



forward thinking series

# Together we build the future

An ultimate way of getting intimate with consumers via online communities.

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## **Summary / Abstract**

The goal of this paper is to draw a blueprint for an enhanced and holistic approach to online community research. In this approach, both researchers and clients cede control to participants and make use of a range of new web technologies in the different phases of the research process. This research method is very useful for examining consumer trends, habits, practices and needs; all findings can be enriched by follow-up brainstorming with larger groups of participants. This finally results into new insights. Applications lie on the fuzzy front end of product, service and communication campaign development and product experience testing (e.g. in order to detect possible improvements).

## Introduction

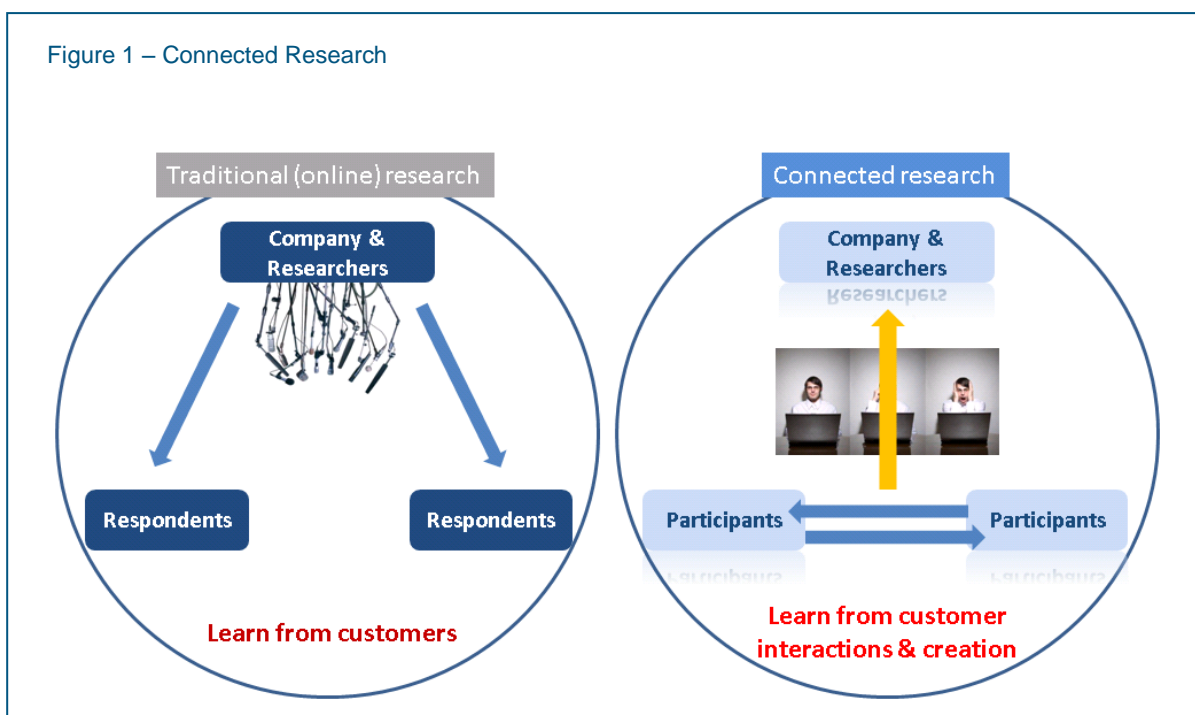
The world is transforming fast. One of the important drivers for this development is the 'improved' internet, with a wealth of information, communication and networking possibilities. It offers people new ways to share content in all kinds of formats and enables cooperation through different types of online platforms at blinding speed and low cost. Users have taken control over organizing content together. After all, the 'Web 2.0' (O'Really, 2005) hype has gained human relevance: as we have reached a point where everyone can have 'a voice'. Sometimes this voice – enhanced through social media – becomes extremely powerful: consumers can make or break a brand or product and they are even able to force companies to withdraw or bring back specific products or services (Jaffe, 2007). This 'power of the masses' forces individuals, companies and communities to radically change the way they communicate, behave and live (Bentwood, 2007). Understanding and making use of the mechanics and underlying drivers of this phenomenon is of ever growing importance. As A.G. Lafley, CEO and Chairman of P&G, put it: "Consumers are beginning in a very real sense to own our brands and participate. We need to begin to learn how to let go." (Roberts, 2006). This shift opens a window of opportunities for smart companies who are willing to thoroughly listen to, and eventually co-create products and services with their consumers (Leadbeater, 2008). It is therefore mandatory that marketers and market researchers change the way they communicate, interact and engage with

consumers and research participants. We believe that market researchers need to cede control and get more intimate with their participants and clients.

## Connected Research

Up until this point, a handful of market research agencies have dived into the 'Web 2.0' trend to illustrate market research applications (Puri 2007; Hamilton et al 2007; Reinhold and Bhutaia 2007; Gadeib and Genter 2007; du Perron and Kischkat 2007; Abiven and Labidoire 2007). The focus is often on specific 'Web 2.0' applications which are rather niche and considered in isolation of each other (e.g. Second Life, blogs, communities). Furthermore, these forays are frequently experimental and far too often, the hype overshadows the real usefulness of the work. In a previous paper (Schillewaert, De Ruyck and Verhaeghe, 2008) we took a first attempt at thoroughly integrating '2.0' into the market research process, with the clear overarching goal of enhancing market research. In order to provide common understanding, rigor and to be independent of fads, we coined a new term for this kind of market research, namely 'Connected Research'. Connected research is an embedded form of market research which uses online tools to tap into social interactions between consumers and allows a more equal relation between researchers and participants in terms of communication as well as content and input. Research could be both guided and observational (ethnographical) in nature (see figure 1).

Figure 1 – Connected Research



Applying this philosophy in the qualitative research domain, we strongly believe in the benefits and added value of conducting qualitative research online by making use of a whole range of web-based research tools. Among the many benefits of such research (Schillewaert, De Ruyck and Verhaeghe, 2008; Auerbach and Hall, 2004):

- **It is a pure, convenient and efficient way to engage with consumers:** consumers are able to participate from their home, making use of their own computer. This familiar and informal setting in the intimacy of the home environment makes participants feel more comfortable than in traditional research settings. Engaging with participants who are in such a safe and private place allows researchers to get access to the most distilled reflections of participants and their most open and honest opinions. Moreover, conducting research this way benefits both the researcher and the participant: neither party has to travel to be involved. Furthermore, due to the immediacy of connection with the moderator and the already comfortable respondent, the time necessary to complete the research can be minimized.
- **Honest responses are gathered:** in an online setting, the effect of peer pressure is lower. The anonymity of an online environment is liberating to the less assertive respondents. Participants feel more empowered to speak their minds and disagree with others. Debate is fostered rather than retrieving for consensus.
- **Deep findings are generated:** it is possible to co-create with participants and to make use of their user-generated content. Moreover, home computers often contain a reservoir of audiovisuals, projects and intimate thoughts. Making use of online platforms enables researchers to tap into these troves of information.

While it remains important to always keep the fundamentals of traditional (qualitative) market research in mind we experience that this new era in research is forcing us to do things differently. Researchers (and marketers) need to be willing to cede more control to participants. They need to treat them with much more respect: making them members of the in-crowd when it comes to the goals and objectives of the research project, becoming an active listener and giving them feedback and results of

research from time to time (Poynter, 2007). And of course, moderators need to adapt and rethink their interaction style in these online research settings.

## Online Community Research

In this paper, we apply the connected research definition and philosophy to online community research. Today, most of the research conducted in online communities is used to formulate hypotheses; however, online researchers are sometimes too quick in drawing conclusions from these first community responses, or opportunistic marketers simply demand researchers ask specific questions on a strictly moderated platform. The approach is often still too rational, not taking into account any of the social dynamics or interaction. However, our species is at heart a social one and social interaction forms the basis for most human thought and behavior (Earls, 2007). Until now, online community research is still conducted within a structured, rigid frame or pattern which is set up only by researchers, members are frequently prompted only to react (in a discussion, via a poll or survey), not to actively contribute. When it comes to bringing the consumer into the board room, the results they provide are too dry, simple facts and figures which are not juicy or illustrative enough to have a real impact on discussions. Furthermore, research communities are too often used as a 'one solution fits all' research method without limitations in topic, method or technique. Considering this, our goal is to draw a blueprint for an enhanced and holistic approach to online community research. In our approach, both researchers and clients cede control to participants and make use of a range of new web technologies in different phases of the research process.

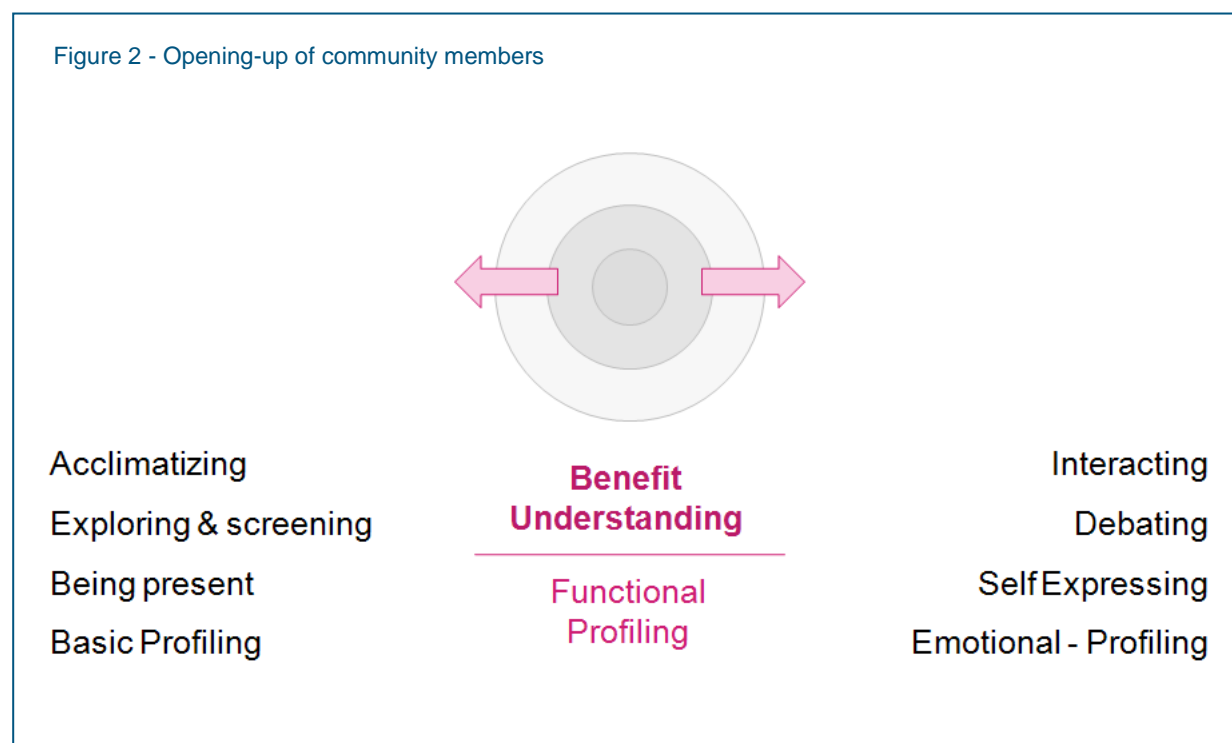
## Towards a holistic approach

When it comes to online community research, we believe in '*power to the people.*' Learning from consumer interaction and creation is key. We developed a complete and integrated toolbox of new research and motivational techniques based on extensive meta research among participants of online communities (usability research on the platform and online qualitative research). We did this in order to get the most out of this intimate relationship with consumers and to gain in-depth insights into the dynamics of online communities, and the drivers and

barriers to taking part in such research projects. Our key findings are outlined below:

- **Reasons consumers participate** in an online community research project are mostly intrinsic: being interested in the discussed topic(s), a desire to share views with peers, getting to know more about the topics studied, the **possibility to give 'direction' to the future** of a certain product or service and the fact that they like to create or search for answers and solutions together with others during a longer period of time. Some participants even perceive it as a kind of entertainment. The chance to win a prize seems to be of almost no importance. People who are indifferent towards taking part in this type of research projects declare that they did not understand the goal of such a community or think that nobody is really interested in their opinion. Other people assume that taking part is too time consuming or they fear working with this type of new web technology.
- Research shows that **people are more willing to talk to peers (people like them) than to businesses**. People tend to react very cautiously in the beginning of a project. During the start-up period, participants explore the platform and adapt to the new environment. After a few weeks (and after understanding the benefits of the research approach), they start communicating with others and are willing to interact with them. Debating starts to take place and people extend their profile with more emotional information as well as stories (see figure 2). On the other hand, unveiling the name of the company for which the research is conducted is the best way to get the most out of the participating consumers. Taking these findings into account, there seems to be a **clear need for intermediaries who are able to build a trustful and inspiring peer-to-peer relationship with the research participants**. Other researchers support these findings (Porter, 2007; Wittes Schlack and Jennings, 2008).
- As a community moderator it is a real pleasure to experience this phenomenon: community members take the task of the group very seriously, there is a rather strong peer-to-peer interaction and even after a couple of days, very rich insights are gathered. After a while, **participants become peers** (they use a more informal tone of voice and share more personal information), every participant seeks his social role in the community **and they perceive the moderator as a 'friend'**.
- Although they really appreciate the fact that the **moderator** is neutral and that (s)he works 'behind the scenes', participants give the moderator some very **important tasks**: inspire and encourage the

Figure 2 - Opening-up of community members



community, keep the discussions on topic and act like a sheriff (e.g. reacting against inappropriate behavior).

- **Participants also like to be amused in a multi-channel experience.** They want to explore the research topic both in the online ((news) articles related to the topic) as in the offline (going to an event or place related to the subject) world. Don't give them boring pushed content in terms of questions and polls alone, let them also discover new things and share those experiences like real citizen journalists. In other words: **create an atmosphere** around the discussion both online and offline.
- **Giving feedback is key:** multiple research results have shown that one of the main reasons people participate in research projects is to express opinions and to influence decision making. But if we do not give some results back to participants, it gives the impression they are not being listened to. We really need to move forward from a 'parent-child' relationship towards one among equal adults (Poynter and Lawrence, 2007).

## The integrative blueprint

Based on our research findings and experiences described above, we developed an enhanced toolbox for online community research. The ultimate goal of all these integrative efforts is to create and install a

common interest in the research community. In comparison with successful natural communities which 'automatically' emerge and grow around a common interest over an extended time period. Our integrative blueprint is based on the following tools and principles (*figure 3*):

- Our **user-friendly research platform** enables a simultaneous discussion of several topics. Topics that prove to be richer and more complex than anticipated by marketers and researchers can be split based on intense consumer interaction. Furthermore, participants are actively involved in ensuring the quality of the discussion, through the opportunity to flag inappropriate behavior of peers. To give participants the feeling that they really own the platform, they have the ability to start their own discussion topics (both related and not related to the research subject) in a specific 'corner' of the community. Besides monitoring the discussions, the moderator has the ability to activate specific profiles (based on a built-in KPI measurement system that tracks silence time of participants, their number of interactions in the community and the value of their contributions (number of words)) throughout the whole process.
- Typical sample sizes are hard to provide but in general terms, communities have around 200 active members of which 50 to 100 participate per topic or per study wave. Our experience shows that careful **recruitment around a common**

Figure 3 – The integrative blueprint



**interest** is a key success factor for communities to generate quality output. Moreover, recruitment is a continuous and integrated process. Participants could be recruited out of an online access panel, screened on specific criteria like interest in the topic, willingness to discuss topics with peers online, and having a minimal technical background. Moreover, one may make use of snowball sampling through the intake questionnaire, via the platform and through online social networking sites (like *Facebook* by which participants can be provided with tools to recruit their potentially interested friends). In the recruitment phase it is very important to convince people with the right profiles to take part in a specific project. Some guidelines: the recruiter needs to be very clear on the project goals. He/she needs to show the relevance of the project and motivate the participants to take part. It is also important to stress that discussions are very interesting and fun to participate in, along with the fact that every opinion counts. Furthermore, it is important to reassure participants that a technical background is not needed. Giving them enough information about how to use the tools on the platform and where to find the FAQ is a final important guideline, although the community platform is very user-friendly and participants generally have few problems. There is still a need to have a good helpdesk with an 'always' and easy to access moderator.

- The **intake survey** (which, for participants, is the start of the whole research process) may include **user-coded open-ends** (Verhaeghe, Schillewaert and De Ruyck, 2008) concerning their usage of and attitudes towards the research subject. This '2.0' tool allows participants to analyze their own open responses into structured categories which they define themselves. Participants provide their unaided opinions about a stimulus, interpret and tag their own answers, assign them to categories generated by peers and finally reassess the question with the entire set of user generated codes as if it was a closed ended question. The results of this exercise (and the intake survey) are fed back to the participants at the very start of the discussion to stimulate reflection among the participants. This first phase will also be enriched with **online desk research or 'desk 2.0'** by the moderator (gathered via the observation of online conversations regarding the researched topic
- through web tools like Technorati, Digg, Delicious... all part of an enhanced online desk research framework and integrated into a *Netvibes* dashboard for the research team (an RSS feed aggregator)). This is done in order to inspire respondents and guide the researcher in the choice of subtopics that must be discussed by the research participants. Moreover, participants are encouraged to conduct their own desk research and share links with both the researcher and other participants through **an inspiration thread on the platform**.
- Based on past experiences, we know that in research communities there is a need for continuously managing participants, creating a common interest and, hence, the challenge of getting respondents to continually participate. Therefore the level and approach of moderation is no longer one of a directive moderator, but much more that of a trustful and **inspirational catalyst** (Brafman and Beckstrom, 2006). Communication happens in a very informal style in order to create a peer-to-peer relationship between researchers and participants (moreover, by means of video messages each member of the research team introduces his or her self). As a catalyst it is important to create a clear identity within the community, be present, listen actively and create visible connections with the members (see figure 4).
- Engagement is also enhanced by using **several motivational techniques**. Examples include: giving community members tasks which they have to execute and report back, giving participants the opportunity to open new discussion topics or to send in questions for the topic guide of an online discussion group, appoint some community members as journalists who summarize and comment on specific discussion threads, invite special guests who are knowledgeable about a topic and provide their live comments, communication on a weekly basis through a newsletter and video reports which offer transparency concerning the research process and agenda (*"What have we done so far and what's coming up next?"*) and play on participants' intrinsic motivation and provide them the results of polls and surveys. After gathering first insights concerning consumer habits, we move on to identifying drivers and barriers for - e.g. in the up-

Figure 4 – The inspirational catalyst

The screenshot shows the FutureTalking website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Home, Discussies, Nieuws, Leden, Hulp en tips, and Controlepaneel. A search bar is located on the right. The main content area features a large section titled "Entertainment" with a sub-header "Entertainment in het digitale tijdperk". Below this is a video player showing a man speaking. To the right of the video is a poll titled "Hoe zou jij in de toekomst graag televisie kijken?". The poll options are: "Via mijn gsm", "Via online TV", "On demand", "Via YouTube", and "Via de 'gewone' televisie". Below the poll, there are social media icons for Facebook, Myspace, and Netlog. At the bottom left, there is a "Nieuws" section with a news item titled "Bekijk het filmpje van het eerste thema 'Social Networks'".

coming case study - the adoption of new technologies in daily life. Here, participants are asked to **think from their own and a market point of view**. By doing this we try to tap into the crowd in a maximal way (Surowiecki, 2004).

- In order to engage participants fully, our research communities rely on **an integrated set of research tools** such as multi-media uploads (to allow researchers to give participants tasks in the context of user-generated ethnography (Verhaeghe, Van den Bergh and Colin; 2008)), video capturing tools and polls. Another option is making use of **online discussion groups** or even a **full ideation process** in order to flesh out findings or to start generating ideas for new product/service development or improvement. This should be done with the most 'innovative' members of the community. Afterwards things can be further

developed and fine-tuned together with the other members of the community.

- During the last (and probably most valuable) phase participants 'brainstorm' with each other in order to generate insights and start with co-creating new products, services, communication styles... Through the previous stages participants, researchers and clients went through a learning curve, which we try to make maximal use of during this final phase. The process may start with a **user-created brainstorm** (Verhaeghe, Schillewaert and De Ruyck, 2008) that facilitates participants to brainstorm and think interactively. Participants list as many of their own ideas as possible about a certain topic and track if their own ideas are already provided by other participants. If not, the new idea can be added. Finally, participants are invited to indicate or 'dig' the ideas they prefer. The output of this brainstorm is of

course fed back to the community. Based on the ranking made by participants, researchers and clients decide which of the generated ideas are feasible and have business potential. These selected early insights and ideas are thrown into an online discussion group, ideation process or the community for **further development by participants**. In the end this will lead to fine-tuned concepts that are ready for in-depth testing in a more quantitative matter.

We want to illustrate the implications of our way of working and our integrated toolbox for conducting online community research by means of a case study.

## Case study: the 'Future Talking' community

### Case description

We implemented the above guidelines in an ambitious multi-client community project (*Rabobank.be, De Post-La Poste, Vacature Interactive & References Interactive, Vlaams Centrum voor Openbare Bibliotheken, D'leteren, Belgacom Group and Telenet*). The participating companies (from different kinds of industries) are provided with answers to questions concerning the future of new media and communication (within a Belgian context). The research community ran for a year and covered different subtopics ('social networks', 'online entertainment', 'digital lifestyle' and 'work, career and new media'). In this paper we focus on the quarterly topic of 'Digital Lifestyle'. Research questions are: *How are (and can) different new-media channels and devices (be) used in daily life?; What does new technology mean for consumers today? What drives and inhibits the consumer to go along and adopt those new technologies?; What is the future perspective: is this hype or will adoption expand?; What is the potential usage in different perspectives?.*

### Sample description

For this exploratory project it was important that we could count on a sample with a nice spread in terms of 'age', 'gender', 'technical background' and 'social behavior.' This was important in order to draw conclusions about the overall population. Sample size was 150 active members. We created two separated communities (per language: Dutch and French). In terms of activity we ended-up with an average monthly activity of 400 contributions.

We also conducted two online discussion groups (a Dutch and a French-speaking group, with eight participants in both) at the end of the quarter, in order to sharpen and illustrate findings.

### Analysis

Data analysis was done using both traditional qualitative analysis techniques and interpretation, as well as text mining (by means of 'Text Mining for Clementine 12.1') which enabled us to search for 'hidden diamonds' in the data (Anderson, 2008).

When it comes to analyzing community data, it is very important to keep track of the social interaction between participants. Findings on the impact of social dynamics on individual behavior and reasoning need to be taken into account during the analysis and interpretation of the results.

### Results

The aim of our theme 'Digital Lifestyle' is to find out how new technologies affect the day-to-day lives of people and how we should estimate their impact. In the community, the Future Talkers have had a very interactive brainstorming session about 'family', 'ecology', 'health' and 'the future of new media'.

- **Technology in day-to-day life, an introduction**

Technologies are no longer the playground of a small group of specialists. They are finding their way into people's living rooms. Little by little, all family members are confronted with the new possibilities technology brings along. During the discussions we noticed that people are opening-up more and more to the integration of technology in their household. According to the Future Talkers, the applications arising from it can make **day-to-day life** a lot **easier**.

In the community all kinds of examples of home automation, which show that new **technology is in fact very aspirational**, came up:

*"We'll switch all the lights on and off with one button!"*

*"The coffee will be ready by the time you're downstairs"*

*“Remote cooking, washing, ironing, and vacuum cleaning should be possible via a robot which receives instructions via the Internet”*

When people think about the possibilities that new technologies bring with them, the **‘convenience aspect’** seems to be key. Technology helps us to carry out a number of everyday tasks and makes our lives much easier. From this we can conclude that **technology** is in fact a **facilitator** of which the purpose is to increase **our personal convenience**. Based on their own experiences and in-house problems – which they illustrated with photos, some participants came-up with new ideas such as wireless connectivity and television screens. Some of them even brought them into reality!

On the other hand, a lot of people still question the **safety** and **efficiency** of new technological systems, which shows there is a lack of trust:

*“A number of things can go wrong if you're not at home”*

*“It isn't quite perfect yet...”*

It is very important to elaborate on this ‘tension’ between **convenience** and **trust**. People are often convinced of the convenience but often give up due to a lack of trust. However, we observed that people are **not naïve** and realise that **new technologies will be the standard in the long term**:

*“Just think of the VHS tape, with the arrival of the DVD it has completely disappeared.”*

In view of the fact that today's evolution in technology can greatly simplify our day-to-day lives, we need to ask ourselves **whether technology implicitly leads to more freedom**. An interesting mental framework that we discussed in-depth with the Future Talkers during the online discussion groups (of which the results are discussed later on):

- **Technology in today's life**

At the moment almost all participating households make use of new technologies. In every family the use of mobiles has become the tool to make (minor) arrangements and appointments among each other, and e-mail is used chiefly to share photographs or to

remotely, cheaply and quickly stay in touch with peers.

Among friends, instant messaging programs (like MSN) are a particularly easy way to stay in touch and social networks are used to stay up-to-date (viewing ones profile with photographs, extensive information, friends, blogs).

*“When we've made a fun clip of the children, I immediately forward it.”*

*“Because my husband sometimes spends long periods abroad, we often use Skype and webcams to stay in touch.”*

*“I think everyone in our family will spend more time behind the computer. We don't live around the corner from each other and it is an ideal way for the grandchildren and the grandparents to stay in touch and to know what is going on in each other's lives.”*

On the other hand, we noticed that the use of e-mail makes a working environment a lot more practical. Communicating and making plans is a lot quicker than before. Asynchronous communication means you can respond whenever you feel like it. Moreover the use of free services such as Skype is perceived very cost-effective. A number of interesting courses of action will be discussed in more detail in our fourth quarter in the community which will evaluate the impact of technology at work.

- **Ecology and Technology**

In the previous section we briefly discussed the impact of technology on the environment. With this knowledge in mind we went into this issue in more detail with the Future Talkers.

The advantages of technology for the environment are recognised in the community. However, an important comment needs to be made: if we analyse the messages of the community members we may conclude that **the environmental aspect is seen chiefly as an individual advantage**. Using less paper is **cheaper and more efficient**. Most importantly, technology needs to have a practical or financial advantage for them, and **any environmentally friendly aspects are a nice bonus**.

*"It does free up a lot of filing cabinet space."*

*"Technology needs to cut down the amount of work/time; the environmentally friendly aspect is a nice bonus."*

Participants indicate that the use of paper in day-to-day life has certainly gone down as a result of the digital revolution, but for some things it is still essential. **The digital signature, for instance, still doesn't have the same familiarity as the old-fashioned signature.** And the lack of a clear set of regulations concerning the validity of digital documents means that people are not too keen on it yet:

*"The digital signature was once hailed, but seems to have died a silent death."*

*"Digital signatures can be forged, on paper they can't!"*

*"In case of disputes a paper document carries more weight than a digital document."*

*"I still prefer to have invoices on paper..."*

*"Some e-paperwork still needs to be printed for it to be valid."*

Practically, **paper can also hold an advantage:**

*"Drawings need to be shown to the customer on paper, otherwise it doesn't work"*

*"Reading or correcting long texts is still easiest on paper"*

*"Everyone can bring their laptop to a meeting, but it does not make for good discussions."*

#### ✓ **What would Future Talkers do in terms of digital simplification?**

We notice that people **almost literally request 'time' to learn how to work with the latest evolutions.** Technology is developing so quickly nowadays that the older generations are often unable to keep track. Progress is applauded but **transparency, uniformity and guidance are indispensable** in this in order to avoid 'techno fatigue' among the masses.

We temporarily appointed the Future Talkers in the community as 'Ministers of Digital Simplification' to find out what digital evolutions they expect. *"What is the first thing you would do to simplify and improve your day-to-day life in a digital sense?"*

- *According to the Future Talkers broadband Internet is a key condition for an optimum experience of modern technology and is in fact the gateway to the digital spectrum. They believe it is a service that should be available to everyone. It is therefore essential that the prices of broadband Internet come down significantly!*
- *WiFi should be a free service in every town and city to allow everyone to connect easily.*
- *The tariffs of mobile operators need to become more transparent!*
- *The validity of digital documents needs to be clearly described to clarify their legal value.*
- *Requesting certain documents should be possible online: e.g. certificates of good conduct, number of inhabitants, registry office plans, information about underground pipes, etc.*
- *In the field of security the members expect a further expansion of ID card readers, both for online identification and e.g. filling out one's taxes.*
- *It should be possible to forward doctor's certificates online to the National Health Service.*
- *Meal vouchers should be digitised.*
- *The participants also expect the integration of different cards such as: bank cards, SIS (Social Information System) cards, identity cards, etc.*

#### ● **What else shall the future bring?**

Future Talkers expect the **internet to be everywhere. Everyone** will have an **internet connection and the prices will be very cheap in the future.** 'Web 3.0' will be the new standard and make the possibilities of the internet bigger and bigger and even more interesting.

Moreover, **news will be more tailor-made**, ranging from personalised news flashes on PDAs to electronically composed newspapers. The on-demand principle is clearly gaining importance:

*"I expect electronic newspapers."*

*"Sensors that register eye movements to know whether you have finished reading."*

All indoor devices will be connected with each other and everything will be 'downloadable'. **The on-demand principle will be the standard with the following characteristics: instant, personalised, ubiquitous.**

The participants of the Future Talking community have huge expectations regarding future technologies, but are quite pessimistic about the specific realisation of the possibilities. For instance, they believe it should be possible to send doctor's certificates to the National Health Insurance electronically, but don't think the involved authorities are in a hurry to do anything about this.

- **Key learnings**

If we consider all the opinions in the community we learn that the recurrent themes throughout the entire discussion are the '**convenience aspect**' and the '**facilitating aspect**'. People want new technology to be transparent, user-friendly and to offer an added value in the day-to-day tasks; technology should make their lives easier. Regarding 'ecological benefits', we found the following: the advantage of new technologies results in more convenience (less paper) and cost-effectiveness (less waste) rather than being a real ecological choice.

Furthermore, the on-demand principle will become increasingly important. More and more content and services should be adapted to the individual wishes of a consumer. As a result the anytime-anywhere idea will become the standard: instant, personalised and ubiquitous content and services.

### Semantic analysis: some text mining results

Text mining tools may be very powerful to get the maximum out of the data, for example in analysing the differences between specific socio-demographic profiles. For conducting this type of text analysis we make use of the *Text Link Analysis* module in *SPSS Text Mining for Clementine 12.0* enriched with (traditional) qualitative analysis by reading out participants' quotes for the final interpretation of the text links and clusters.

An illustration of the power of semantic analysis can be found in figure 5. In terms of paperless administration, the following verbatims appear in

clusters: 'valid', 'pay check', 'doubting', 'digital document' (cluster 1); and 'storing', 'prove', 'in case of' (cluster 2, which is linked to cluster 1). Out of this we have gained additional proof for the notion that people want to have something physical in their hands when it comes to official documents. Remember that we mentioned previously that the not yet authorized digital signature seems to be their point of concern; they especially seem to doubt the validity of digital documents in cases where they would have to prove something. Moreover, storage and classification of digital documents seems to be something extra they are worrying about.

### Online discussion groups: in search for the missing piece(s) of the puzzle

From the initial talks we discovered a number of interesting issues and questions upon which we elaborated in the online discussion groups:

- *Does technology implicitly result in more freedom?*
- *How can the convenience – trust dimension be optimally strengthened?*
- *How can the technology sector facilitate the adoption and what can be done to guarantee transparency (clarity)?*

During the discussion we received very clear answers from the participants. Technology needs to bring freedom (without too much time to be invested) and has to create additional spare time. Companies need to take people on a journey when it comes to new technologies: educating people before adoption and facilitating their learning curve ('How to use it?') through clear and easy to understand communication campaigns, sales speeches and manuals.

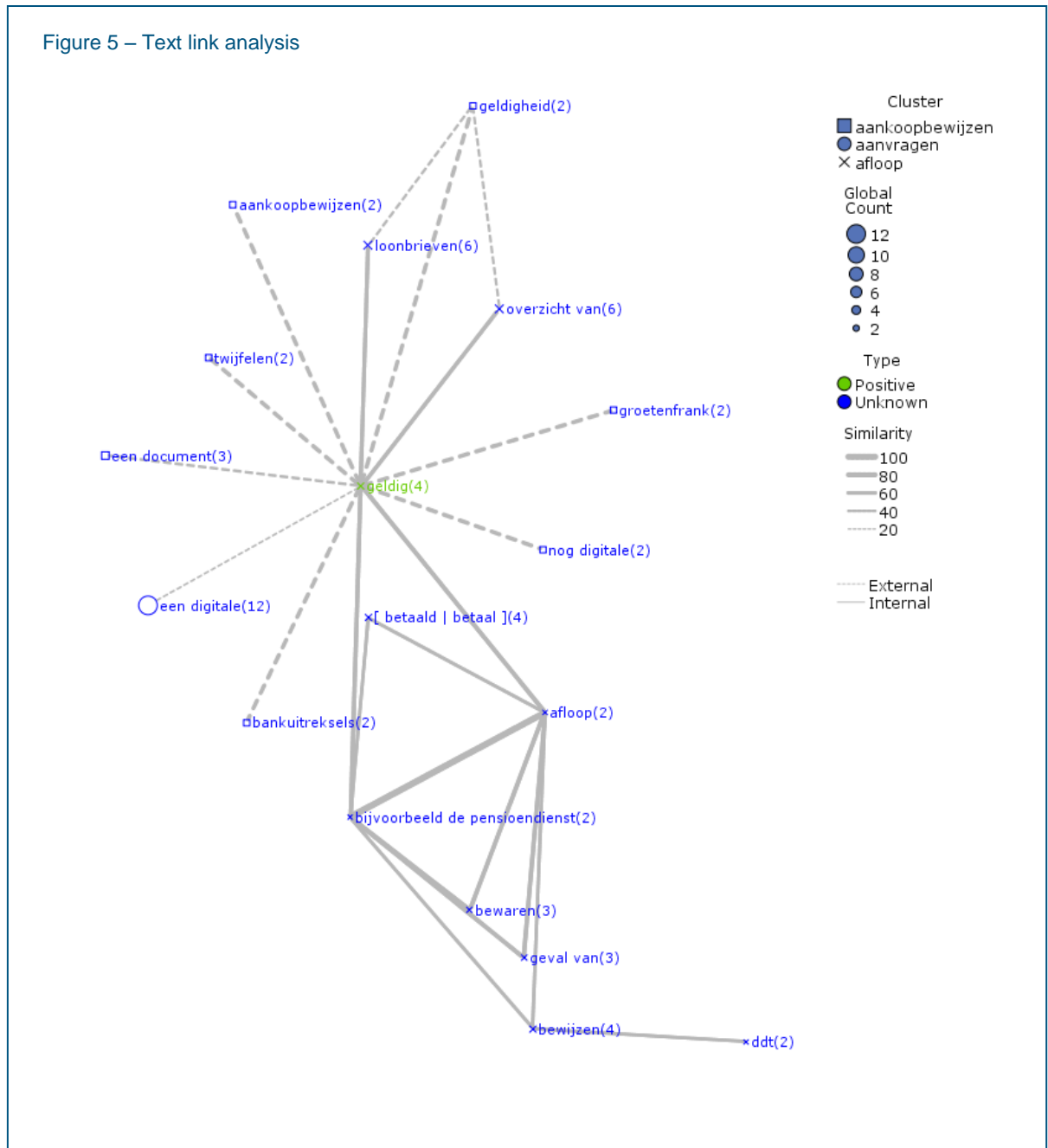
Back in the community, we published the results and let the participants develop the raw concepts further into specific actions and campaigns which were of use to our clients: movie-manuals instead of paper versions or digital ones, online help from peers and many other great ideas.

### Reporting

Thoughts and insights were frequently shared in an online collaboration platform ('Client Area') to which all participating companies had access and via a newsletter (including pictures, quotes and (video) summaries of the intermediary results) which could be

spread within the participating companies. At the end of each topic, both a plenary steering committee (in order to stimulate discussion of the results in a larger group of complementary companies) and a private

interactive in-company workshop were set up for the participating companies. These workshops also include video reports of the results besides interactive brainstorms and consultancy sessions. In the meantime, each company could of course log on and observe the real-time community.



## Discussion

Online social networks are booming. Estimations speak of growth from 240 million online social networking members now to 24 billion by 2012. Moreover, research shows that the phenomenon is spread along all age groups: from teenagers to seniors (Lipsman, 2008). *Making use of these types of platforms* both for recruitment and for conducting research on similar private research platforms **becomes of ever-growing importance.**

What does the outlined approach bring to the qualitative research domain? First of all, it allows researchers and marketers to be **longitudinally connected with research participants and facilitate an ongoing dialogue between companies and consumers.** It enables all involved parties to think complex topics through and allows researchers to track evolutions in attitudes and behavior over time. Moreover, this type of exploratory qualitative research **takes into account social interaction and dynamics among peers.** It also gives consumers a real voice in terms of having the ability to say what they want (when they want it). **Output is richer and more valuable.** It supports telling real stories about real consumers in the board room. These more dynamic debriefings (with stories, pictures, movies) grab attention and facilitate 'making a point' because messages become more memorable and sticky. Despite what Comley states (2008), the method is complementary to other research techniques (like online discussion groups and bulletin boards), rather than being a substitute (Schillewaert, De Ruyck and Verhaeghe, 2008).

The integrated and holistic online community research approach is very useful in investigating consumer trends, habits, practices and needs. All findings can be enriched by follow-up brainstorming with larger groups of participants. This whole process yields new insights. **Applications lie in the fuzzy front end of product, service and communication campaign development, besides product experience testing** (e.g. in order to detect possible improvements). Brands, (broad and complex) topics or target groups are central to the approach.

This new research approach illustrates and may also lead to fundamental **changes** in the qualitative research industry: relationships between companies,

agencies and participants have to become truly 'connected'.

- **Relationship with 'respondents'/'participants':** as a matter of fact we can no longer speak of 'respondents'. Their role in the research process has gained that much importance; we must start calling them 'participants', although, we have to be very careful with speeding-up the process of converting 'respondents' into 'participants'. As the conclusions of the described case study have made clear, people clearly want to feel comfortable with new (research) technologies with the help of the introducing companies. This step-by-step. We strongly believe that this is one of the greatest challenges panel providers will face in the forthcoming years when facilitating online qualitative research.
- **Relationship with clients:** clients also have to cede control over the outcomes of this kind of research project. Researchers need to guide them in this and put things into context. On the other hand, there is what we may call the 'friends challenge'. As the line between marketing communication on social networks and online research communities becomes thin, companies could have the feeling that they are able to conduct community research by themselves and even include it into their marketing strategy. This forces us, as market research companies, to rethink and sharpen our added value in terms of selecting the right methods, selecting the right people, asking the right questions, giving the project the right direction, conducting in depth analysis (both via traditional qualitative techniques and text mining analysis) and to fully use our experience and marketing knowledge during the interpretation of results and the debrief. Eventually and especially in these type of ongoing projects, research companies need to become long term strategic partners of their clients instead of 'opportunistic' vendors.
- **Research skills:** community catalysts need to have a broad range of complementary skills. Besides being an all-round qualitative researcher, these next generation qualitative researchers need to be good writers and communication specialists as well. This implies that they need to adopt certain skills from journalism and communication sciences. Furthermore, we have observed that the line

between content and resource management becomes rather fuzzy (ongoing, intensive communication/cooperation between and involvement of both parties is needed to make projects a success). An enhanced way of communicating with both participants and clients seems to become a necessity to have full engagement with the research project from consumers and have real impact on decision making on the client side. Therefore the described case study was a co-operation between a research and a communication agency.

- **ESOMAR guidelines for conducting good research:** the line between communication/marketing and research becomes sometimes rather thin. This implies that, maybe, ESOMAR guidelines need to be revised in terms of where the boundaries between research and commercial activities lie.

Finally, we believe that the possibilities of **text/data mining** and networking analysis will enrich traditional qualitative analysis and needs **further exploration**. We are quite sure that these analysis techniques may add an additional layer of findings to what already exists. This will lead to a blurring between quantitative and qualitative research. While e.g. communities and the generated information (e.g. text) are qualitative in the traditional sense of the word, semantic analysis (text mining) adds quantitative flavor to our findings. There is a shift here in the level of analysis from the participant to the information chunks they generated and the association patterns between them.

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