



# Synergizing natural and research communities

Caring about the research ecosystem

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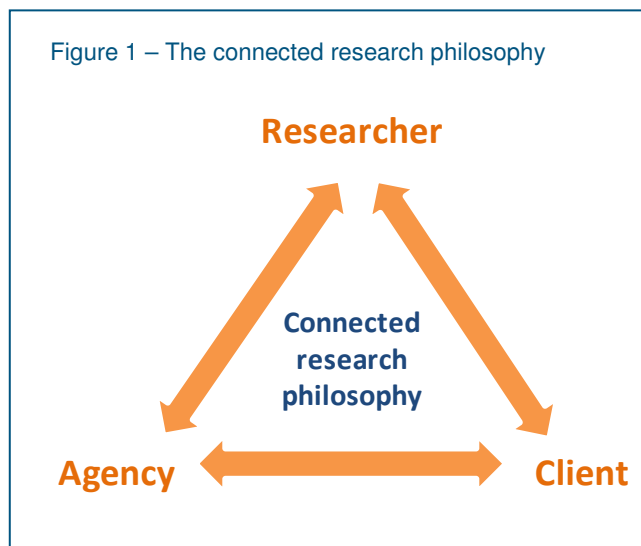
Research panels are under a lot of pressure: for far too long we have treated panels as ordinary databases. As a result, response rates to traditional surveys are in decline and it becomes harder to motivate people to participate in research projects. As researchers, we have to look into alternatives that still allow us to learn about the attitudes and behavior of consumers.

Thanks to the rise of social media, a whole new stream of consumer information became available and our industry is embracing it as the new Walhalla. By using methods like 'social media nethnography' in which online conversations and stories are observed, researchers learn from online sources of textual and visual information that are freely available (Verhaeghe, Van den Berge, Schillewaert, 2009). Instead of asking new input from research participants, existing information is recycled. Because consumers are free to talk about whatever they like, social media nethnography does not only provide answers on research questions one already had but it also gives answers to questions you they did not ask and answers without asking questions.

User-generated-content is a welcome new source of information for researchers. But unlike our research panels, we should treat this new ecosystem with caution and preserve it while we still can. We need to learn from the past when we experiment with new ways of doing research.

## The connected research philosophy

In market research projects, there are three important stakeholders: the research agency, the client and the consumer / research participant. Our objective in this paper is to explore how we can sustainably use the ecosystem of social media for research. We explore if we can create a 'win-win-win' situation and interact between all agents so that the combined effect is greater than the sum of the individual effects.



**The research agency.** The value of a new research methodology for researchers can be assessed on 3 dimensions. The method should make things more efficient; lead to better and richer information to be used to answer the research question or it should reveal new insights that cannot be discovered before (De Ruyck et al, 2009). Both social media nethnography and research communities stand the test. When combining both methodologies, researchers could go one step further by investigating the synergies between the two methods and triangulate findings.

Especially in terms of recruitment, research agencies could potentially benefit from natural communities. One of the key factors for the success of a research community is identification with the topic or brand that hosts the community. Because natural communities are centered on a common interest, we could be more efficient in attracting participants to the research community. This recruitment can be organized in

different ways going from just posting the invitation to the research community or by asking the community owner to contact community members directly.

Using social media for the recruitment of research communities is also beneficial at another level. The success of the research community depends on the number of answers on a specific research question. Therefore, we typically foresee a kick-off session through an online discussion group (in smaller groups) as a warming-up phase (De Ruyck, Schillewaert & Caudron, 2008). Recruiting people from a specific social media source has the advantage that there already is a natural bond and identification with the research topic (Sweeney & Web, 2007). We suppose that these participants will therefore be more active in the research community. Moreover, because of their natural bond and the trusted relationship this may stimulate them to talk more freely, which could lead to richer insights.

**The client.** Companies are embracing social media and research departments have not stayed behind. Social media nethnography has proven to be an excellent tool for insight generation, assessing online brand health, measuring communication effectiveness and learning more about customer experiences. It is a true listening tool that often reveals answers to questions one did not have. Still social media nethnography cannot answer all questions and has limitations. It is limited to what consumers spontaneously share. It does not allow testing new concepts like products or campaigns. Because of the focus on conversations rather than participants, it is difficult to generalize the findings of social media nethnography to a more representative population. Ideally, social media nethnography is thus complemented by other types of research that takes these limitations into account and still maintains the listening approach.

A popular and engaging way to get connected with contemporary consumers is via 'research communities', the research equivalent of natural communities. Both community types are similar in being asynchronous, centered around a common interest about a certain topic and the fact that social dynamics play a role (De Ruyck, Schillewaert & Caudron, 2008). While we know that the latter needs a period of accommodation and adequate moderation, people start having a certain 'community feeling' and as a result discuss more freely, openly and frequently. The advantage of research communities for clients is that they can be geared in

specific directions. In addition, clients can also join the conversation in research communities with a lower chance of hurting their commercial relationships. Because of such similarities, research communities can be the ideal methodology to fill in the blind spots from what we learn via social media nethnography.

**The research participant.** When conducting social media nethnography, the unit of analysis is the conversation rather than the participant. We collect a number of online conversations on a certain topic and we analyze and summarize their content. This does not mean that individuals are not research participants. True, the research participant did not explicitly opt in for the research project. They are more anonymous than in traditional research in the sense that we often do not even know basic demographic information. We depend on the information people spontaneously share about their identity to provide us with a basic idea on the sample characteristics. Still we are using their content in a way and the question is how can we respect the needs of this 'invisible' research participant?

A first important notion goes back to the concept of informed consent in research. Unlike in other types of research, consumers do not explicitly subscribe to social media nethnography. Still, they do share their content on a public domain like the internet, a source that has been used for secondary research since its existence. The central question here is if people are aware that their data can be observed for research purposes. Would they still share information if they knew? So what is the sustainability of this new research ecosystem?

Recently there has been a focus on creating more equality between researcher and participant (Comley, 2006). An important component in this mutual relationship is giving back to research participants. In traditional research, we try to achieve this by feedback results. To the best of our knowledge such practices in social media nethnography have not yet been applied. It could however be an element in making social media nethnography also a valuable experience for research participants.

As pointed out before, one of the client needs is to conduct complementary research to tackle unanswered questions. We can recycle existing information through social media nethnography but still need to ask specific questions. By adding a research community, we try to continue the conversation in a natural way without harming the natural interactions. Furthermore, we could adapt our communication style as much as possible to the customer vocabulary and style. As researchers, we do not always speak the same language as our

research participants. By using their wording, respondents could feel more at ease.

## Our research design

We set up a research design that incorporates all elements to assess how we can create a 'win-win-win' relationship and synergize social media and research communities. In line with what we discussed above our research design was threefold: (1) a research community with members of a natural community, (2) a benchmarking of the research community with natural members against communities with generally recruited participants and (3) a survey among social media users to assess their attitudes towards social media and market research.

### A. Research community with natural members

The combination of social media nethnography and research communities was explicitly tested in cooperation with **DANONE (Nutricia) Global R&D**. DANONE is active in the market of infant feeding. In order to improve their product offering, there was a need to better understand the concerns mothers experience when feeding their baby. The study for Danone was conducted in several steps:

- In a first step, we conducted **social media nethnography**. During the universe detection, we searched for online conversations on infant feeding. Those conversations were collected with the aid of webscraping technology and cleaned on duplicates and spam. In total we collected over 100.000 conversations in English on .co.uk websites from 2009-2010. The conversations were analyzed by applying the augmented research model for observational research (Verhaeghe, Van den Berge, Schillewaert, 2009). By conducting social media nethnography first, we wanted to avoid that we asked explicit questions for which the answers already exist. Moreover, it gave the opportunity to put topics for further analyses on the community research table.
- In a second step, we set up a **research community with mothers**. The aim of this community was to ask more specific questions on the physical characteristics of infant feeding. Danone also wanted feedback on a specific product idea – which for obvious reasons could not be found in natural communities.

**Recruitment.** For the recruitment of the community members, we identified different social media sources from the previous

nethnography study and searched for a source which had sufficient posts on infant feeding and would allow us to recruit research participants. The community owner of Babycentre.co.uk was approached and with their help we recruited 80 mothers for our research community. We ensured (via screening) that all mothers sufficiently visited Babycentre.co.uk so they were able to have some kind of social bond and a common interest.

**Conversation guide.** In order to make the young mums feel at ease in the research community we wanted to investigate what the effect would be if we adapted our language as much as possible to the natural consumer vocabulary on Babycentre.co.uk. The community was divided in two identical parallel groups. In group one, we asked the questions in typical more neutral research language whereas in the other group we used the typical communication style used by mothers on Babycentre.co.uk (e.g. their own slang). Therefore, we made a dictionary of commonly used terms and phrasings in the natural community that could be used to set up the conversation guide for the second group in the community.

### Example of consumer language

Dear mums,

**Lots of online chats** are about the amount of milk. Some mums share tips and tricks about **bf and ff**. While some are convinced it's better to feed on fixed times, other mums are firm believers of feeding on demand (when your **LO 'asks' for it** by for example start crying).

-What is your opinion on feeding time and duration?

-Which approach is **better for your LO**?

Thank you,  
Moderator Anouk

Typically as researchers we try to formulate our questions as neutral as possible. However, we found out that posts on baby.centre.co.uk were much more emotional and illustrative. Especially posts that generated a lot of conversations contained a lot of emotional wordings. In order to incorporate this emotionality in the research community, we re-used quotes from Babycentre.co.uk to illustrate

certain questions. As such we wanted to assess if such wordings generated more and better output.

We also found the average post length of a successful post on Babycentre.co.uk was significantly shorter than the normal post length in topic guides. As a result, we tried to respect this suitable length and did not use long question posts.

**Feedback before research.** We started the research community by feeding back a summary of the results of the social media nethnography. The aim of this phase was twofold: on the one hand, we wanted to make sure that every community member was aware that we observed their comments on the natural platform for research purposes. Secondly, we also wanted to give something back by providing them a useful summary of the nethnography study. At all times the community members had the chance to react on the social media nethnography as a method as well as on the findings. After the feedback phase, we started the discussion phase where we discussed the remaining research questions. The community ran for 3 weeks. At the end all participants completed a satisfaction survey

### B. Benchmark the community performance

To benchmark the effectiveness of recruiting community members via natural resources, we compared the community KPI's from the Danone community with the **KPI's from previous research communities** we conducted. We assessed: number of participant posts, identification with the community, general satisfaction, perceived informational benefits, social benefits, cognitive efforts and time investments (Ludwig, De Ruyck, Schillewaert, 2010). We compare these KPI's for the Danone community with those of 2 totally different communities: one of which the participants were recruited from a customer database and one where we made use of a mixture of sourcing techniques (panel, social network and site intercept recruitment).

### C. Survey on attitudes towards social media

In order to better understand the customer perspective on using social media for research, we conducted a **quantitative study among 500 users of social media** in UK. We made sure that our sample existed both out of passive and active contributors on a different set of social media

sources like blogs, micro blogs, forums, social networks, video and picture commenting websites and review sites. We presented concept boards on how research agencies may use social media. Each concept stressed different “reasons why” such research is conducted. After seeing these reason why concepts participants rated the attractiveness of each.

- In a first concept, we wanted to share the idea of the ‘research ecosystem’ with the consumers. This refers to research as a harmonic system and mainly stresses a connected relationship which beneficial to ‘agency’ and ‘client’.

### Concept 1: research ecosystem

Companies want to find out what is important to their customers, so they typically ask them questions using online surveys. Because they have so many questions, these **surveys can take a long time**.

An **alternative source** of information could be **social media**. Companies could listen to what people are saying about a topic on social media and use this information to answer many of their questions. This would allow them to focus only on the unanswered questions in shorter surveys.

- Next, we presented two important reasons why clients find social media nethnography useful. We presented the idea of insight generation and branding and product evaluation. These concepts stress the learning connections between ‘client’ and ‘participant’.

### Concept 2: customer understanding

Companies want to find out **what is important to consumers** because it is sometimes difficult to know what these needs are.

Since consumers are free to talk on social media platforms about products or services, **companies** could read **what their consumers are saying online** about their product or brand. By doing so they would learn more about what consumers find important.

- Finally, we also asked consumers to share the idea of giving feedback after conducting social media nethnography. This concept relates to “giving back” to ‘participants’ from ‘research agencies’.

### Concept 3: product and brand feedback

Many conversations on social media mention specific **brands and products**. Companies are eager to learn more about what people are saying about them online. By following these online conversations, they can **learn more about** their strengths and weaknesses and act upon what they learn.

- Next to the research concepts, we also asked them to what extent they were aware that their user-generated-content could be used by companies.

### Concept 4: feedback

In order to better understand consumer needs, companies follow conversations on social media. Based on their observations, they **summarize** the most important topics that are mentioned. These summaries are made **publicly available** for anyone who wants to know about the discussions that have taken place on a specific theme.

## Results

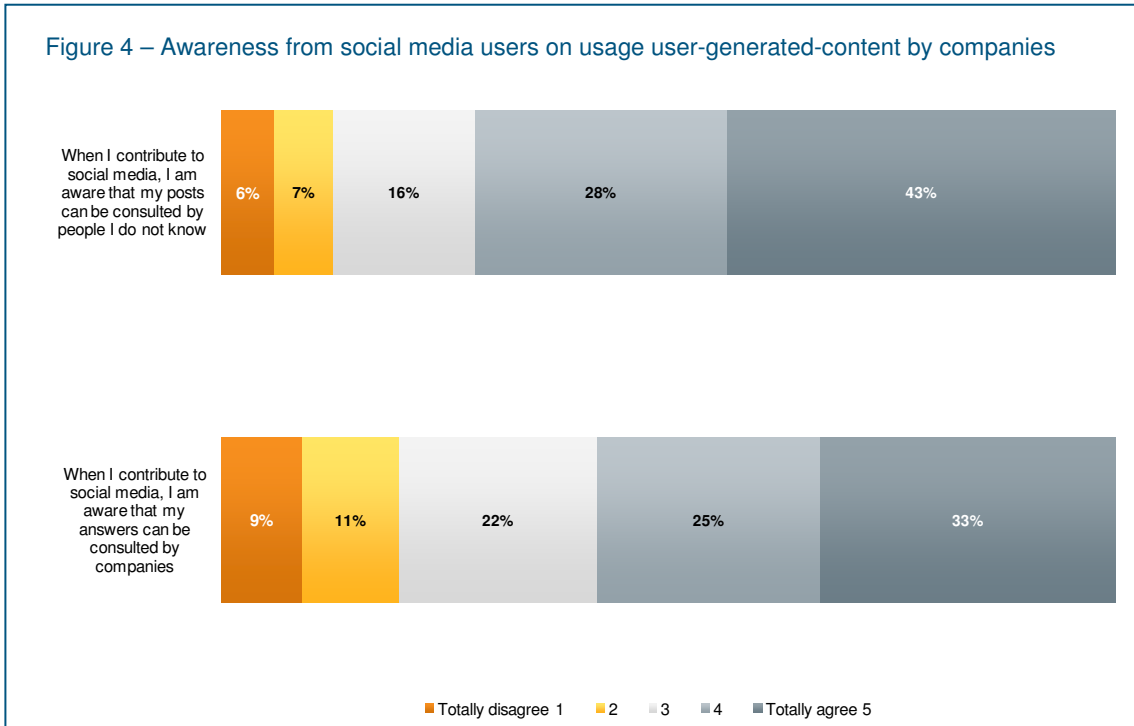
We discuss the outcomes of our approach by means of the three connected research relationships.

**A happy immersed client.** The main goal for Danone was to better understand how mothers experience infant feeding. The combination of social media nethnography and research community matched their expectations.

Social media nethnography was mainly valued as a listening platform where marketers and market researchers at Danone could learn more about the customer perspective. Because mothers were free to discuss what they wanted on natural communities, topics were addressed which Danone did not expect upfront. For example, “temperature” and “flow of the milk” were two topics that were heavily debated online.



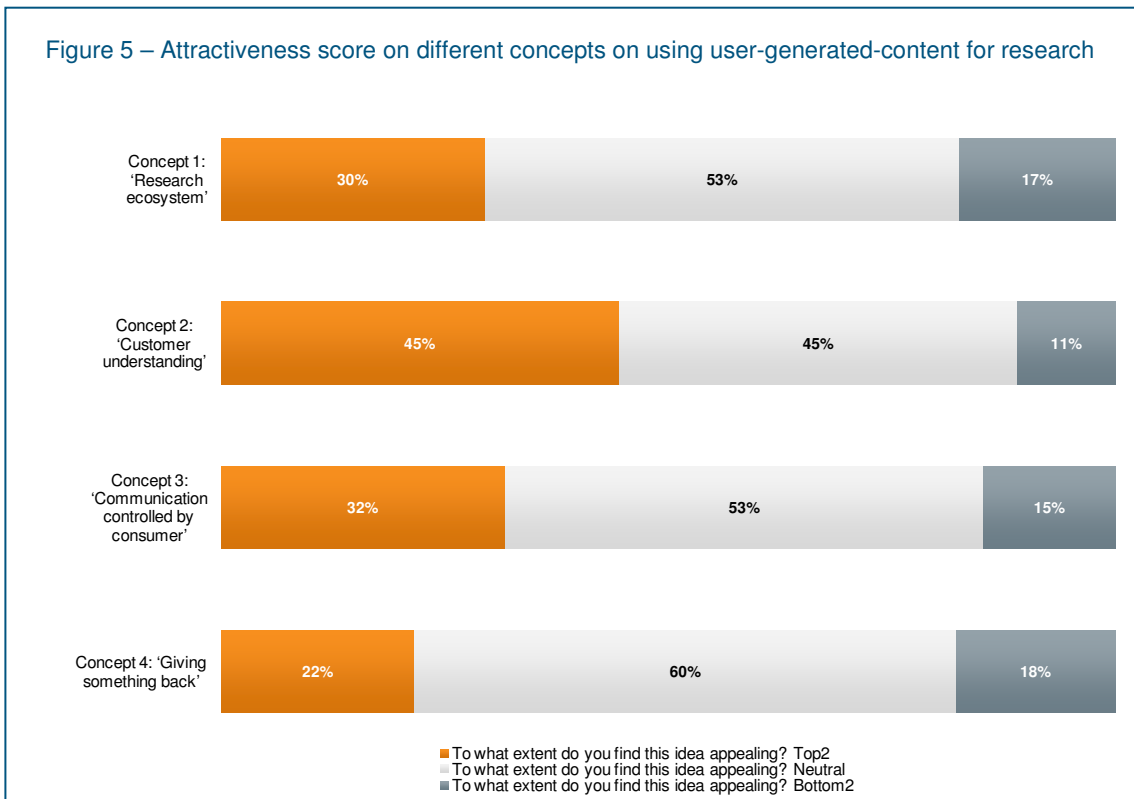
Figure 4 – Awareness from social media users on usage user-generated-content by companies



of the topics but the mere act of sharing information itself was not talked about at all. Admittedly we have to say these participants agreed to participate outside of their comfort zone and may therefore be less critical as well. In the quantitative study, we also asked

were neutral on the concepts. In terms of appeal, the concept of customer understanding was most favored. Consumers do not really consider social media platforms to be a harmonic system and do not seem to care about us giving back. Hence, our results

Figure 5 – Attractiveness score on different concepts on using user-generated-content for research



research participants' feedback on the different concepts on using user-generated-content for research. Again the neutral and thus indifferent attitude was striking. About half of the respondents

seem to indicate that there is not much researchers can do to make social media and research an exciting experience. Either consumers do not care or do not understand things the way our industry does. On the

other hand the resistance against combining research and social media is not huge and consistently lower than the appeal.

We also assessed the performance and satisfaction of the members in the research community. The general satisfaction is significantly higher on the Danone community of which the members were recruited from a natural community (7,8/10 compared to 7,1/10 for the other two). We also took into account other objective KPI's as identification with the community, general satisfaction, perceived informational benefits, social benefits, cognitive efforts and time investments. These variables were identified in a previous study together with the University of Maastricht (Ludwig, De Ruyck and Schillewaert; 2010) as having an effect on on-topic posting as described in the figure below. Again we compared the scores of the Danone community with those of the other cases.

nethnography study, providing a social and off-research topic discussion area.

A second action we took to make the community a joyful experience for research participants is adapting our communication style to their natural language. The rationale was that we wanted to make consumers feel more at ease in the research community. Neither in general satisfaction with the research project, nor in what has been said by the participants, we observed striking differences between our two test cells. We also checked if the adapted communication style was reflected in behavioral measures. We did not find any major differences in the number of posts and the length of the posts, between the two groups within the Danone community.

The conclusion is that we can just be ourselves as a researcher/community moderator as either

Table 1 – Community KPI's Danone community and bechnmarks

Value based drivers		Effect on on-topic posting	Recruitment method		
			Danone	Community A mixed method	community B client dbase
Informational benefit	<i>Product-related learning, that is, better understanding and knowledge about the products, their underlying technologies, and their usage</i>	Positive	5,2	6,4	6,4
Social benefit	<i>Benefits deriving from the social and relational ties that develops over time among the participating entities</i>	Negative	4,8	5,1	5,3
Cognitive effort	<i>The effort necessary to consider one alternative over another and come to a satisfactory decision</i>	Negative	4,6	6,5	6,1
Time cost	<i>The time investment made</i>	Negative	4,7	5,9	6

The perceived time costs and cognitive efforts participants feel they have to invest are lower for those used to participate in discussions on a natural community about the topic. On the other hand perceived social and informational benefits gained out of community participation are lowest in the Danone community. This can be explained by the fact that they are used to interaction on the natural platform which is purely focused on generating these benefits for its members. Little if nothing is still new or surprising to them. Nevertheless, the overall satisfaction within the community was quite high. We believe that this is due to the fact that we adhered to a number of basic requirements in running the community, e.g. giving feedback about the

participants do not expect us to connect at their level and/or we have achieved good moderation styles. Of course, one needs to make sure as a moderator that the language is understandable by all the research members but it is not necessary to take over their language. Next to that, your communication style should be friendly and generate trust between you, the participants and the goals of the research community.

Table 2 – Behavioural measures comparing 2 groups (research language vs consumer language) within Danone community

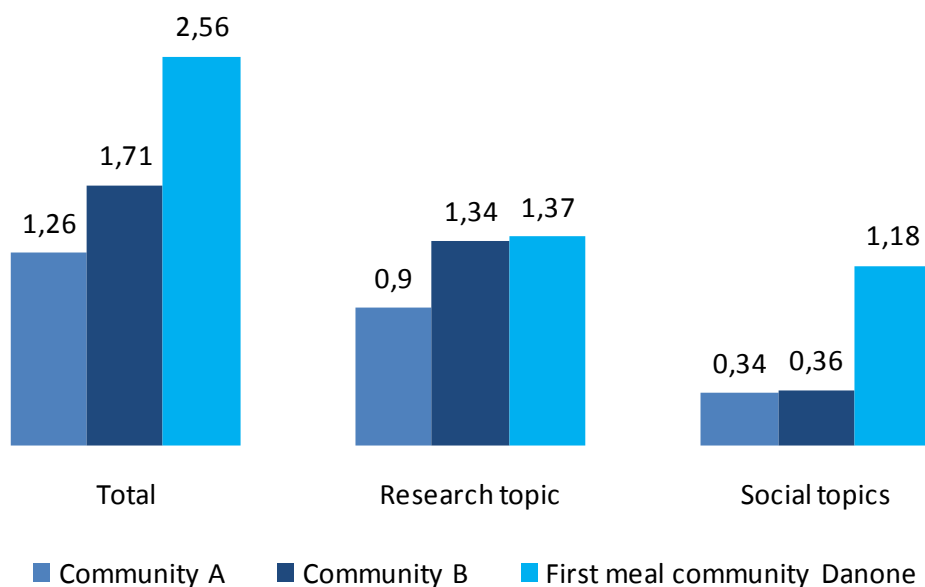
	Researcher language	Consumer language
Frequency	399	353
Richness	116	122

### **Happy researchers and community moderators.**

As an agency, we were both satisfied with the nethnography and the research community. Combining natural and research communities helped us mainly to improve on the informational and automational level:

- The synergy was beneficial in terms of recruitment. Because we first recycled data through social media nethnography, we could limit the amount of questions we still had to ask in the research community. The speed of recruiting very specific profiles, such as young mums with children of maximum 12 months old, is much faster if one can identify the exact platform where the action is. It took us hardly 10 days to recruit 80 mums while other recruitment channels would at least demand double the time, not even taking into account panel pressure.
  - On top of that, working together with a party like Babycentre.co.uk who is very well connected with members of that specific target group enhances participation rates once recruited. The analysis of the post frequency per week per community member shows that the Danone community had higher averages than the other two communities we benchmarked with.
- perceived social benefits for the Danone community. One potential reason could be that members of natural community have higher standards on social benefits than other consumers because they are experiencing the social bonding on a daily base in their natural community.
- For researchers, the social corner topics are of great value for insight generation. By studying what mothers share with each other spontaneously, we can discover unexpected insights. In a sense, we were truly able to mimic natural community dynamics: the social corner allowed us to listen bottom-up to the mother's concerns just like we do in social media nethnography.
- The synergy was also very helpful for the community moderator. In terms of warming-up, the moderator had the feeling that the community members recruited on existing social platform headed off more quickly on the research community. The nethnography helped them also to increase their understanding of infant feeding and increased moderators' self-confidence. First of all, they were able to write a more complete and comprehensive topic guide.

Figure 5 – Participation rate on community topics per community member per week



An in-depth analysis showed that this was mainly due to the fact that the social corner participation was more than twice so successful in comparison with the benchmarks. This finding is a bit in contrast with the low score of

As researchers, one is biased by his own perspective and knowledge when setting up question. The increased knowledge on infant feeding also allowed the moderator to talk on a more equal level with the mothers. In the topic

guide, we could address what we already knew and ask for the missing information. As such, the combination of the two methodologies allowed us to collect more in-depth information.

## Taking research forward

In market research, we are constantly looking for innovative methods to better understand customer behavior. Such innovation needs to happen with respect for its stakeholders. In this paper, we aimed at investigating how we can create a 'win-win-win situation' for all stakeholders.

Overall, we were able to satisfy the client and researcher needs. Combining ethnography with a research community was clearly beneficial. The researcher was able to create synergies by recruiting research participants from the natural communities. The client got answers on his (branded and confidential) questions and on questions he did not have to ask. Moreover, the design allowed marketers and researchers to better connect with their consumer, to really 'feel' them.

Of course, improvements can still be made. For example, the longer research process and time lines allowed an increased interaction with other departments at Danone. It would have been more beneficial if we could have involved all teams from the beginning so they were even more aware of this opportunity to connect with consumers. For the researcher, creating synergies between natural and research communities did not lead to shocking advantages at the transformational level. We believe that in future research, we could improve this by combining the information on a user-level. Maybe, we can find new insights by connecting what a certain user says on a research topic with his opinions on the social corner. All community members were also active on the natural community babycentre.co.uk. Maybe in the future we can also enrich the research data with spontaneous information they provide in that natural community. Connecting the dots seems the way forward.

The results for the research participants lead to other conclusions. Our actions to fulfill the research participant's needs did not harm but also did not lead to any significant advantages. It seems that the majority of the consumers are aware that their contributions can be observed by companies. When also testing this in a real life case, we did not receive any critical reactions. The majority of them were also neutral towards the different concepts (to leverage social media for research) that we presented. Adapting our communication to their language and

style did not matter, either. It seemed like they did not care. So is there something that we can do for research participants that is valuable for them?

In our quantitative study we also added some concepts on companies joining the conversation. As researchers, we only use user-generated-content for observation. We should however look further than pure research. Other departments in companies use social media for other purposes than insights and learning. Marketers can join the conversations for branding for example. Online buzz is becoming increasingly more important as a KPI in advertising and communication. CRM departments deal with the unsolicited feedback on social media – social CRM. In so called 'Social Sales', sales representatives try to identify potential customers and influence them in their decision making process. We wanted to find out what consumers expect from companies in terms of social media and user-generated content in general. The number 1 winner in terms of joining the conversation was 'Social CRM' or even 'socially responsible' CRM. Among 5 concepts (e.g. social sales, social CRM, information sharing, advertising, branding), consumers find the following concept the most appealing in terms of what companies can offer them on social media:

### Concept 5: Social CRM

You express your **dissatisfaction** with a product or service on social media. This conversation is picked up by an employee of the company that provides the product or service. This person **contacts** you to **solve your problem**.

45% of the social media users claimed that if they would express a problem on social media with a product or brand, it would be appealing to them that companies help them out, join their conversation and target them individually. A good example of what social CRM means is the case of Rabobank. Rabobank is an online bank active on the Dutch and Belgian market. As every bank, at the end of the year, they reward their loyal customers with their annual interest. However, at the end of 2009, they made a small mistake in the calculation of this interest. The empowered consumer took action and the mistake was heavily discussed on social media on New Year's morning. The marketing manager from Rabobank picked up on the discussion over the course of New Year's day and addressed the crowd the same day: he admitted that there had probably been a mistake

Figure 6 – Attractiveness of social CRM for social media users



and promised that Rabobank would look into the problem and correct the interest rates. As a result of his interaction, the tonality of the conversations changed: consumers were no longer bashing on Rabobank but praised the pro-active attitude (Van Belleghem, 2009). The example clearly illustrates what social CRM could mean for consumers. In terms of doing something back for the invisible research participant on social media, this could be the future. It could add a CSR aspect to our existing 'research house'.

Taking action in the field of social CRM leads to a paradox and tension for market researchers. On the one hand, ethical guidelines determine researchers cannot engage in marketing related activities. Results should always be reported on an aggregated level and we cannot contact research participants after the research for other purposes unless they gave their consent upfront. On the other hand a significant part of the consumers explicitly expects from companies to join the conversation if they have a problem with their product or brand. It seems that what consumers want we cannot or must not provide. Consumers want to interact in specific occasions (e.g. help them solve problems but not for selling). Hence, there is a need for skills to discriminate between consumer conversations which report product or service problems from conversations that just mention a brand or product. While currently this may be a problem from the perspective of our industry guidelines, researchers and analysts are professionals who can probably make that distinction best. Besides, the methods for doing so become available such as social media ethnography and analysis techniques like text analytics. The danger may be that if we do not leverage those skills, that

companies will react on conversations inappropriately (e.g. bad timing, wrong objective). Are we being too strict as an industry and should we re-think our boundaries within this new reality where no explicit questions are asked but information and action become multi-directional?

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