

CLASSIFICATION OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES

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INTRODUCTION

Background of the study

The rapid development of information technology has significantly increased interest towards online communities. The Internet enables people to stay in touch via networks with other people in many different ways. From an organization's point of view, the development of information technology and Internet has strongly affected how they market their products and services. The Internet has spawned new models of interactivity and exchange.

The first online communities were mostly aimed at leisure time activities and were maintained by associations and non-profit organizations. Nowadays, companies have discovered possibilities that online communities can offer and there are already a wide variety of commercial online communities. Online communities can effectively offer customers personalised service and interactivity on the Web. They enable conversations between customers and dialogue between customers and representatives of organizations. Some examples of business-oriented online communities include communities of independent resellers sharing sales tips and ideas; buyers and sellers in an Internet marketplace, exchanging information related to purchases or sales; customers on an Internet commerce site, united by a common interest in topics related to products offered on the site and people subscribe to online information services. To make it easier to understand the variety of online communities, it is necessary to classify them in some way.

Purpose and methodology

Though an online community is a multidisciplinary phenomenon, we approach the communities from the perspective of marketing theories. The study aims at deeper understanding of the classification of commercial online communities by focusing on the state-of-the-art of the research field and by further developing the classification. We begin from earlier studies concerning the classification of online communities.

Our study is grounded in qualitative, deductive research, which allows the interaction between theory and practice. We utilize an interpretative mode, which means that "we also use our

senses and our common sense, intuition, tacit knowledge, and experience in conjunction with systematic, scholarly research and everyday observations from practice” (Gummeson 2002).

The research process consisted of three intertwined phases: literature review, internet search and analysis. The first phase in this research has been to scrutinise the literature concerning the research problem area. Our framework for analysis is constructed on the basis of this review.

The second phase was to make observations from practice by visiting different commercial online communities’ Web sites to gather information about the dimensions of online communities introduced in the literature and to gain deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Our approach to the problem was actually a combination of two methods, namely, document review and observation. According to Stake (1995, 68) “both methods follow the same line of thinking and they back up each other. In these methods, research questions should be carefully developed in advance and a system set up to keep things on track.” Due to the intertwined phases of literature review and internet search, the studied communities’ sites were visited more than once during the process. In the third phase, findings were coded and analysed on the six dimensions chosen on the basis of the literature. In analysis of cases our focus was to note similarities and differences between the communities.

The cases were selected by judgemental sampling where “an “expert” uses judgement to identify representative samples” (Aaker-Day 1986, 291). The search for potential cases was based on the researchers’ knowledge of the existing online communities, search engines and the references of authors who had researched online communities. By using different sources, we made more certain that different kinds of online communities were included in our research. The number of selected communities was thirty, ten representing communities maintained by a Finnish company, sixteen from the United States, two from Great Britain and one from Germany and one from the Netherlands.

The community had to fulfil some criteria to be selected in this research. Firstly, due to the focus of the study, communities selected had to be maintained by a company. Secondly, there had to be some evidence of the community, which meant that clear interaction between members or between members and representatives of the company was observable. Thirdly, a clear purpose why the community exists was required to be identifiable.

Structure of the paper

After the introduction, a literature review is presented. The definitions of an online community and commercial online community and the characteristic features of online community are discussed. Earlier classifications are depicted and the framework for an empirical analysis is presented at the end of this section. In the third section the empirical results of the study are presented. Finally, the conclusions drawn and avenues for future research are indicated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of an online community

There is no generally accepted definition of an online community. As online communities became more successful, the term has become a buzzword with many kinds of different meanings. In defining an online community it should be noticed that in a multidisciplinary field such as this, some definitions reflect a disciplinary perspective as sociology, technology or business etc. (Preece 2000; 2001)

In discussing online communities Dyson (1997, 31) defines a community as “the unit in which people live, work and play”. She argues that as the world becomes increasingly complex, people seek community for fellowship and security. According to her, the Internet is an enabling technology that supports the human interaction required for community formation. An online community and a traditional community are quite similar in terms of capabilities, or purpose. Dyson interprets community as a shared asset created by the investments of the members. (Dyson 1997)

Rheingold (1993, 2000) was the first who defined the term virtual community as follows: “Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.” As other researchers, Rheingold emphasized in his definition the importance of meaningful relationships. These meaningful relationships can emerge between users or also between users and representatives of the company. Figallo (1998, 16-17) says that the feeling of togetherness, familiarity, rituals and relationships act as things, which make the social connectedness even stronger during the time.

Hagel and Armstrong (1997) argue that although online communities aggregate information and other kinds of resources, above all they are about aggregating people. People are drawn to virtual communities because of an engaging environment in which to connect with other people, but more often in an ongoing series of interactions that create an atmosphere of trust and real insight. This interaction is based on people’s desire to meet four basic needs: interest, relationship, fantasy, and transaction. The strength of online communities rests in their ability to address multiple needs simultaneously. For this reason, the most successful online communities meets more than one need simultaneously.

Although the term "virtual community" is used popularly (Rheingold 1993, 2000), the term "virtual" might misleadingly imply that these communities are less "real" than physical communities (Jones 1995). Yet, as Kozinets (1998, 366) pointed out, "these social groups have a ‘real’ existence for their participants, and thus have consequential effects on many aspects of behaviour, including consumer behaviour" (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). To maintain the useful distinction of computer-mediated social gathering, we therefore use the term "online communities" to refer to these Internet-based forums.

Commercial online communities

Communities of users, known as user groups, have a long history in business-to-business relationships. User groups between consumers have also been popular in the area of

information technology (for example computer games and software). These user groups are formed by vendors or by enthusiastic buyers.

Although user groups are more often associated with science and technology, they exist also in many business sectors, including insurance, banking, and health care. The groups provide a useful forum to share experiences, solve problems, meet peers at events, and explore other companies and career opportunities, as well as keep current with technology and industry gossip (Mc William 2000).

Internet has enabled people to find and share information and knowledge more rapidly than before, and it also has turned customers from passive objects to active participants. For this reason, markets may rapidly become more knowledgeable than companies. Petzinger (2000) has said, that “markets are conversation”, which describes this movement quite well. Companies are beginning to understand the significance of global conversation. (Petzinger 2000, xiii; see also Locke 2000, 9-10, 17-18)

The more active role of customers has also made the old kind of advertising inefficient. Conversation and permission marketing are more efficient ways than traditional advertising, which is nowadays strongly resisted. The old well-known way for marketing, word-of-mouth, has become even more efficient due to the increased global conversation and online communities. (More about permission marketing see Godin 1999; see also Searls & Weinberger 2000, 80–82, 88–90) The phenomenon called “Buzz” is a way to stimulate a positive conversation about the subject (word-of-mouth) and encourage free PR. (Dye 2001, 30)

Hagel and Armstrong (1997) have a five-point criteria for a commercial online community: distinctive focus on relationship, integration of content and communication, emphasis on member-generated content, choice among competing vendors, and commercially motivated community organizers. According to them all these five criteria must be fulfilled for a commercial online community to exist. Members’ communications create the core of the community’s assets. The organizer of the community plays a key role since without this role the community could not exist and the goal of the organizer is to make a profit on the online community. However, it is hard to find online communities that fulfil all the five criteria.

We tentatively define a commercial community as a company maintained collective sharing a common interest and interacting over the Internet. A common interest refers in this context to all kinds of interests, which may originate from, for example, the same kind of demographic profile or interest in the same hobby.

From a commercial perspective, an online community can be used as a tool to stimulate many kinds of conversations, for example, in discussion forums and in chat-services. Conversations are helpful for companies to gain information of customers’ interests, needs and opinions. To utilize these conversations, and all information that is gathered about customer’s behaviour in the online community, companies create different kinds of databases and use software tools to personalize the service for individual customers.

The result of the successful online community is that both the company and the customer perceive some value in it. Hagel and Armstrong (1997) have stated that a community not only

could be a part of a successful Web-based business plan, it should be so. An online community can be thought to be a key element of the new interactive media that distinguishes them from traditional push media. To build a successful community, customer-centred communication, customer-to-customer interaction, should be emphasized. This means that consumers, not businesses, generate the content of the site, e-mail list or bulletin board. (Chaffey 2002, 359)

Online community elements

According to Hagel and Armstrong (1997) the first reason to join in communities is *interest*, because many of the first communities focused on connecting people who shared same kinds of interests. A second reason is *relationship*, because independence of time and place helps people to build significant and interactive relationships. However, we want to point out that there still remain cultural differences in people's behaviour and language barriers between them. Thirdly, *fantasy games*, which are offered by communities, help people forget their routines for a while. The fourth reason to join online communities, according to Hagel and Armstrong (1997), are *transactions*. These transactions are not only commercial transactions but also for giving and receiving information.

Jenny Preece (2000) has listed the elements of which online communities are constructed. She suggests that an online community consists of *people* who interact socially as they strive to satisfy their own needs or perform special roles, such as leading or moderating. Secondly, an online community has a shared *purpose*, such as an interest, need, information exchange, or service that provides a reason for the community. Online communities have *policies*, in the form of tacit assumptions, rituals, protocols, rules, and laws that guide people's interactions. The final things needed in an online community are *computer systems*, to support and mediate social interaction and facilitate a sense of togetherness.

According to Kim (2000, 33), a discussion forum, otherwise known as a newsgroup, bulletin board, conference or message board, is one of the most familiar types of online gathering place. Like mailing lists, discussion forums are asynchronous, which means that people don't have to be in the same virtual place at the same time to have conversation. This reason makes it possible to have conversations taking place over a period of days, weeks and months. These discussion forums can be maintained in many ways and maintaining organizations can participate in a discussion very strongly or not at all. This means that discussions can happen among members or between a member and representatives of the company. Even if the organization is not willing to participate in conversations, they need to follow the discussions and delete inappropriate messages to retain the forum as a reliable space.

In addition to discussion forums, chat is also a widely used service in online communities. Chat differs from a discussion forum by being real-time software, so that anyone who's connected to the system discusses in real time. Also every kind of contribution to the content or interactivity between the members or between members and the company can be an element of an online community. Examples of this kind of elements are movie recommendations made by members, playing games with other members, online auctions etc.

Earlier classifications of online communities

To make it easier to understand the variety of online communities, it is necessary to classify them at some level. Researchers have made these classifications based on many different criteria. Hagel and Armstrong (1997, 118-123) have categorized communities as consumer-focused and business-to-business focused ones. In consumer-focused communities there are geographic, demographic and topical communities. Topical communities are constructed around people's common interests. Kim (2002) has added one more in this list: Activity-based, defined by a shared activity, like shopping, investing, playing games, or making music.

According to Hagel and Armstrong (1997, 118-123), in business-to-business area there are vertical industry, functional, geographic and business category communities. Chaffey (2000, 359-360) suggests that depending on a market sector, an organization has a choice of developing different types of communities for business-to-customers, communities of purpose, position, interest and communities of profession for business-to-business. Cothrel (2000) has added to this list also, employee-to-employee, which can be a useful tool in companies' internal marketing.

Schubert and Ginsburg (2000) have divided communities into two categories: based on the aspect of the underlying medium or from the perspective of the purpose they serve. From the perspective of the purpose they speak of "Communities of interest" and divide them further into the "Leisure time communities", "Research communities" and "Business communities". Business communities may appear in the form of "Communities of commerce", "Communities of transaction" and "Electronic malls". From the view of the underlying medium, an "Internet community" is a "Network community", which evolves on the Internet. According to Schubert and Ginsburg (2000), a Business community is an Internet community at the same time, because "the choice of terms shifts the focus from the production and exchange of goods and services to the underlying medium."

Due to the newness of the area, there is a limited number of researches concerning the classification of online communities within the marketing literature. A list of studies in this area is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Previous classifications of online communities

Author	Definition / Important elements of an online community	Classification of online communities	Main emphasis
Howard Rheingold (1993, 2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace 	Commercial, non-commercial	The human relationships
Hagel & Armstrong (1997)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – People have four reasons to join: interest, relationship, fantasy and transactions – Distinctive focus as to membership, emphasis on member-generated content, choice among competing vendors, commercially motivated community organizers 	<i>Consumer-focused:</i> geographic, demographic, topical <i>B-to-B-focused:</i> Vertical industry, functional, geographic, business category communities	The economical benefits of an online community
Klang & Olsson (1999)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Functioning effective infrastructure, active membership 	Non-profit and profit, non-company and company	The classification of online communities
Amy Jo Kim (2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Purpose, places, profiles, roles, leadership program, etiquette, events, rituals, subgroups 	Geographic, demographic, topical, activity-based	The building process of an online community
Cothrel (2000); Warms, Cothrel & Underberg (2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Online communities are groups of businesses, customers, or employees with common interests interacting via Internet. – Community elements: member-generated content, online events, Member-to-member interaction, outreach 	Consumers (b-to-c), business customers or partners (b-to-b), and employees (e-to-e).	The active management and the community programs
Schubert and Ginsburg (2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Virtual communities describe the union between individuals or organizations who share common values and interests using electronic media to communicate within a shared semantic space on a regular basis 	Community of interest (leisure time, research and business community) and Network community (Internet community)	The concept of online communities, communities of transaction
Jennifer Preece (2000, 2001)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – An online community consists of: people, purpose, policies, computer systems 	People, purpose, policies, computer systems	The sociability and usability
Dorine Andrews (2001)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Online communities consist of three elements: trust and the nature of computer-mediated communication, online community implementation, the impact of economics 	Traditional, audience-centric	Computer-mediated communication and the impact of economics

Klang & Olsson (1999) have built a model for defining four hypothetically perfect communities. In reality, online communities will not always fulfil the criteria set in the model and they are to be seen as examples used in clarification of the model. According to Klang & Olsson (1999), this model may be used as “a starting point in discussing types of online community rather than giving the ultimate description of existing communities.”

Klang & Olsson (1999) have approached online communities by dividing them into four groups. They present a two-by-two-matrix with one axis describing the intention of the community (non-profit or profit) and the other axis describing the structure of the organization (company or non-company). The groups are named and depicted in Figure 1.

		Intention	
		<i>Non-profit</i>	<i>Profit</i>
Organization	<i>Company</i>	Forum	Shop
	<i>Non-company</i>	Club	Bazaar

Figure 1. The static model of virtual communities (Klang & Olsson, 1999)

According to Klang & Olsson (1999) ‘the Forum’ is chosen to outline a group of people sharing information in a corporate entity such as a coffee room or a boardroom. This community stresses more social aspects than commercial aspects and its purpose is to create a meeting place for its members and employees at the company not to be a profit-creating tool. The Forum is nearly related to the e-to-e community defined by Cothrel (2000). Pure ‘Forums’ exist in the companies’ intranets where only employees have the access.

The purpose of ‘the Club’ is to provide a space where people can go, and share interests and information with other people whom they trust. The Club is a non-profit and non-company community, which means that the community has no primary commercial interest and the organizer is not connected to a company (Klang & Olsson 1999).

Klang & Olsson (1999) further divide company-maintained commercial online communities ‘the Shop’) into three groups. Existing companies that want to sell goods and service via the Internet and want to support this with online community are one group. The other group of commercial communities consists of the Web-based companies that only exist on the Web. The third type of commercial community is the online community that gathers member information and sells this.

‘The Bazaar’ is close to a flea market where everybody can be buyers or sellers. The main difference between the Shop and the Bazaar is that the Bazaar is not controlled by an organization. The purpose of the organizers of this type online community is to create a profit

for all, members and the organizer. The focus on Klang & Olsson's (1999) categories 'Shop' and 'Forum' is same as in this research, where we develop the classification of commercial online communities.

Framework for analysis

Drawn from the literature review, we started from Preece's (2000) classification of commercial online communities' elements. We chose the dimensions of people, purpose and policies from the model. Instead of computer systems, we selected the services enabled by the software used. Additionally, we searched another dimension, the business logic of the company, according to Cothrel (2000) (see also Chaffey 2002). The framework is presented in Table 2. In addition to the dimensions, it contains the operationalisation of them.

Table 2. Framework of the analysis

Dimensions	Description
<i>Business logic of the company</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bricks and mortar, dot-com company or information seller
<i>People</i>	<p>“For whom is the community built?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customers with the same geographic location, demographic situation, topic or profession
<i>The purpose of the community from the customer's perspective</i>	<p>“Why does the community exist? What is the value of the community for its members?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interest, relationship, games, transaction
<i>The purpose of the community from the supplier's perspective</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct revenues, increased efficiency, acquiring new customers, making new innovations, getting an insight and building stronger relationships
<i>Policies</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there hosts and how active are they? • Are there written rules or protocols? • Does the member have to register? • Can the member act anonymously?
<i>Services</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All interactive software: Discussion forum, chat, contests, Q&A's etc.

The first dimension, 'Business logic of the company', clarifies whether the company is a dot-com company, traditional bricks and mortar company or an information seller (Klang & Olsson 1999; see also Chaffey 2002; Turban et al. 2002).

The second dimension, 'People', refers to the potential participants. Due to the commercial perspective of this study, the dimension 'People' is divided into the two groups: the maintaining company, the supplier in this case, and the customers. Further, the customers are divided into four categories: people based on same geographic location, demographic situation, topic or profession. Communities targeted to the people who have same geographic location are formed around a physical location in which all the community's participants have a common interest, because they are physically located here. Communities for the people who have the same kind of demographic situation focus on, for example gender, life stage or

origin. Communities that are targeted for the people who have a shared topic to discuss are for people who share an interest or passion such as sport, music, leisure or any other interest. For the same profession targeted online communities are focused for b-to-b services. (Preece 2000, 2001; Hagel & Armstrong 1997; Kim 2000; Chaffey 2002).

Again, due to the commercial perspective of this study, we divided the dimension 'Purpose' in two dimensions: the purpose from the customer's and supplier's (ie. maintaining company's) perspectives. 'Purpose of the community from the customer's perspective', which is the third dimension, gives an answer to the following questions: "Why does the community exist and what is the value of the community for its members?" The purpose of the community is a very central element in building successful online communities (Kim 2000). According to Hagel and Armstrong (1997) interest, relationship, games and transaction are the reasons why people join online communities.

Referring to Cothrel (2000), there are four main objectives of the companies for maintaining online communities. The fourth dimension, 'Purposes of the community from the supplier's perspective divides purposes into direct revenues, acquiring new customers, increasing efficiency and making new innovations and building stronger relationships.

The fifth dimension is called 'Policies', in the form of tacit assumptions and protocols that guide people's interactions. These are really important elements when creating a community and keeping it manageable, because they bring a community's beliefs and values into focus by celebrating what's admired and letting people know what won't be tolerated. (Kim 2000; Preece 2000).

The sixth dimension is 'Services', which includes all interactive software in the community (see Kim 2000; Preece 2000). This software makes it possible for people to have interaction with each other in different ways.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Business logic of the company

First of the studied dimensions was the business logic of the maintaining company. There were 17 traditional bricks and mortar companies with limited online presence among the cases. However, due to their big investments in the Web some of them could be called as "clicks and mortar" companies (Chaffey 2002, 54), businesses combining an online and offline presence. The remaining 13 companies were interpreted as being dot-com companies. They were trading over the Internet with their customers. In our observation we could not identify any company gathering member information and selling it as suggested by Klang & Olsson (1999).

From the six communities targeted for professional customers only one was maintained by a dot-com company (16,7%) while the communities targeted for consumers were divided evenly between the traditional and dot-com companies. Dot-com companies maintained

mainly communities for demographic groups. The division of the companies' business logic and their customers is depicted in Table 3.

Table 3. The business logic and customer groups of the community maintaining companies

	Customer groups	Demographic	Geographic	Topic	Professional	Total
Business logic	Bricks and mortar	Count 3	2	7	5	17
		% within Target 30,0%	100,0%	58,3%	83,3%	56,7%
	Dot-com	Count 7		5	1	13
		% within Target 70,0%		41,7%	16,7%	43,3%
	Total	Count 10	2	12	6	30
		% within Target 100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

People

The majority of community maintainers did not explicitly express their target customers or desired participants. We had to interpret them on the basis of the purpose of the community and the scope of the communication. In some cases, we could identify multiple target customers. For example, in communities with many sub-communities, each of them could have their own target customers. However, we selected only one customer group from each community that was noticed to be dominant or mentioned by the company for the classification. The group was deduced on the basis of the scope of the community, in some cases it was directly written down on the site. Sometimes the community's customers could have been classified in two or more categories at the same time. For example, because of Finnish language used in the community's communication, it is natural that the community has also some geographical or linguistic limitations. Table 4 presents frequencies of different customer groups.

Table 4. Customer groups of the communities

Customer groups	Frequency	Percent
Demographic	10	33,3
Geographic	2	6,7
Topic	12	40,0
Professional	6	20,0
Total	30	100,0

The majority of the studied communities, 24, was targeted for the consumers, while the rest were professional-oriented. Half of the consumer-oriented communities focused on people with a common topic. In demographic target groups there were communities targeted for

women (three cases), for young people (two cases), for parents (two cases), for people with same nationality (two cases) and for intelligent people (one case).

The purpose of a community for customers

We related the findings concerned to the purposes of the participating customers by using the classification introduced by Armstrong and Hagel (1997), i.e., interest, relationship, fun and transactions. However, we relabeled the dimension ‘fantasy games’ by using the term ‘entertainment’ to be able to have all similar purposes under this dimension.

The purpose of the community was concluded by the material that was written on the Web sites. If there was no written text about the purpose, the answer was left empty. Table 5 presents the frequencies of different purposes classified in four classes. Some of the communities offered multiple purposes for the customers to engage in the community. For example, on Duuni.net’s Web sites (<http://www.duuni.net>) the purpose was written as follows: ”In Duuni.net people can discuss about business, computer science or leisure time activities or just read others opinions. There people can meet their old friends and get also new contacts and get new ideas.”

Table 5. The purpose of a community for customers

Purpose	Frequency	Percent
Entertainment	3	10,0
Interest	9	56,2
Relationship	7	43,8
Transactions	13	76,4

On their sites, 16 communities expressed their purpose while 14 didn’t mention anything about the purpose on their Web sites. Eight of 13 dot-com companies had their purpose written down, and in the traditional companies the same ratio was nine of 17 communities. Half of the professional targeted communities had the purpose written down on their Web sites.

The purpose of a community for suppliers

The purpose of the community for suppliers was interpreted by activities aiming at immediate or prolonged profit from the community. The commercial nature of the studied communities materialized in the way depicted in Table 6.

Table 6. Commercial activities of the communities

Objectives	Frequency	Percent
Selling ads	18	60,0
Fees	4	13,3
Having partnerships	6	20,0
Shop	11	36,7
Other	1	3,3

All of the objectives were found connected to augmenting incomes or cutting costs. These aspects are closely related to one of Cothrel's (1999) objectives, increasing efficiency. 18 of 30 communities sold advertisements on their sites, 4 had membership fees and 11 had some incomes from the shop. Furthermore, 16 communities mentioned that they have sponsorship or partnerships.

No supplier mentioned directly on their site that the community was for acquiring new customers, increasing efficiency, making new innovations, getting an insight or building stronger relationships. However, there were at least ten communities that didn't seem to have any other clear objectives than to use the community in some of these purposes. For example, none of the professional communities seemed to have any other reason to maintain the community. Dot-com companies, in general, seemed to utilize more the above mentioned ways to obtain incomes than traditional companies. For example, 11 of 13 dot-com companies sold ads while among traditional companies the amount was 7 of 17. Interestingly, none of the communities targeted to professionals had ads on the sites.

Community policies

When studying community policies we focused on such issues as anonymity, hosts, registration and rules, which were observed or reviewed on the Web sites of the communities. These dimensions were chosen to best illustrate the policies, protocols and rules mentioned in the theoretical literature. Preece (1999) and Kim (2000) stress the importance of rituals in the community, but this dimension was too complicated to study without a longer observation period. Therefore, they were beyond our reach. The findings of the policies are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Community policies

Dimension	Frequency	Percent
Anonymity	29	96,7
Hosts	14	46,7
Registration	21	70,0
Rules	22	73,3
Other	3	10,0

With the exception of one community, we found people could act anonymously on the sites without having to inform their real identity to anyone else than the maintaining company. Actually, that was the recommended way due to the privacy and security matters.

On their Web sites, 14 communities mentioned that they have hosts or moderators. However, there was a big difference in the activity level of the moderators meaning that in some communities the moderators were actively involved in discussions while in some of communities their role was not particularly visible. One community also had their values written on their Web site.

Some kinds of rules, netiquette or guidelines were found on 22 communities' Web sites. In 22 communities people were asked to register if they wanted to join in a discussion. In most of the registration forms people were asked to give at least their names and their email addresses. However, in most communities, discussions could be followed without registration.

Services

Services refer here to the interactive software that was identified in the case communities. As depicted in Table 8, the most common service was the discussion forum; 29 communities of 30 had it. The next most popular services were the chat and the shop. When looking at the Q & A's (questions and answers) software, we took into account only interactive services and ignored the FAQ (frequently asked question) services. In 'other'-category we identified services like events, dating service and possibility to give recommendations. For example iVillage (www.ivillage.com) offers to its members chat, discussion forum, quizzes, games and shop.

Table 8. Community software services

Element	Frequency	Percent
Auctions	2	6,7
Chat	13	43,3
Contests, quizzes	7	23,3
Discussion forum	29	96,7
Flea market	3	10,0
Games	3	10,0
Q & A's	9	30,0
Membership reward program	2	6,7
Shop	13	43,3
Other	13	43,3

The results also showed that two professional communities offered a membership reward program. In one case this meant that after gathering some amount of points by answering other members' questions, a member could get something free from the community's shop. In the other case, active members were rewarded by placing their names on the list of the top members on the site. All of the professional communities had a discussion forum, and one of

them had a question and answer site. Furthermore, one of them also had a shop. The suppliers in the professional communities also offered other services like an email box (one case) and events for their members (two cases).

The difference between the dot-com and traditional suppliers materialized in the software enabling the online auctions. The communities offering this opportunity were both dot-com companies. In other services, there were no big differences between traditional and dot-com companies.

CONCLUSIONS

In this study the idea was to develop the classification of commercial online communities by selecting dimensions, which can be used to classify online communities. These dimensions were selected from earlier theories of online communities, and adapted for the commercial online communities. The rationality of these dimensions was tested empirically among 30 commercial online communities.

Due to the limited sample of communities and the nature of the method used, there are some limitations, which need to be noted before generalizing the results. It is possible that the sample could have some bias. Also the research method, which didn't include interviews, may have caused some loss of finding due to interpretations. Yet, the nature of this study is exploratory to identify characteristics and creating an early proposition for a new conceptual framework for the classification of commercial online communities. All in all, the study contributed to the marketing theory by identifying suppliers' and customers' different motives for engaging in the online community.

The dimension capturing the business logic of the maintaining company was found to be a useful dimension for comparing two kinds of communities. The studied 30 communities maintained by traditional or dot-com companies didn't have many differences. However, dot-coms aimed more for direct incomes than traditional companies. A deeper research by another method may reveal more interesting facts of similarities and differences of these two kinds of communities.

The study showed that the dimension called 'People', the possible customers, can be divided into four groups, distinguished by the geography, demography, topic or profession. The division between professional and consumer targeted communities gives a particularly clear distinction between the b-to-c and b-to-b communities. In some cases there are many target groups in communities as subgroups. Thus, selecting the dominant is a more challenging task.

In some dimensions there were some problems to gain proper data by the selected method. 'Purpose of the community from customers perspective' and also 'Purpose of the company's perspective' were not written on the Web sites in many cases. In that dimension, a different method than online document review and observation would be preferred to be able to reveal the objectives. However, all kind of transactions from information to shopping were the most common purpose for the customers and selling ads the most common way to have more incomes among these 30 communities. It appears that the objective of many communities is also related to customer relationship marketing (CRM) more than direct incomes. Every one

of the researched dot-com companies had ads on their sites and also the marketplaces were quite common. It is notable that studied communities for professionals didn't have any advertisements on their sites.

In 'Policies', the dimension that studied the different policies, protocols and rules, communities were quite a homogenous group. It seems that most of the communities have their rules written on the Web sites and they encourage people to stay anonymous, because of the privacy matters. Referring to study, communities didn't usually have their values on the Web sites.

The dimension 'Services' included all the interactive software in communities. 'Services' was not so effective tool to classify different communities but gave information about the variety of software in online communities. Discussion forums seem to be the mostly common software to create interaction. Only one of the researched communities did not offer any kind of discussion forum. Actually, in many cases it was the only service and enough to create a community. The communities focused on professional people offered a membership reward program, but generally less other services than other communities.

Finally, commercial online communities are quite a heterogeneous group because of the maintaining companies' different backgrounds and purposes, but in many dimensions, they have also homogenous elements as having discussion forums and same kind of rules. Actually, we would propose that services offered on a community's Web site are a dynamic synthesis of a supplier's business logic, the purpose of a community and people participating in a community.

Our research shows that to understand the community's purpose more deeply, it is necessary to conduct a survey or interviews, because of the limited information available from their Web sites. However, as a preliminary study of classification, this study showed that based on these dimensions, communities can be understood better as a strategic marketing tool of companies.

This study points to several new research avenues. Both qualitative and quantitative research is needed in order to develop the theory of commercial online communities. Research on the definition and classification of commercial online communities is needed as well as more knowledge of their characteristics and role as a marketing tool and as a part of companies' strategy needs to be analyzed. This study also raises questions about how online communities maintained by traditional companies differ from communities maintained by dot-coms, and how for professionals targeted communities differ from consumer targeted communities. To study these issues we recommend a longer period ethnographic approach to the community sites.

Referring to the studied 'Policies' dimension, it would be interesting to study how anonymity affects the discussion, what kind of privacy politics communities have, what kind of differences there are in hosting cultures and how companies use the information in their relationship marketing. Also rituals in online communities, which were not taken into our research frame, would be an interesting area to expand this research. Indeed, future research is needed in many areas of this multidisciplinary phenomenon.

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Communities in the empirical study

Name of the community	Web site address
Ancestry.com	http://www.ancestry.com
AOL	http://www.aol.com
Apple	http://www.info.apple.com
BBCi	http://www.bbc.co.uk
Club Nokia	http://www.club.nokia.com
Duuni.net	http://www.duuni.net
eBay	http://www.ebay.com
Ellit	http://www3.soneraplaza.fi/ellit
Ezboard	http://ezboard.com
FamilyFun	http://family.go.com/boards
Forum Nokia	http://www.forum.nokia.com
Heineken International	http://www.Heineken.com
Huuto.net	http://www.huuto.net
Internet movie database	http://www.imdb.com

iVillage	http://www.ivillage.com
Jewish.com	http://www.jewish.com
Jippii	http://www.jippii.fi
Mainio	http://www.mainio.net
MSN	http://www.msn.fi
Nicehouse.fi	http://www.nicehouse.fi
Office Community	http://www.microsoft.com/office/community
SAP Community	http://www.sap.com
Shell.com	http://www.shell.com
Sooda.com	http://www.sooda.com
Sulekha	http://www.sulekha.com
SunSpot.net	http://www.sunspot.net
Suomi24.fi	http://www.suomi24.fi
The Well	www.well.com
ThirdAge	http://www.thirdage.com
YLE	http://www.yle.fi

