virtual communities based on motivations: **Relational communities (These** are communities based on relationships. These communities are created for the purpose of making contacts and networking. They are home to other types of communities, such as consumer or virtual brand communities. Examples include: Facebook, Twitter, and Myspace), **Communities of interest (They** bring together people who share their experience on a given subject. Members interact on the basis of a common interest. This is the case, for example, of branded virtual consumer communities, where the focus is on a particular brand. Also in this category are communities of practice dedicated to a given practice with the aim of improving it.) **Transaction communities (These** are

communities created to facilitate the buying and selling of services. They use peer review and payment security systems. They make it possible to increase or decrease the level of trust associated with a seller or buyer. This is the case of the eBay community.) There are two subtypes: virtual social worlds and virtual game worlds: **virtual social worlds (**characterized by a high degree of freedom for members. They interact in a three-dimensional universe in the form of avatars. Examples include Second Life)**.**

These are platforms that bring people together in a three-dimensional environment in which users (avatars) communicate according to game rules.

Depending on the relationship, we distinguish between**: B-to-B virtual communities, C-to-C virtual communities, and B-to-C virtual communities.**

B-to-B virtual communities: These can be vertical (integration by profession), horizontal (integration by function), or internal to the company (extranet, intranet, employee community [example: mon-macdo.com]).

C to C virtual communities: Initiated by a public figure, these include non-profit communities of interest (e.g., video game, literature, film, political or philosophical enthusiasts).

B-to-C virtual communities: These are created by companies wishing to get closer to their customers and/or prospects. They range from de facto communities (ISP portals) to commercial virtual communities.

From these typologies, we can see that virtual communities bring together corporate bodies and individuals for relational, commercial, and entertainment reasons. These typologies point to the existence of branded virtual communities.

The virtual brand community has been defined by several authors. For De Valck, VanBruggen and Wierenga (2009), it is "an online community, specialized and not geographically linked, based on social communications and relationships surrounding brand consumers. Sitz (2006) defines the virtual brand community as a "perennial elective group of actors sharing a system of values, norms, and representations (i.e. a culture) and recognizing each other's links to each other and to the community as a whole, based on a common attachment to a particular brand".

These two definitions of the virtual brand community reveal that the virtual brand community is a geographically unlimited group of people with strong ties to each other based on their attachment to the brand.

It is characterized by sustained interaction, the recognition of a collective identity and cultural code, the existence of defined community spaces, and the definition of rules for belonging to the collective. Branded virtual communities thus have their origins in postmodernity, the Internet medium, and human nature.

2-2 Participation in virtual brand communities

The essence of community practices lies in the participation of community members. Members are at the heart of all community actions, which is why they should be encouraged to participate. Several studies have looked into the origins of member involvement in a branded virtual community. Among these is the theory of uses and gratifications, which is used to explain the benefits that individuals derive from their use of a medium (Katz et al. 1973). According to this theory, the satisfaction of individual motivations will depend on the perceived value or benefit of being a member of a brand's virtual community. This theory justifies the motivation to use media through: the search for entertainment, the enhancement of social interactions, and the escape from daily stress (McQuail, 2010). In addition, Kang et al (2014), following recent studies on branded virtual communities and their effects on the consumer-brand relationship, propose four types of benefits sought by members of a branded virtual community, namely: functional, socio-psychological, hedonic and monetary benefits.

- Functional benefits: Satisfying consumers' functional needs encourages participation in the brand's virtual community. Research has shown that consumers are looking for up-to-date information about the brand. They also need to express their opinions, to be in constant interaction with the company and other customers (Jung and Kim, 2014).

- Socio-psychological benefits: According to Kang et al (2014), social exchange theory states that a high level of interaction between community members will encourage participation in community activities (Blau, 1964 cited in Kang et al. 2014). Furthermore, according to social identity theory, community members forge a social identity through their sense of belonging and identification with community members and through the benefits they can derive from their social interaction (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002). In the case of online communities, members expect to contribute to the community and to receive help and support from other members. The sense of identification and social interaction is likely to lead members of a virtual community to actively participate in that community.

- Hedonic benefits: these are the feelings of pleasure, excitement, or amusement that the consumption experience brings to a consumer (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004). The activities proposed by online brand communities, whether initiated by the company or by members, such as games, competitions, co-creation

activities, and others, contribute to the realization of hedonic benefits. Interaction with community members also leads to a multitude of feelings of pleasure or joy (Gupta and Kim, 2007).

Monetary benefits: Monetary benefits are traditionally among the primary reasons why consumers develop a relationship with a brand or join loyalty programs, for example (Rosenbaum et al., 2005). They can take the form of: monetary discounts, introductory prices, promotional offers, gifts, etc. (Harris and Goode, 2004). Some research has established a positive effect between the offer of monetary benefits and consumer attitudes towards a brand and a virtual brand community (Han and Kim, 2009).

For authors Raïes and Gavard-Perret (2011), a member's sustained and intense participation in a community strengthens his or her commitment to it. This can be explained by the affective and/or social ties he is likely to develop through his exchanges with other community members, and his sense of usefulness reflected in his own contributions to other community members.

The literature proposes two facets of the intensity of participation in a branded virtual community: participation in terms of frequency and average duration, which reflects the fact of being present, and participation in terms of level of contribution, which is a function of the number of activities in which the member takes part within the branded virtual community (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2004).

Jang et al, (2008) show that the frequency of participation in the community contributes to the affective commitment to the community, i.e. creates attachment, identification, and the desire to maintain the relationship between community members. From this observation, we can formulate the following first hypothesis:

H1: Consumers' affective commitment to the brand's virtual community is positively associated with their participation in the brand's virtual community.

I-3 The brand's virtual community fosters members' commitment to the brand

The most recurrent definition in the literature is that which sees commitment as the effort required by the parties to create and maintain the relationship over time (Zineb, 2023). Authors Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande (1992) define commitment as the consumer's desire to maintain a long-term relationship, or they define it in terms of its consequences, such as the sacrifices the customer is willing to make to maintain the relationship. For Hollebeek et al, (2014) engagement corresponds to a customer's level of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment in specific brand interactions. The notion of engagement therefore has 3 points of influence on the brand user/consumer: the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of the consumer.

The author thus distinguishes three dimensions of engagement: cognitive, affective, and activation. The cognitive dimension is the level of attention the consumer devotes to the brand, while the affective dimension is the level of positive feelings and emotions the consumer develops towards the brand. As for the behavioral dimension, it corresponds to the consumer's level of predisposition to brand consumption and activities. Commitment to the brand's virtual community is defined by Cheung al., (2014) as: "*a feeling of emotional involvement with the virtual community characterized by identification with, and emotional attachment to, that community*". This is justified by the words of Gavard-Perret and Raies (2011) formulated as follows: "The relationship that consumers build with members of the CVM is likely to have an impact on their relationship with the object of the gathering". Furthermore, according to CNRS: "A stronger commitment to the brand results in a stronger commitment to the community [...], the commitment to the community in turn positively influences the commitment to the brand". We can therefore formulate the following second hypothesis:

H2: Consumer commitment to the brand is positively associated with their affective commitment to the brand's virtual community.

The conceptual research model is as follows:

Figure 1: The conceptual **research** model

Source: By the author from the literature

III.   Research Methodology

The main objective of this article is **to analyze** the determinants of members' participation in branded virtual communities and to highlight the influence of members' participation in the virtual community on their commitment to the brand. The study population consisted of all members of the MY PARI 2020 virtual brand community. The non-probability sampling method was adopted for the convenience sample, with a sample size of 113 members. The sample survey was based on an online self-administered questionnaire. The data collected were subjected to descriptive analysis and Pearson correlation coefficient analysis using SPSS version 18 software.

To test the various working hypotheses, measurement dimensions were adopted based on the literature on branded virtual communities, member participation, and commitment to the virtual community and to the brand. In this research, member participation and commitment are considered as unidimensional variables. Items were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale.

IV.   Analysis of result

4-1 Participation in the MON PARI 2020 branded virtual community

Table 1: Results of the flat sort (frequency table) of members' participation motivation

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Indifferent	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree	Average	Overall average
Searching for information	27,4%	10,6%	24,8%	32,7%	4,4%	2,76	
The search for a sense of belonging	16,8%	16,8%	25,7%	35,4%	5,3%	2,96	
Seeking relationships with other members	8,8%	11,5%	23,9%	36,3%	19,5%	3,46	3.35
The search for entertainment	4,4%	8,8%	23,0%	38,1%	25,7%	3,72	
Searching for exclusive offers	8,0%	10,6%	21,2%	42,5%	17,7%	3,51	
Looking for freebies and perks	5,3%	6,2%	22,1%	46,0%	20,4%	3,70	

Source: Based on survey data

The flat-sorted analysis (frequency table) of members' motivations for participation shows an overall average measurement of 3.35 for the variables used to measure the factors behind their participation in the community. Contributing most to this average are the search for entertainment (3.72), the search for freebies and benefits (3.70), and the search for exclusive offers. Strictly speaking, participation by MY PARI 2020 community members is motivated more by the search for satisfaction of hedonic needs (entertainment) and monetary needs (the search for freebies and advantages, the search for exclusive offers).

4-2 Effects of participation on affective commitment to the brand's virtual community

Table 2: Correlation results for participation variables and affective commitment to the community

Correlations

		"I feel an attachment to the members of the community	"I feel a strong sense of belonging to the community	"I feel like a family member in the community	"for me, my 2020 bet has a strong personal meaning
Frequency of participation	Pearson correlation	1 **0,309**[**]	0,095	**0,417**[**]	**0,350**[**]
	Sig. (Bilateral)	0,001	0,316	0,000	0,000
	N	113 113	113	113	113

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

Source: Based on survey data

The results of the correlation between the variables of degree of participation in the community and those of affective commitment to the community give correlation coefficients (significant at the 0.01 threshold) and positive for the majority of the variables belonging to affective commitment to the community of 0.417; 0.350 and 0.309 respectively. Indeed, the degree of participation contributes to the affective commitment to the community, i.e. creates attachment, identification, and the desire to maintain the relationship between members of the MON PARI 2020 community. This leads us to validate the first hypothesis (H1). This corroborates the work of Jang et al. (2008) and Casalo et al. (2008), who have shown that participation in the virtual community engenders strong commitment on the part of members.

4-3- Effect of affective commitment to the brand's virtual community on commitment to the brand

Table 3: Correlation results between affective community commitment and **brand** commitment variables

		The PMUC brand gets my full attention	I like this brand (I feel attached to it)	I am determined to follow this brand
"I feel attached to the members of the community	Pearson correlation	0,555[**]	0,488[**]	0,623[**]
	Sig. (two-tailed)	0,000	0,000	0,000
	N	113	113	113
"I feel a strong sense of belonging to the community	Pearson correlation	0,666[**]	0,313[**]	0,393[**]
	Sig. (two-tailed)	0,000	0,001	0,000
	N	113	113	113
"For me, my 2020 bet has a strong personal meaning	Pearson correlation	0,754[**]	0,455[**]	0,622[**]
	Sig. (two-tailed)	0,000	0,000	0,000
	N	113	113	113

"I feel like a family member in the community	Pearson correlation	0,500**	0,408**	0,608**
	Sig. (two-tailed)	0,000	0,000	0,000
	N	113	113	113

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

<u>Source</u>: **Based on survey data**

A Pearson correlation coefficient analysis of the links between affective engagement in the brand's virtual community and their commitment to the brand reveals positive correlations (0.555; 0.488; 0.623; 0.666; ...) and significant at the 1% threshold between members' affective engagement and their commitment to the brand. All this leads us to accept our second working hypothesis (H2) confirming that members' affective commitment to the virtual community has a positive influence on their commitment to the brand.

V. CONCLUSION

Our aim was to analyze the determinants of member participation in MON PARI brand virtual communities and to highlight the influence of member participation in the virtual community on their commitment to the brand. The analysis and interpretation of our survey results led us to the following conclusions: member participation in virtual brand communities is low, while those who do participate are more motivated by the search for freebies and brand benefits, the search for exclusive offers, and the search for information. Brand managers and community managers should therefore create content that places greater emphasis on the functional, hedonic, and monetary benefits provided by the brand. Moreover, from a metric point of view, engagement is mostly perceptible through the "like" marker, which is considered low. Member participation in the MY PARI community contributes to affective engagement with the community, and engagement with the MY PARI 2020 community contributes to engagement with the brand. This research, with its limitations, opens up new avenues of investigation in a field where a large number of questions remain to be resolved. The first limitation lies in the choice of a virtual brand community. Moreover, the analysis of member participation and commitment in a branded virtual community was limited to a gaming brand (PMUC). It will be interesting to extend this work to other branded virtual communities while analyzing the effects of member engagement with the virtual community on brand loyalty.

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