EXPLORING MANAGERIAL EMPOWERMENT PRACTICES ON SOCIAL MEDIA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

EXPLORER LES PRATIQUES D'AUTONOMISATION MANAGERIALE SUR LES MEDIAS SOCIAUX ETUDE QUALITATIVE

LILIA EL FERCI
Phd Student, High Institute of Management Tunis, University of Tunis, liliaelferci@yahoo.fr, liliaelfercibouhlel@gmail.com

IMENE BEN YAHIA
Associate professor, ARBRE Laboratory. University of Tunis, imenebenyahia@yahoo.fr

Abstract.
Much research in management has investigated empowerment strategies deployed by organizations to improve employees’ performance. Despite their concrete outcomes, adopting such strategies by marketers is still embryonic. Therefore, this paper focuses on marketers’ strategies to empower social media users. It aims at identifying the managerial empowerment practices and to understand their expected outcomes. In-depth interviews were conducted with digital marketing managers. Results shed light on seven strategies used by businesses to empower social media users. In addition, they distinguish between three outcomes that are the impact on image, communication and loyalty.

Keywords: Consumer empowerment; managerial empowerment strategies; Social media; Qualitative study

Résumé.
De nombreuses recherches en Management ont examiné les stratégies d'empowerment déployées par les organisations pour améliorer la performance des employés. Malgré leurs contributions attrayantes, opter pour ces stratégies en marketing est encore embryonnaire. En conséquence, cet article se concentre sur les pratiques marketing d'empowerment du consommateur. Il vise à les identifier et à comprendre leurs résultats escomptés. Des entretiens semi-directifs sont menés avec des responsables Marketing dans des agences de communication digitale. L'analyse de contenu met en avant sept stratégies. En outre, trois résultats sont distingués : l'image, la communication et la fidélité.

Mots-clés : Consumer empowerement; Stratégies d’empowerment managériales; Médias sociaux ; Etude qualitative
INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have played a major role in content marketing by sharing information and opinions about products and services (Cha, 2009). Interactions on social media are based on openness, cooperation, co-creation and trust (Constantinides, 2014). Social media users are more active. They gain enough power to change the rules on the web and to affect anything at any time (DeValck et al., 2009).

Many studies have drawn attention to the emergence and development of e-consumer empowerment (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Hoyer et al., 2010). Businesses positions, however, are mitigated. Whereas some consider it as a threat, others are contributing in making e-consumers even more empowered. The purpose is to get the best of it and harvest sustainable outcomes. This strategy was largely used decades ago by managers on their employees (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Blanchard, Carlos, & Randolph, 1995; Block, 1987). Managerial empowerment practices were defined by Randolph and Kemery (2011) as “actions that managers can use to create a context in which employees can feel empowered and to promote a feeling of empowerment in employees” (page, 103).

Despite the recognized development of social media users’ empowerment, few authors have investigated the managerial empowerment practices on social media. Whether consumer empowerment is a threat or an opportunity, our research attempts to explore how businesses are dealing with it. Accordingly, our research question is as follows: What are the managerial empowerment practices in social media? What outcomes are expected by businesses?

In order to find elements of answers to these research questions, this article reviews first consumer empowerment on social media. Then it mobilizes the field of management to understand the managerial empowerment practices. Next, the exploratory qualitative study is detailed followed by a presentation and discussion of the results. Finally, the implications, limitations and new ideas for future research are presented.

CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT

Unlike old consumers who were often viewed as passive subjects forced to accept marketers’ practices (Burns and Warren, 2009), users of social media adopt new forms of reactions such as voice and exit. Exit and voice are defined in light of Hirschman’s (1970) study as: exit; or the refusal to consume, thus leaving the market; and voice: complaining about companies and products, thus raising consumer voice in the market (Keeley and Graham, 1991).

Recent developments in online shopping environments, showed that consumer exit and voice are strengthening (Rezabakhsh et al., 2006) and are also interpreted as strong indicators of consumer power on the Internet (Urban, 2004; Hoffman, Novak and Venkatesh, 2004; Kucuk and Khrishnamurthy, 2007).

Numerous studies have shown that social media help consumers to gain power or authority at the expense of firms (Bolton and Saxena-Iyer, 2009). According to the theory of power sources (Rezabakhsh et al, 2006), the evolution of the internet ‘rectifies the imbalance of power between consumers and firms’ (Pitt & al, 2002), providing consumers with access to information, a wide range of products and decision support tools (Harrison, Waite and Hunter, 2006). Similarly, Leung et al, (2010) highlighted that Facebook empowers people through the acquisition of information and knowledge, the development of critical awareness, the formation of a collective identity and the propensity to act. Rich (2010) and Qualman (2010) added that the empowerment of customers is directly related to the development of social media, through sharing, creating and publishing any information or content on the web. Previous research has defined empowerment from two perspectives. The first perspective is positioned from the side of consumers. It defines empowerment as a subjective state, caused by perceptions of increasing control (Wathieu et al., 2002). The second perspective, that we
adopt in this research, considers empowerment from the side of businesses and defines it as giving consumers power through resources such as greater information or greater understanding (Brennan and Ritters, 2004; Cutler and Nye, 2000; Rust and Oliver, 1994). In this sense, Smith (2004) mentioned empowerment as a growing force in marketing and suggested that providing more control to consumers is important for competitive reasons.

According to LeBossé, (2001) empowerment means gain of power and is a compound of a prefix “Em” which reflects the expression of a movement, of a radical “power” that means authority and of a suffix “ment” which indicates the presence of a product and a result. The author added that empowerment refers to the ability to act and to achieve a process (Schulz et al., 1995) and to the delegation of authority to a community (Deslauriers, 1999). Nardo et al. (2011) conducted a benchmarking on the UK framework supporting consumer empowerment in 2008 and showed that, empowered consumers can make informed choices, which in turn require to put in place tools for consumers to secure the best possible outcome for themselves.

AlShibly (2009) considered that empowerment is the gaining of power by individual or groups and the processes of giving power to them, or processes that encourage and facilitate their taking of power. He pointed that the psychological view, the social relations view and the economic view of power give birth to antecedents such as customization; personalization; flexible pricing, and pre/post purchase services; trust; regulation and Communication. In the same line of thoughts, managerial empowerment practices will be reviewed in the next paragraphs as there is a relatively high degree of agreement about managerial practices associated with empowerment in an organization (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Blanchard, Carlos, & Randolph, 1995; Block, 1987).

MANAGERIAL EMPOWERMENT PRACTICES

Several studies focused on the companies’ strategies to empower their employees in order to enhance their efficacy. Seibert et al. (2004) noticed that managerial empowerment practices are related to empowered employees. Fuchs et Schreier (2011) added that empowered employees demand the product designs when they participate in its selection process. Years before, Arnold et al. (2000) revealed that managerial practices lead employees to see more value in their personal contributions, to develop self-efficacy to perform and extend their work role, to make choices regarding different facets of their job, and to feel that they can really make a difference in their work environment. Boudrias et al. (2009) showed that managerial practices influence not only employees’ motivation but also employees’ behaviors. They recommended that supervisors influence the occurrence of empowered behaviors by developing positive mindset within the organization and opting for delegation and consultation (Menon, 2001).

In continuity with those studies, several researchers recommended to pay attention to the role of the customer’s participation in the service creation and the delivery process (Eisingerich et al. 2014). Blanchard et al. (1995), identified three dimensions of managerial actions to empower consumers. The first dimension ‘Sharing information’ involves managers providing potentially sensitive organizational information on costs, productivity, quality, and financial performance to employees. The second dimension ‘Creating autonomy through boundaries’ refers to managerial practices that encourage autonomous action, including the development of a clear vision, and clarity regarding goals, work procedures, and areas of responsibility. The third dimension ‘Building team accountability’ involves managers developing teams that are the locus of decision-making authority and performance accountability in the organization.
Lilien et al. (2002) and Ogawa and Piller, (2006) underlined that the participation of customers in a new product development enables firms to develop better products and reduce costs and risks. Fuchs et Schreier (2011) identified two enhancers for customer empowerment that are customer empowerment ‘to create’ by submitting ideas for new products designs (1) and customer empowerment ‘to vote’ in order to select the product designs (2).

RESEARCH METHOD
Given the nature and the objective of our study, an exploratory qualitative study is deemed appropriate. In-depth interviews were conducted with managers of digital communication agencies. The interview guide focuses on two main topics. After introduction of the researcher and the general topic, the manager was asked to describe the agency’s activities on social media. Then, the two main topics of the interview were approached. Respondent was, first, asked to describe the practices used to empower social media users, and then, to reveal the expected outcomes from them.

Interviews ranged between 20 minutes and 45 minutes. They were recorded with a Dictaphone. The theoretical saturation was reached after 12 interviews (Glaser and Strauss, 1997) (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wezign</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>40 years</td>
<td>Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Eminence</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>26 years</td>
<td>Digital Marketing Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Havas village Tunisia</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>23 years</td>
<td>Digital Marketing Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>COM’UNIQUE</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>28 years</td>
<td>Digital Marketing Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>MOTION</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>25 years</td>
<td>Digital Marketing Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>MTD Group</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>35 years</td>
<td>Digital Marketing Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>27 years</td>
<td>Digital Marketing Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>25 years</td>
<td>Digital Marketing Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Naxos Advertising</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>32 years</td>
<td>Digital Marketing Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Mandarin Digital</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>40 years</td>
<td>Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>J.Walter Thompson Tunis</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>24 years</td>
<td>Digital Project Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Streamerz</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>32 years</td>
<td>Digital Manager</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interviews were fully transcribed without corrections, nor language adjustments to ensure the reliability of the collected qualitative data (Pellemans, 1999). Content analysis was processed on NVivo 11.0. Figure 1 shows the created nodes and examples of texts.
Moreover, we follow the analysis described by Giannelloni and Vernette (2001, p.87) which is based on two types of analysis: vertical analysis which allowed us to follow how and according to which order of importance each individual evoked the categories and the horizontal analysis that gives an overview about all the individuals to follow the quotes of each category.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Results highlight seven dimensions of Managerial empowerment practices in social media. Figure 2 traces the networks between the emergent categories via NVivo 11.0 software. Furthermore, three outcomes are highlighted. According to Giannelloni and Vernette (2001), the calculation of absolute and relative frequencies for each category is important to reinforce the analysis (Table 2). Findings are presented and discussed in the following paragraphs.

Table 2. Vertical and Horizontal analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Managerial empowerment practices</th>
<th>Interview n°</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sharing information</td>
<td>Absolute</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy through boundaries</td>
<td>Relative</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team accountability</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call to action</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Viral</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Co-creation</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanization of the brand</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalization of content</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personalized treatment</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Complaint management</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Empowering e-Consumers

Seven dimensions of managerial empowerment practices emerged: sharing information; autonomy through boundaries; call to action; vote; humanization of the brand, personalization of content and personalized treatment.

- **Sharing Information with the users**

Many marketers declare that they use social media in order to share any new information at any time about products, services, events or any other things. An interviewee explains “It is our job to communicate everything that happens in the company and we also communicate the life style within the company, the news, the team building, the meetings….the consumer is in a strong position. It has all the information in hand and it can compare compared to other providers and in this case the quality plays an important role.” Another interviewee adds “In fact, every time you have something for the consumer you have to inform him”. A respondent highlights “Our goal is that information is present when the consumer asks questions about price, durability, quality or any other question. The access to comparative product, prices and any other information empowers consumers and make them in a strong position in social media. A respondent said “the consumer is in a strong position. It has all the information in hand and it can compare product and in this case the quality plays an important role”.

- **Autonomy through boundaries**

Interviewees are aware of the necessity to give more freedom to their consumers and let them react as they want on social media. A respondent claims “they are free when they propose concepts….never delete a critical post. Another marketer mentions that firms must give value...
to the comments of consumers and not neglect them. “We answer politely. We take note and we put the customer's remarks in value”.

“I wrote a negative comment about Ooredoo and advised them to train their teams. Ooredoo told me that it does not matter and that they will take care of everything. I really enjoyed that”

- Call to action

Results reveal that firms invite consumers to propose ideas, to collaborate with them and to create a new product (co-creation). Also, they encourage them to share experiences, photos and videos, to put comments and to communicate with other people (co-communication). Marketers call this strategy “Call to action”. An interviewee explained “where you can share photos or share an experience.....the user is at the heart of the action”; “by proposing ideas, taking into account his opinions, doing polls, games”; “We ask them to put a "like" or "I love" about what interests them. We call this a "call to action", invite people to put "likes", to share or to put a comment” Another marketer added “the consumer will give us ideas to improve our product and our after-sales service”.

- Vote

Results show that it’s important for companies in social media to give users the chance to vote the product designs to be produced and wins a gift for example. This practice gives e-consumers more power to influence the decision of others. A respondent said “The one, who will have the maximum of votes, will be able to convince people to vote for him, wins a gift; “It’s to vote on our product”.

- Humanization of the brand

E-Marketers underline that there is a human relationship between the brand and its users and that this humanization give more value and more power to consumers. A manager highlighted “The humanization of the brand is very important .... to show the human side of a brand to consumers .... For them, it's not just a brand but rather people working to put in place a better methodology”. “There is a human relationship with a brand ..... it is a human brand above all and so the consumer can identify with it.” Another one added “If the consumer does not understand English or French, we try to translate the message into the language they understand or if the information is complicated, we try to simplify it”

- Personalization of content

Personalization of content is another strategy used by firms in social media to empower consumers. An interviewee explained “we are in the personalization. Everything is different in the personalization marketing. For example, in a newsletter, we personalize the content according to the person, what the users likes and what he hates”

- Personalized treatment

Marketers manage their e-consumers one by one. This personalized treatment may make the consumer feel powerful as companies are very interested in him. An interviewee clarified “We try to contact him personally...we try to contact people one by one...even if there is a problem, we must make sure to manage the situation ...in case of crisis. So we try to handle each case by ourselves”.

Moreover, one of respondents explained personalized treatment though complaint management as following “this is a scam, the brand will contact that person to tell him that they will pay him back. That's the power...Ooredoo told me that it does not matter and that they will take care of everything”.

**Expected outcomes from the managerial empowerment practices**

Content analysis identified three outcomes from empowering social media users that are impact on image (1), communication (2) and loyalty (3).

- **Image**

Interviewees insisted on the importance of the relationship between image and brand. They explain “We do it to strengthen the image of the brand....improving his image...This can be
through messages, publications, all the interactions that are happening. It is to improve the image so that the brand can gain a value, to receive good feedback, to retain the consumer”; “to valorize our image in the eyes of the consumer”

- Communication
Communication is the second outcome of empowerment practices. A digital manager said “we try to involve them and guide communication in this direction.....”; “the e-consumer today has the power. He has all the tools necessary to be informed. Whoever has the internet knows practically everything”; “Your Facebook audience can be done with simple communication; a short video, simple content can do a lot of things and generate buzz. It can also generate a lot of "seen" and we can talk about many things”. Another respondent added “when you put content online, users will share this same content and so the consumer becomes your broadcaster, as if he was your spokesman. That's what shows the strength of the consumer”.

- Loyalty
Loyalty is the third outcome of empowerment strategies. Respondents highlight that all the practices used by companies aim to engage consumers, to retain them and to involve them. “Engage the community”; “retain the consumer”; “This is commitment”; “involving consumers” were repetitive verbatims in the interviews.

CONCLUSION
This research was aimed at exploring managerial empowerment practices and understanding the expected results for businesses. In-depth interviews were conducted with digital marketing managers. Findings highlighted that companies do use some practices to empower consumers in order to harvest some outcomes. The research showed seven managerial practices to empower users (sharing information; autonomy through boundaries; call to action; vote; humanization of the brand, personalization of content and personalized treatment). It distinguished between three outcomes (image, communication and loyalty). Results of the study reinforce the positioning of empowerment under the business perspective.

At a managerial level, the findings of this research can be a guideline for companies that want to get the best from empowered e-consumers rather than considering them as a threat or ignoring them. At a theoretical level, much research has drawn attention to the consumer empowerment on social media. However, the majority considered it as a state or feelings. Treating it from a business perspective, like this research did, is still a new trend needing more exploration.

As for all studies, this study has some limitations. First, findings of this study cannot be generalized because of the qualitative approach. However, identifying the managerial empowerment practices on social media paves the way for future research in the field. For instance, future research may investigate how empowered consumers perceive such practices. In addition, the results of this study shed light on the outcomes of social media users’ empowerment. Future research may investigate how to harvest them. Second, the sample size of the data collection may be small. However, the theoretical saturation was reached. Future research may conduct quantitative studies using larger samples. Third, the ground of this research is limited to the Tunisian context. Future research may investigate managerial empowerment practices and social media users in other countries, mainly with high penetration rate of social media.
REFERENCES


Deslauriers, J.P. (1999), Réflexions sur le colloque : Travail social et Empowerment à l’aube du XXIe siècle, Nouvelles Pratiques Sociales, 12, 165-169


