



**Doctoral School of
Business Administration**

SUMMARY OF THESES

Tamás Viktor Csordás

**User participation as a marketing communications tool
in the age of digital media**

Ph.D. dissertation

Supervisor:

Dr. Dóra Horváth, Ph.D.

Associate Professor

Budapest, 2015

Department of Media, Marketing Communications and Telecommunication

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I. Preliminaries and aims of the study

The topic of the present dissertation is the phenomenon of consumer participation in the value creation process for organizations, and in particular, the marketing communications effects thereof. The sustained research interest in the topic for the past 15 years shows that not only digital media is a novel area that needs to be studied, but that the study of digital media as a complex phenomenon has now secured a high social relevance and a broadened and deepening knowledge of the medium is now required, backed up by the recognition that entirely new working mechanisms seem to more and more take shape. At the same time, while this new digital environment has many innovations in store for consumers as well as organizations, the underlying driving forces can by no means be referred to as new. What makes it especially important to releasing a similar summary work is the extend these underlying phenomena take in this new environment: while in the past participating consumers might have only been referred to as a small, bold, and eccentric segment of society, the phenomenon of consumer participation has more and more entered (not independently of the empowerment offered by digital technology) the mainstream of social processes and the focus of attention. Yet, one can conclude, that there is hardly enough scientific knowledge about the phenomenon.

“Brands do not exist in a void. Regardless whether or not a company participates online, consumers are constantly talking online about companies and services” (Johnston, 2011: 84). The communications environment can thus be defined as a many-to-many, “aggressively interactive” (Rust et al., 2010: 96) environment, where all participants can take the role of information source, and where an organization (even for the message of their own brand, product or service) is hardly one of many information emitters. Hence the perception of postmodern marketing, according to which marketing communications can and should not be about only disseminating pieces of information, but it should rather focus on communications as a partnership, where meaning and value creation are performed with the active participation of consumers and other stakeholders present in the communication environment (Mitev – Horváth, 2008).

As most organizations have no other choice but to enter the field of social media marketing and communications, this can no longer be considered an innovation in marketing communications, which brings about the phenomenon of advertising clutter (Ha – McCann,

2008) to the ecosystem, where it is essential for the organization to manage to be an effective participant of the environment.

The main focus of the dissertation is thus to explore the opportunities for firms' marketing communications lying in user-generated media and the diffusion thereof.

The dissertation's scientific goal is to contribute to the literature on consumer empowerment and online information diffusion by offering marketing-focused insights to them. Another scientific goal is to examine the concept of consumer value creation as a focal point in the framework of an empirical study thus offering a contribution to the framing of the concept and to the understanding of the underlying working mechanisms, while providing a starting point for further research on the marketing communication impact of consumer value.

An important practical significance of the study is to highlight the fact that new media is a complex environment and its use in marketing communications cannot be a goal in itself (contrarily to the still too many apparent examples in practice today), rather a strategic tool which needs to be an integral part of (and therefore fit into) the organization's wider marketing and management strategy (see e.g. Csordás et al., 2014). The dissertation introduces the fields of user-generated content into this strategic approach in order for potential advertisers to be able to effectively plan and execute marketing communications tasks relevant to this new environment. By this goal, we aim to draw the attention to the marketing significance of user-generated contents (Krishnamurthy – Dou, 2008). At the same time, the dissertation is a cautionary tale about the dangers related to the using of active user participation for business means.

II. Methodology

II.1. Used methodology

The dissertation studies a paradigm shift in marketing communications in the process. The experimental, exploratory methodology chosen for the empirical study of the dissertation is a reflection of this changing environment, through which we aim to gain insights into a turbulent environment, and thereby offer theoretical and empirical handholds and foundations for future research.

The main study of the dissertation is a qualitative study, an observant netnography. The main aim of a qualitative study in the fields (netnography, content analysis) is to analyze a changing environment, to explore new consumption patterns in order to offer relevant research questions for further studies. In this respect our study is highly exploratory and has many connection with the method of grounded theory (Kozinets, 2006; Mitev, 2012).

Netnography, as developed by Robert V. Kozinets, is a research philosophy regrouping general research principles for social sciences in the study of digital environments. According to Kozinets (2006) the possible methods used in netnographic studies can be as diverse as content analysis, projective techniques, narrative analysis, semiotic analysis (the study of signs and their meanings, e.g. the language and abbreviations used within brand communities), various visual research methods (e.g. visual content analysis), interviews and queries of online users, kinesic studies (e.g. eye tracking studies). He also states that it is preferable to incorporate of several methods of research and triangulate the result thereof for the best interpretation of the answers to a research question. In our study our primary research method is that of qualitative content analysis.

Our research focuses on the study of the new communication space's macro environment where a larger community of users form a common cultural entity based on the common understanding of various signs, language elements and cultural artifacts. Our concrete study examines one of these cultural entities, namely internet memes. In the study of memes as message-transmitting interfaces we used the framework of a targeted, convenience sample (based on preliminary studies) of internet memes based on a pre-determined thematic (the Game of Thrones tv/book series).

11.2. Research questions

- RQ1: How user-generated contents as cultural goods contribute to creating tangible marketing communication value?
- RQ2: What types of latent corporate and brand connections (i.e. consumer meanings) can be identified through user manifestation?
- RQ3: How does the organization get into the spotlight during peer-to-peer interactions? How can a company derive market intelligence from users expressing or suggesting their needs in connection with a particular activity?
- RQ4: What types of value-added levels of consumer contribution can be identified? How can each level be characterized, and what touchpoints can be identified between them?
- RQ5: How do delighters and dissatisfiers of value work in these cultural entities? How can a company enhance perceived customer value using these channels and contents?
- RQ6: How are less active members socialized within a community?

11.3. Data collection and sample properties

Data collection was performed on entries and contents of various internet and social media sites (arbitrary, directed sampling). Directed sampling is a non-probability sampling technique which can be effective in the case of a focused research framework (e.g. a narrow cultural area) where the role and potential contribution of informants is more important for answering the research question than the representativity of the study (Lincoln – Guba, 1985, Wallendorf – Belk, 1989 in Kozinets, 2002).

Our study investigates cultural artifacts and user-generated creative expressions outside of the field of brand communities, reachable to the “average consumer”. The unit of our analysis is internet memes, the population comprises all internet memes related to the Game of Thrones universe.

The reason behind choosing the framework of Game of Thrones was its role in popular culture, i.e. a wide awareness and topicality, as well as the intense and extensive user activity related to it.

To confirm that the Game of Thrones universe is fit for serving as a base for our main study, we conducted a multi-phase exploratory study. In a first stance, we performed an initial exploratory observation (Dörnyei – Mitev, 2010) on the available internet memes and various contents in the Game of Thrones universe. In this phase we were searching using search engines for the terms “Game of Thrones”, “Game of Thrones memes”, “George RR Martin memes” as well as various other terms stemming from these latter (e.g. “You know nothing memes”) with the goal of identifying potential internet sites for sampling. This research phase that lasted for about two months can be characterized as the phase of immersion into the topic that made the in-depth study of user meaning-generation possible.

Parallel to this, a preliminary feasibility study was performed. Here, university students were tasked with creating internet memes that were later analyzed for the topics appearing within. The analysis of this exploratory sample showed that the internet memes created in the Game of Thrones thematic offer a sufficiently flexible framework, and the underlying meanings are sufficiently broad for enabling users to transfer a wide variety of messages throughout (Fisher – Smith, 2011: 343). Based on the above, we concluded that the Game of Thrones universe was fit for conducting a more in-depth study.

Table 1. Phases of the cultural entrée

November 2014	Framing of the research topic; Search for resources; Study of various media brands that generate a large number of internet memes; Selection of the final research context <i>output: Game of Thrones universe finalized as the framework of study</i>
December 2014	Exploratory study: student sample (task: generate own Game of Thrones memes and write a narrative about the context thereof) and related feasibility study <i>output: The Game of Thrones universe is relevant for conducting a marketing focused empirical study</i>
December 2014 – January 2015	Immersion; Finding internet sites and spaces related to the topic; Narrowing the potential spaces for sampling; Observations; Research notes; Preliminary sampling <i>output: Determining the directors and spaces for sampling; Preparation of sampling; Research notes.</i>
End of January 2015	Sampling from chosen sites and spaces; Complementary sampling; Data cleaning; Finalization of the research sample <i>output: Research sample composed of 715 internet memes</i>

Following the view that netnographers are methodological bricoleurs (Kozinets, 2006: 132) we used a multi-source sample. The reason behind this was a better fit for our research questions. For example, we discarded the use of a sampling composed only of search engine results (e.g. Kucuk, 2014) for being too narrow and specific to one or another given meme

template. This latter would have offered a sample visually more homogenous but more diverse in terms of content and meanings. Parallel to that, the exclusive use of one or another meme image aggregator (e.g. Reddit, 9GAG) was equally discarded. In this case, one specific site could have been considered as a community or a subculture, with peculiar distinguishing marks, which once again was against our initial will of examining a larger cultural context. Therefore, following the indications of grounded theory methodology on theoretical saturation (Sandelowski, 2008) we used each selected site in our sampling to a point when disturbing redundancies and/or uninteresting or incomprehensible content streams were found. This process led to determining of a sampling threshold for each site present in our sample. Making use of the adaptive nature of netnography, we conducted a complementary sampling based on our initial research phase with the goal of offering a more comprehensive base for analysis. During sampling it was possible in many cases to follow a number of links or references provided by the uploaders and/or commenters (e.g. by observing the discussions related to the posted meme image, or images displayed at the opening of the result of an image search, etc.). User discussions related for given internet memes (apart from a few exceptionally interesting cases recorded in our research notes) were not taken into account for the sake of the present research.

Our sampling methodology consisted of downloading the images to be included in the final sample accompanied by the building of a database with the coordinates of and other notes about the downloaded contents (e.g. related internet sites, occurring topics, research notes, etc.). These research notes were used in the following data analysis. The structure of the final sample can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. The research sample

Source	Description	Threshold	Sample size after data cleaning
9GAG	Social media website of general entertainment that enables users to share user-generated images.	first 100 most popular entries with the “thrones” tag	97
		complementary sample of the first 25 most popular entries with the “george rr martin” tag	23
Memes landing .com	Specialized meme aggregator.	first 200 most popular entries	175
		complementary sample of additional relevant entries outside of the domain of the fixed threshold	23
Reddit	An entertainment, social networking, and content sharing website built around special areas of interest (called subreddits). Sampling here was limited to visual entertainment content related to the Game of Thrones universe, available on the related subreddit (/r/aSongOfMemesAndRage/).	first 200 most popular (on Reddit, referred to as “upvoted”) entries	171
		complementary sample of additional relevant entries outside of the domain of the fixed threshold	7
other	Complementary search engine findings (e.g. Google Images searches and sites found by virtue thereof [e.g. thematic Pinterest sites, articles on the best Game of Thrones memes, etc.]; additional 9GAG and Reddit sources).		219
<i>Total:</i>			<i>n = 715</i>

III. Results of the study

III.1. Theoretical background

The dissertation's theoretical foundation is threefold. First, starting from the classic consumer value theory of marketing it unfolds - using the recent advances in services marketing, experience marketing or consumer culture theory - a broader scope and understanding of a postmodern, consumer-centered marketing value. Following that, the dissertation examines the aspects of consumer participation in marketing value creation. It analyzes consumer power theory as an enabler of consumer participation, leading to a presentation of the various forms and potential outputs thereof. In a final part, the dissertation gives an overview of the social aspects and manifestations of consumer value in marketing communications - within brand communities, and without, e.g. through user-generated media, i.e. cultural goods.

III.2. Meme status

A special feature of our research is that it studies a meme in the traditional and scientific sense on channels referred to as memes by the internet folk. While the traditional (and scientific) approach to memes has abstract and often controversial subjects, the colloquial interpretation refers to very specific contents (and to their derivatives). Moreover, while memetic studies focus on cultural entities that are successful on a long term, internet memes are creations with a high topicality and a sudden success, that may or may not become successful on the long term (Shifman, 2013). In order to ensure a seamless transition between the academic and colloquial meanings of the concept of memes, Wiggins and Bowers (2014: 11) offer a hierarchical system of memetization. According to this latter, memes are initially in a (1) maintenance mode. In this phase, a content needs to fulfill the basic requirement in the way to become a meme, that is, to be spreadable (Jenkins et al., 2013), i.e. to be interesting in some respect to be disseminated by users in their original form. In case of (2) emergent memes, success brought about by spreading content is activated and a given content involves users to a point to trigger imitation and creative reinterpretation: active bricoleurs add new context and creative content to the original idea (Horváth et al., 2014). Emergent memes are topical, and can somehow be related to the original context and message. An idea becomes a (3) meme (in its original, scientific meaning) when it reaches a critical mass. Its basic idea becomes universal, cultural reinterpretation and potential subcultural aspects are replaced by mass audiences and mass usage. The original message and context are largely lost at this stage, the

meme becomes self-serving. This process is greatly facilitated by the so-called meme templates.

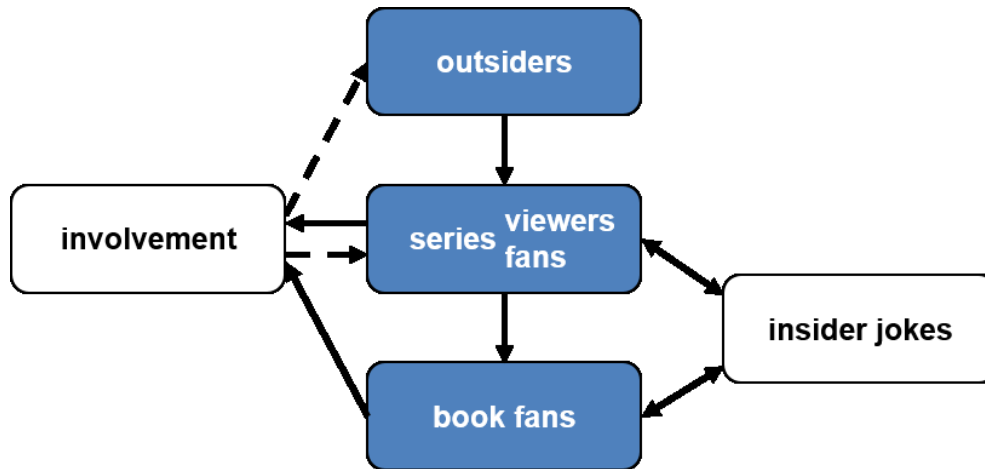
The research universe in itself can be considered a wider-scale meme in the sense that the tv-series thanks to its wide audience and awareness, unites a great number of people and generates high involvement and contribution from their part. As a cultural entity, we identified only one internet meme (template) that can be considered a meme in its original meaning („brace yourselves, winter is coming” meme). In the context of the latter, many examples of messages were found that had no connection whatsoever with the original message, a possible reference to its meme status: the meme is so embedded into popular culture and its language, that many users resort to this meme when wanting to express in a dramatic way something that is about to come. By the phenomenon of consumer hyperreality and through the alternative universe it offers, a meme like this contributes to the mythification of the brand. Moreover, memefication can play an important part in increasing brand awareness and brand associations by offering active users creative elements that can be directly linked to the series (e.g. stills or quotes taken from the series) and time spent with the brand through user conversations. Moreover, the slipstream of one widely recognized meme can contribute to the creation of various more or less related emergent memes, as can be observed in the sample.

III.3. From intertextuality to “group dynamics”

The use of external meme templates in expressing messages related to the Game of Thrones universe raises the matter of intertextuality. Moreover, in order to decode some of the messages, much of the humor or sarcasm included in the memes of the sample, the receiver is often required to possess a specific cultural literacy, which can in turn function as an element of group cohesion. Similarly to previous netnographic research (e.g. Kozinets, 1999), a group dynamic can be observed through the creative messages included in the sample. The scientific significance of this finding is given by the fact that the study did not focus on conventional conversations, but visual contents obtained from various sources: in this sense, our finding might be an indication to the strong role of internet memes in culture transmission and peer-to-peer communications.

Based on the sample we divided the creators of these visual messages into three categories: (1) outsiders, (2) viewers of the tv-series and (3) book readers.

Figure 1. Group dynamics and value creation processes based on meme messages



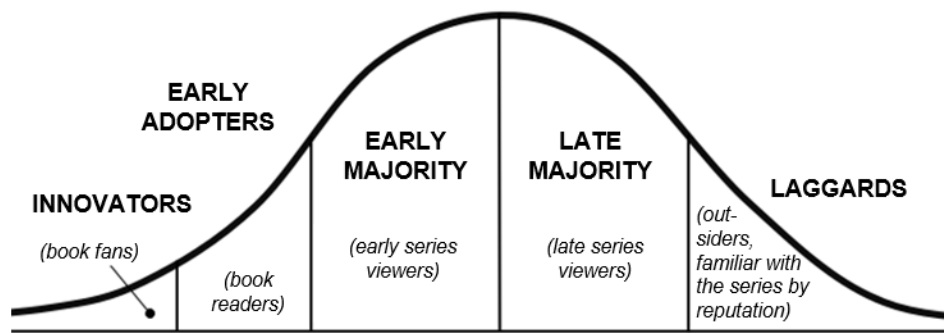
The presence of an (1) outsider group is somewhat of a surprise, as these are the users that are expressly not consumers of the contents related to the Game of Thrones universe. Yet, they contribute to the series by creating messages about it and through these messages, get included into a sample about the series. The largest group is that of (2) the viewers of the tv-series. The main “product” that can be identified in the sample can equally be related to this group, namely the tv-series itself. This is an indication to the fact that the tv-series produced by HBO is the main source of consumer associations and not the books, even though the existence of these precede the series by 10 years. Also for this reason, (3) book readers as a group seem to perceive reading the series as a ritual. Also, an air of elitism emerges with a notable information superiority. This latter finding implies an important role of this group for Game of Thrones as a brand: as innovators and early adopters they define and disseminate certain behavioral patterns related to the consumption thereof (Busse – Gray, 2011).

According to our results, the involvement of less active users takes two identified patterns. First, between book fans and viewers of the series and second, between viewers and outsiders, who are unaware of the series. In addition to user education, user involvement may include elements like an emphasis on product benefits or a continued media presence. Product benefits coming from users (i.e. meme creators) perceived as peers can be considered as consumer recommendations (Paek et al., 2011), thereby contributing to generating demand. The perceived popularity of the series can trigger a feeling of frustration and alienation in those that do not already watch the series, and a possible remedy for the subsequent cognitive dissonance is to start viewing the series. Game of Thrones as a topic of conversation triggered by the continued media presence can be considered as a social integrator and generating

internet memes in the topic can itself be considered a personal gratification related to social interactions. The social function equally manifests itself by the appearance of insider jokes, the dissemination of which within the groups and among various groups can be regarded as an element of group cohesion, where the context of a creative content can often go beyond that of the plot of the series.

Based on the identified elements related to the group dynamics of internet memes (Figure 1) we proceeded to elaborating the innovation curve of content consumption related to the Game of Thrones universe (Figure 2): the identified roles and related publication habits can function as a market prediction tool.

Figure 2. Innovation curve of the consumption of Game of Thrones

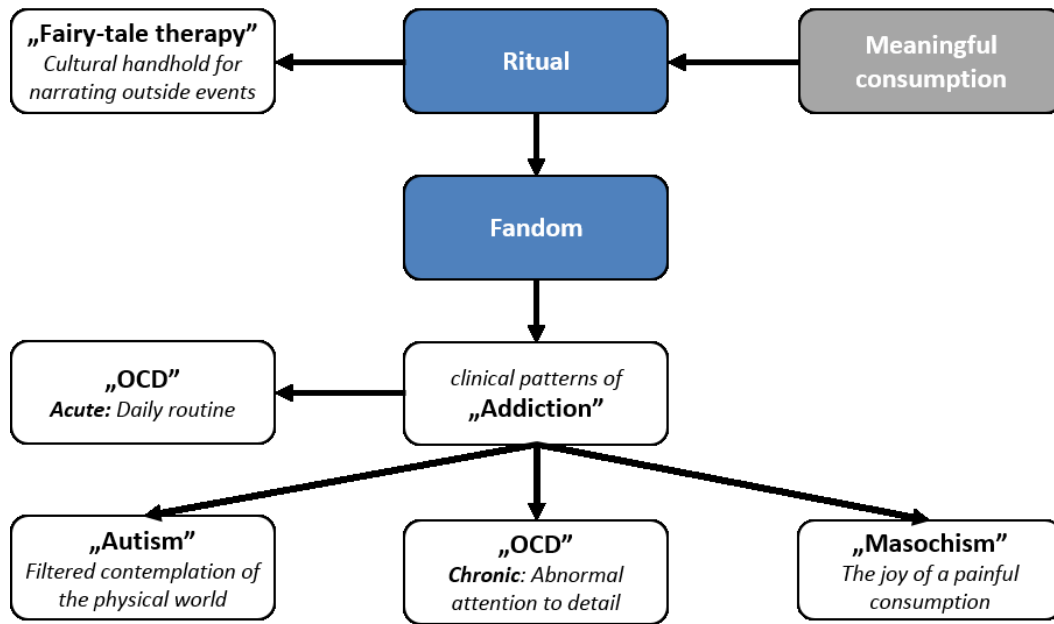


Source: own elaboration based on Rogers (1962)

III.4. Consumer meanings and dimensions of perceived consumer value

Our results highlight the fact that the consumption of the Game of Thrones series is not a mere time-filler, rather a meaningful activity for the active users participating in the meme creation process. Our results show a certain similarity of the patterns related to the consumption of the series (as suggested by the contents of the analyzed internet memes) and certain psychiatric symptoms (Figure 3), offering a valuable addition to the marketing approach to the phenomenon of fandom.

Figure 3. “Psychoanalysis of memes”: Patterns of consumer value creation in the sample



The meaningfulness of the series is revealed via rituals that express an increased emotional involvement.

Memes in the category dubbed “fairy-tale therapy” give a personal reflection to a current event or phenomenon that affects the lives of a wider group of people, using the framework of the creative elements of the Game of Thrones universe, which functions here as a cultural handhold.

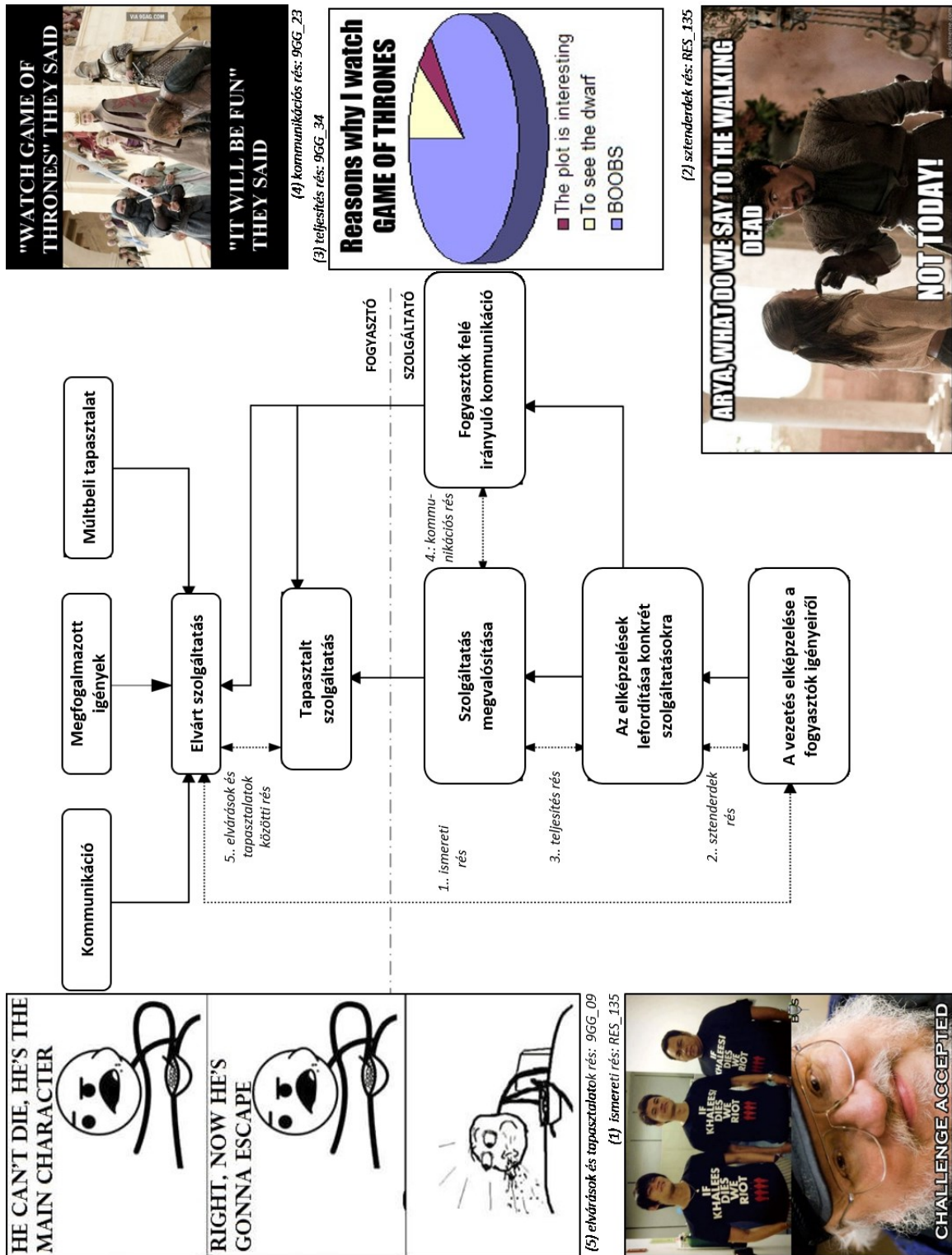
Fandom can be characterized by an active involvement. Contents that were classified into this category have the fact in common that meme creators leave the reality of the physical world behind show an escapist pattern of consumption by putting the Game of Thrones universe forward in their lives for a certain time. Consumer manifestations that were classified under the category of fandom show elements of admiration, fascination (i.e. delight) and even addiction. This latter implies that not only it is a meaningful and prioritized consumption, but can function – based to some indications in the sample – as a drug.

One separate and deeper identified dimension of fandom is the extension of one’s admiration to the physical world, by watching the world through the elements of Game of Thrones. This is the reason why this activity was compared to the condition of “autism”.

The consumption of Game of Thrones for many meme creators seems to amount as a masochistic experience: the peculiar, unforeseen and often brutal storytelling of the series is manifested as a value delighter.

In the category dubbed the “acute” form of “obsessive–compulsive disorder” the series equally becomes the basis of various community rituals. In its “chronic” form, users seem to project themselves into the story with their whole personality. The judicious and (by their role of avid, active fans) critical consumers can offer a print of perceived service quality through their creations: as one of the major contributions of our study, we managed to apply a major marketing model (Parasuraman et al.’s (1985) service gaps model) to a qualitative study of a sample of user-generated content (Figure 4). Organization that monitor user-generated content can take advantage of this information source in their marketing and communication planning processes by being able to generate visual mind maps about their brands.

Figure 4. An example of the use of traditional marketing models in a qualitative study: The services gaps model in the Game of Thrones memes

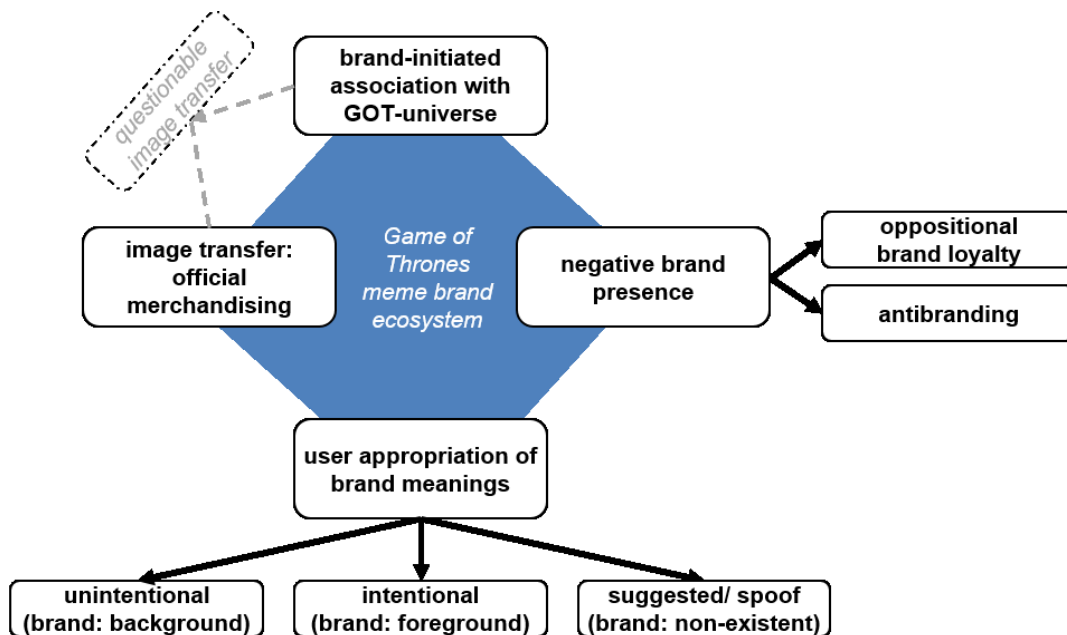


Source: own elaboration based on Parasuraman et al. (1985: 44)

III.5. Meme brand ecosystem

There was a surprising amount of brand-related elements in our sample composed essentially of user-generated cultural artifacts. We organized the commercial brands appearing in the sample into four categories (Figure 5): (1) brand-initiated brand presence, presence through a (2) user appropriation of brand meanings, (3) negative brand presence, and (4) merchandising.

Figure 5. Game of Thrones meme brand ecosystem



Within brand-initiated presence one could identify brand meanings of Game of Thrones and related social values appropriated by other commercial brands. In many cases small businesses resorted to a more or less conscious piggybacking on the success of the series (e.g. by a provocative choice of name, a shared insider joke with the consumers, and the viral echoes thereof).

Brands appearing in the peculiar context of Game of Thrones can imply that these brands are part of the pool of most accepted and/or best known brands of the group of active Game of Thrones content creators. This way, the objects with identifiable brands montaged next to fictional Game of Thrones characters might be a sign of a top-of-mind brand performance at a target group. Moreover thematic links in memes allow for users to illustrate a generic product or service category with a concrete brand. The latter can equally be a sign of the top-of-mind status of a brand. Another sign of increased brand awareness is the conscious use of the elements of (or similar elements to) a brand's identity for the sake of one's message.

This category offers a genuine reflection on the undergoing change in the communication space for brands: brand meanings can clearly be controlled by users who contribute to shaping a brand's image through various acts of brand meaning appropriation and hijacking. It is important to note that a community directly appropriating or adapting a brand's communication messages can contribute to the memefication of a brand message or the sustainment thereof. As our results suggest, spontaneous brand associations show deep consumer meanings (e.g. MasterCard, KFC, Starbucks). While brands appearing in user-generated contents is in itself a performance of a previous marketing communication activity of the organization, brand meaning appropriation is a form and manifestation of user voice and empowerment and as such, cannot be controlled by the company: a reasonable goal for the organization is therefore to handle these manifestations as actual factors of consumer value.

III.6. Main conclusions of the study

Users and consumers as active content creators can in themselves constitute a valuable target group for an organizations marketing (communications) activity, while the information appearing through the cultural artifacts they produce can serve as valuable marketing assets in the monitoring of a brand's social position.

In the study of consumer participation as a marketing communication tool we performed an analysis of the Game of Thrones meme ecosystem. User-generated content as cultural goods proved to be suitable for monitoring and collecting intelligence for both the focal brand (Game of Thrones) and other brands associated with the series' universe through user associations (RQ1).

Memes, as cultural goods with a wider audience offer for brands the possibility of additional brand encounters. Moreover, the experiential aspect of the consumption of primarily cultural goods makes it largely distinct from the actual situations of product or service consumption and therefore offers less formal brand encounters. At the same time user creativity and the related spontaneous associations can provide brand the monitor this ecosystem with countless pieces of latent market insight and intelligence (RQ2).

Memes often tend to essentialize, oversimplify and exaggerate the themes and topics they address. Internet memes are the imprint of a peculiar (simple, yet extremely expressive) representation of their generators' realities: while they are based on seized, spontaneous, unsolicited, but thereby authentic moments. These moments, when linked to a brand, can

often paint a ruthless, even though instructive picture of the role that the brand in question occupies in the public eye, its consumer meanings, its legitimacy (RQ3; RQ4).

While one cannot relate internet memes to one given community, these contents can act as a postmodern social space, where a number of group dynamic functions and thereby a form of modern tribalism (Cova – Cova, 2002) can be observed (RQ6). The peculiar language and widespread culture of internet memes (e.g. capturing noteworthy moments; making unusual associations; active creation and dissemination) (Horváth et al., 2014) make them suited to act as an alternative communication channel, which can be regarded as a kind of digital meta-communication system.

All in all, internet memes are an outstanding representation of consumer participation in the digital space. However, as cultural goods, receivers need to be in possession of certain cultural capital, that is, the awareness of the related cultural register(s). At the same time, it is worth noting that in the context of products or services, organizations equally have a role in educating their consumers thereby also facilitating the degree of involvement.

The participation in meme creation assumes a strong emotional involvement, that emphasize the role of delight and outrage in value creation (or destruction), instead of the more neutral satisfiers and dissatisfiers. This emotional charge can affect latent, tacit brand associations as well as service gaps, while the visual representations make them observable. As in many previous netnographies, group dynamics once again were found out to play a role, by letting users with strong ties to the brand (i.e. brand evangelists) play an important role in disseminating information and in educating other users, as well as in protecting the brand against attacks by other users (with, for example, opposing brand loyalties) (RQ4; RQ5).

III.7. Significance of the results

One scientific significance of the dissertation is the application of various traditional marketing models (e.g. the gaps model) in the evaluation of the consumer perception of value in an observational study of a qualitative sample of user-generated cultural artifacts. This result shows that similar approaches can be justified in marketing research (e.g. in connection with consumer culture theory research), in verifying related marketing models and results and observing latent or manifest consumer brand associations.

Proactive corporate communications are essential in the digital, many-to-many context where a brand presence can be reached through engaging in already existing relevant conversation in an honest, and if need be, self-critical manner. In exchange, the social space can function as a market prediction tool. This activity however requires a strategic approach from the organization with an emphasis on monitoring and learning, in order to unearth the core marketing sources of potential problems and respond accordingly, rather than using a sole mass communications approach.

User-generated content is perceived by users as an informal and unbiased communication space where brand presence is not forced, but organic, user-controlled and context-dependent. Similar brand encounters may contribute to an additional demand-generation function (by indirectly causing cognitive dissonance that the act of consumption may diminish) while the stimulated media presence can also contribute to raising consumption intensity. For a direct business use, emergent memes offer a greater potential because of their topicality, narrower target audiences and more concrete message. Because of their generality, global memes are subjected to a relatively important loss of the original meaning – unless, a strong semiotic marker is present. This works the same way in case a marketing message becomes a meme (e.g. visual markers or creative hooks of consumer brands that have the potential to become memes on their own). While a brand can be present visually and/or textually in a memefied internet meme, brand message transmission might still be limited because of the aforementioned loss or distortion of original meaning: targeted messages can easily get lost in the clutter of memes often incoherent or incomprehensible in their message and often too similar to each other in structure. At the same time a brand presence that can directly be identified with the brand even long after a related original marketing communications effort is the sign of an effective brand performance.

By reacting to the expressed needs and wants of various subcultural groups or neo-tribes through their content consumption activities, the digital channels allow organizations to become more easily part of users' everyday conversations and everyday life. All in all, compared to traditional mass media marketing communications, on one hand, this new environment comes with an increased level of responsibility for organizations, with, on the other hand, an increased yield potential.

III.8. Limitations and future studies

The creators, senders and diffusers of internet memes (as those of all forms of user-generated content) are generally hard to identify. Therefore in our study we can only make indirect assumptions as to the personality traits of a sender of a message, their motivations, etc. For this reason, as in similar qualitative studies, it is important here to avoid a new form of marketing myopia (Levitt, 1960): while the reduction of access barriers leads to an increased number of users becoming active content creators, the phenomenon still only touches a given segment of society (and thus consumers) as a whole (van Dijck – Nieborg, 2009). For this reason marketers will still face the task to build reasonable market intelligence out of the data and insights received through these new channels.

Our research, despite the rigorous planning and sampling process suffers from the customary flaws of qualitative research: the results can only be interpreted in the given context. Even though the result cannot be generalized, the scrupulous description of the research planning and sampling processes enables further research to repeat our inquiry or even to extend it to other - similar - contexts. Subsequent critical, comparative analyses can offer even deeper market and scientific insight into the working mechanisms of social and user-generated media and its potential for brands.

It is also possible for a future study to supplement a similar study of internet memes on a smaller sample with the observation of related user discussions. A complex content analysis might contribute to an even better understanding of the user meanings related to online user-generated visual contents and to the understanding of the immediate reactions they trigger.

IV. List of publications by the author in the dissertation's topic

Refereed journal articles (in English):

1. Csordás, T., & Gáti, M. (2014). The New (Marketing) Role of Firms as Media Content Providers - The case of SME's Strategic Social Media Presence, *Vezetéstudomány / Budapest Management Review*, 45(3) 22-32.
2. Csordás, T. (2013). The new role of consumer meanings and legitimacy in building marketing value. *Economists' Forum / Közgazdász Fórum*, 16(6) 27-48. URL: http://epa.oszk.hu/00300/00315/00107/pdf/EPA00315_kozgazdasz_2013_06_027-048.pdf

Refereed journal articles (in Hungarian):

3. Csordás Tamás & Nyirő Nóra (2012): Az információterjedés szerepe az innováció-elfogadásban: az okostelefonok és az online kollektív intelligencia, *Vezetéstudomány* 43(1) 64-73.
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5. Csordás, T., Markos-Kujbus É., & Gáti, M. (2014). The Attributes Of Social Media as a Strategic Marketing Communications Tool. *Journalism and Mass Communication*, 4(1) 48-71. URL: <http://www.davidpublishing.com/DownLoad/?id=15965>
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10. Csordás, T. (2013). The new role of consumer meanings and legitimacy in building marketing value. *International Conference on Economics and Business Management, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, November 23, 2013.*
11. Nyirő, N., Csordás, T. & Horváth, D. (2012). Participating audiences and media management. *European Media Management Education Association (emma) Annual Conference 2012, Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary, February 10-11. 2012.*
12. Csordás, T. & Horváth, D. (2010). Do Smart Phones Diffuse? Reflections of Online Consumer Content on the Diffusion of Innovation, *EMAC Regional Conference, Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary, September 24-25. 2010.*
13. Horváth, D., Bauer, A., Csordás T. & Mitev, A. (2010). Online vs. Offline Gossip as a Source of Corporate Communicative Advantage, *EMAC Regional Conference, Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary, September 24-25. 2010.*
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15. Markos-Kujbus Éva, Csordás Tamás, & Kiss Tünde (2014). Fogyasztók a vállalatok ellen? – A negatív online szájreklám a virtuális kereskedelmi közösségekben. *A Magyar Marketing Szövetség Marketing Oktatók Klubja 20. Országos Konferenciája*, Szegedi Egyetem, Szeged, 2014. augusztus 28-29.
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