

When Haters gather in a virtual community... Netnography of a french community called « Les Râleurs en ColRER E »

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Abstract:

This research aims to understand the nature of the exchanges of members of a virtual community of Haters. An exploratory study, based on a netnographic approach, was carried out within a virtual community of users of an RER line angry against the SNCF, in charge of the railway line. The analysis highlights four categories of speech: mostly emotional discourse, through which the members of the community express their feelings towards the SNCF; normative discourse, through which members help each other by sharing information; mixed discourse, both affective and normative; and, more marginally, discourse of a cognitive type, aiming at collecting information. This research enriches the literature on customer relationships by showing that it is not necessarily the love but sometimes the hate of a brand that will constitute the basis of community belonging, and alerts brands to the fact that a broken brand promise can lead customers to form a community to denigrate the brand and harm it.

Keywords: Online community; Brand hate; Netnography.

Track: Digital Marketing & Social Media

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1. Introduction

If brands are used to make people dream and/or to be idealized by consumers, it is clear today that there is a growing aversion to some of it that can lead consumers to hate it (Da Silva, 2019). With the advent of social networks, widely used around the world, this hate can spread very quickly¹. Especially since consumers who have had a negative experience with a brand will tend to talk about it more or post more negative comments (Christodoulides & al., 2021), than consumers who have had a positive experience (Hegner & al., 2017). Some consumers, with a common interest in a brand, are likely to gather into virtual communities. Originally created by brand fans who wanted to share their creations, their passion and even their love for a given brand (Bourdaa, 2016), it seems that a new type of community has recently emerged. In fact, there are virtual communities of Haters² who gather individuals who share their hate for a brand. In this context, it seemed appropriate to investigate on this new type of community. We asked ourselves: 1/ what could be the nature of the posts and comments shared by the members of such a community, 2/ what such a community could bring to its members, 3/ what could be the externalities of such a community of Haters for a brand. For doing this, we selected on Facebook a virtual community composed of people feeling hate towards the SNCF, which is considered as one of the least liked brands in France³.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Virtual communities

Before going digital, communities took many forms that, despite their differences, shared a common structure. In his book *Communauté et Société*, Ferdinand Tönnies (2010) depicts it as living, concrete organisms, based on the humanism and solidarity of its members. For Weber (2019), communities are social constructs in perpetual evolution in which members enjoy a certain freedom of opinion and action, without forgetting the common bonds and sense of belonging that unite them. Virtual communities are so named in reference to the "online" context in which the conversations and exchanges between members take place. In his

¹<https://www.ouest-france.fr/leditiondusoir/2022-11-03/pourquoi-les-consommateurs-se-mettent-ils-a-hair-certaines-marques-2133c7e2-0f6d-441e-b936-36f6b7688557>

² Individus qui éprouve de la haine, dans notre cas pour une marque.

³<https://www.lesechos.fr/industrie-services/automobile/remplace-par-sfr-la-sncf-nest-plus-derniere-du-classement-des-marques-1299350>

Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace (1996), John Barlow even perceives a notion of a new generation social contract in these virtual communities made up of Web users, where individuals would establish a kind of social contract between them and would self-manage themselves. These self-managed virtual communities can be created by individuals with very different motivations and statuses. These can be communities of practice (Brown & Duguid, 1991), self-help communities (Preece, 2001) or even brand communities (Kim & Jin, 2006). Members of the communities can join it for cognitive-based motivations (search for information) and/or for social-based motivations (willingness to create social bonds) (Ewing, 2008), and expect to have fun, learn, socially integrate themselves and/or personally blossom (Sivertstol, 2018). Nevertheless, these informational and social advantages are produced through an active participation of the members, which is enabled by the possibilities offered to the Internet user by Web 2.0, namely the ability to create and spread content on the Internet (Poncier, 2009). The implementation of this User-Generated Content (UGC) (Daugherty & al., 2010) at a community scale allows in consequence members to constitute a *thesaurus* (Wasko & Faraj, 2000), a collection of their information, know-how, testimonials and tips. In the context of virtual communities of Haters, the UGC is useful to create a “*tribal knowledge base*” which serves the members, on the hand, to help each other in face of the brand failures, and, on the other hand, to encourage themselves mutually to hate the brand.

2.2. Brand hate

Hate is a concept that has been the subject of much research in various disciplines, whether in psychology, social psychology or marketing (Harrington, 2004). Hate can be defined as "*an attitude or disposition that includes intense feelings of repulsion, animosity, hostility, and aversion toward a person, group, or object*" (Cambridge Dictionary of Psychology, p.230). When brands do not meet their customers' expectations or when their experiences are negative, they tend to develop negative feelings towards these brands (Roy & al., 2022). In marketing, brand hate is defined as "*a psychological state in which a consumer experiences intense negative emotion and hatred toward a brand, a hatred that manifests itself in anti-brand activities.*" (Kucuk, 2018, p.566). Brand hate is a complex and multidimensional construct (Monahan & al., 2023). Indeed, according to Sternberg (2003), hate "*has multiple components that can manifest themselves in different ways on different occasions*" (p.306). In his research, he has highlighted three emotions underlying hatred: disgust, contempt and anger. Manifestations of brand hate can be passive or active (Bayarassou, Becheur & Valette-Florence, 2020). Several attitudinal and behavioral consequences of this brand hate have already been

identified among consumers, which can lead to online and offline complaints (Rodrigues, Brandao & Rodrigues, 2020), to negative and/or vindictive word-of-mouth (Kurtoglu & al., 2021), as well as the avoidance of the brand (Bryson, Atwal & Hulten, 2013).

3. Methodology

In order to answer our problem, an exploratory approach of the netnographic type was put into practice and consisted in collecting language and non-language data within the chosen community. These data were subjected to a double analysis (analysis by each author) and the results were compared to reach a consensus.

3.1. Why a netnographic method?

Netnography (Kozinets, 1998) is the adaptation to online context and the implementation of practices and techniques of ethnography (Prior & Miller, 2012). This method seemed particularly appropriate for observing a virtual community of Haters. First of all, its relative discretion (Kozinets, 2002) does not influence the behavior of the individuals observed and allows for the collection of more authentic information, thanks to the relative anonymity of the participants (Bernard, 2004, p.54). Then, data collected are generally diverse (Cléret, 2011), saved and permanently accessible to the researcher. Moreover, like the ethnomarketing approach, netnography makes it possible to combine different types of observations and reasoning, which offers the opportunity to capture the entire semiology of the virtual community being observed. Finally, deciphering this semiology is used to understand the drivers and elements influencing the decisions of members of online communities.

3.2. Presentation and justification of the observed community

For our research, we selected a community on Facebook. It is a private French-speaking group, called « Les Rôleurs en ColRER E ». Facebook is the first social network in the world and in France, and it is also known for the numerous hateful or aggressive comments posted (1/7)⁴. Then, we restricted our sample to the SNCF Haters communities because this brand is as much loved as hated by the French. Finally, based on a battery of qualitative and quantitative criteria proposed in a pragmatic way (Cf. appendix 1), we selected the community that can provide the most valid and reliable results. The netnographic work consisted solely of floating and then non-participating observation.

⁴ <https://www.nouvelobs.com/societe/20190428.OBS12212/sur-facebook-un-commentaire-sur-sept-est-haineux-ou-agressif.html>

3.3.Data collection, coding and processing

The collection of language and non-language data was preceded by a floating observation of online conversations within the Haters community, which made it possible to establish a taxonomy of discourse composed of 4 categories and 15 subcategories (Cf. appendix 2). Subsequently, 500 online conversations were collected within the community between October 11 and 20, 2022 and categorized using the aforementioned taxonomy. Elements accompanying online conversations (emoticons, photos, videos) (Dooley, 2012) were also collected and analyzed. As part of a Textual Data Analysis (TDA) (Lebart & Salem,1994), the four textual corpora, corresponding to the four types of discourse, were downloaded into the IRaMuTeQ software, then processed through a top-down classification of text segments ("Reinert method"), bringing out thematic nodes. The coded data set was also statistically analyzed in Excel to assess the frequency and prevalence of each category and subcategory of speech within the Haters community studied.

4. Main Results

The analysis of the posts and comments allowed us to highlight four dimensions characterizing the nature of the exchanges:

a/ a normative dimension (27,2%): Haters share informations, share their experiences with group members. Their posts highlight information about RER E traffic (train departure conditions, traffic conditions, cancellations, delays, etc.), current events (strike, fuel shortage). They don't necessarily communicate by writing, they publish photos in real time. They are polite and supportive of each other. They also discuss on the transport tickets (Navigo pass), the representatives of the SNCF (staff and management). They deplore the state of the network in a factual way while expressing their anger. There is no collective action undertaken, only the Mayor of the town of **** served by the railway line is in contact with the SNCF and his action is not supported by all the members of the group. However, we see a certain unity of members within the community.

b/ a cognitive dimension (3,2%): Haters are looking for information and ask the group for help. Due to the small number of verbatims recorded (16), the IRaMuTeQ tool was not able to analyze them.

c/ an emotional dimension (48,2%): Haters express their feelings/emotions and participate in the debates within the group. Members share their daily suffering due to a lack of service. They use the community as an outlet and compare themselves to participants in the game show Koh Lanta, projecting themselves in an adventure where they face challenges and help each

other to survive. They are part of a group and have a class consciousness. They talk about themselves without naming themselves ("user", "traveller"). They empathize with those who break the rules. They complain about the SNCF but not the staff and debate the actions of the Mayor of ****.

d/ a mixed dimension (21,4%): it is the result of the combination of the above-mentioned dimensions, mainly normative and emotional. Members share their problems (train breakdown) and their concerns (punctuality). They express their emotions with the help of numerous emoticons. They encourage each other and exchange information about the cyclical and structural situations. The SNCF does not live up to their expectations and the members talk emphatically about their daily experiences.

The community members actively participate by posting, and comments seem to find it useful. Indeed, they have real-time information related to their RER railway line and are thus aware of the traffic situation (delays, cancellations, route changes, etc.), allowing them to better react to any difficulties encountered or to come. They can exchange with members who understand them and express their dismay, their anxiety, their weariness or even their anger about certain situations. As captive customers due to the SNCF monopoly, they cannot boycott it. Powerless and unable to make themselves heard, they use this space as an outlet.

5. Discussion

5.1.Theoretical contributions

The concept of brand hate is a relatively new concept in the literature, which tends to gain momentum (Da Silva, 2019). This exploratory study highlights the categorization (emotional, normative, mixed and to a lesser extent cognitive) of posts and comments content within a virtual community of Haters. Moreover, our research tends to show that, like brand communities, the advantages sought by members of Haters communities are similar: they are informational, social, altruistic and visibility benefits (Raies, 2006). More globally, this research contributes to our knowledge about the orientation of the customer relationship.

5.2.Methodological contributions

From a methodological point of view, this research has two virtues. On the one hand, it implements a netnography, a methodology with many qualities but still little used. In this case, netnography combined an *ex ante* observation at community integration with an *ex post* non-participant observation. On the other hand, the combination of a textual analysis and a statistical analysis provides a qualitative and quantitative reading key, as well as reliable and valid results to interpret.

5.3. Managerial implications

As a result of our work, we can identify a number of recommendations for brands that do not meet their customers' expectations. Firstly, brands should, as was done in this study, research, identify, integrate, and observe any communities of Haters formed against them. Secondly, they should collect and analyze customer criticism of their products or services, and then implement corrective actions. Some brands have already started to admit in their advertising that a part of the population hates them or to acknowledge their shortcomings by doing "hate-acknowledging advertising"⁵. This can be an idea to develop. Finally, brands, concerned by communities of Haters, could light a counter-fire by creating communities of Lovers.

5.4. Limitations and outlooks for future research

As with any research study, our study has several limitations. First, we focused on a single online community. It might be interesting to study the nature of the posts and comments of a community of Haters in relation to another brand, or another category of products or services, to ensure the generalizability of our results. Moreover, since our analysis is time-limited, a longitudinal study over several months would likely allow us to deepen and enrich our discourse taxonomy.

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⁵ <https://theconversation.com/quest-ce-qui-conduit-le-consommateur-a-ha-r-certaines-marques-193232>

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Criteria for choosing the virtual community of Haters

Macroscopic criteria	
Criterion n°1	Francophony of the virtual community
Criterion n°2	Degree of opening of the virtual community
Mesoscopic criteria	
Criterion n°3	Number of members in the virtual community
Criterion n°4	Number of daily publications in the virtual community
Microscopic criteria	
Criterion n°5	Population composed solely of users into the virtual community
Criterion n°6	Level of variety of topics discussed into the virtual community

Appendix 2: Categories and subcategories of discourses

Categories	Subcategories
Cognitive discourse	I look for information
	I ask for help
	I am interested in a testimony
Normative discourse	I share information
	I offer help
	I share my experience
Emotional discourse	I contribute to the good atmosphere of the community
	I express my feelings about the brand
	I take part in the debates
	I express my feelings about the community
Mixed discourse	I share information and express my feelings about the brand
	I share information and contribute to the good atmosphere of the community
	I share my experience and express my feelings about the brand
	I offer help and express my feelings about the brand
	I look for information and express my feelings about the brand