Investigating Stakeholder Requirements for Designing an Effective Online Research Community Platform

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Abstract
Online research communities offer collaborative environments where organizations can interact with consumers in real-time to gain insights, build innovation projects, and access relevant audiences passionate about providing impactful responses. This research paper aims to uncover key insights from stakeholders for designing an online research community platform. To achieve this objective, the study conducted research among relevant stakeholders, including market research agencies, advertising agencies, professional associations, researchers, private marketing specialists, and future members/participants in the online community as respondents in the studies conducted. The specific objectives were to identify stakeholders' needs for tools and technical solutions to design an online research community platform, pinpoint specific needs for online communities, and identify desired functionalities regarding the online community platform. The ideal online community platform should offer various functionalities to cater to different users' needs. The platform must be user-friendly, with intuitive and easy-to-understand features for users at different experience levels. A pleasing visual design that is simple and airy with clear identification of each button/element on the page is necessary to create a perfect environment for interaction with participants. Overall, the findings from this research study provide valuable insights into stakeholders' needs for an online research community platform. By identifying these needs and desired functionalities, the study guides the development of an effective and user-friendly online research community platform that can compete with foreign platforms, bring together research agencies, interested brands/companies, and members-consumers, whose input is valuable and crucial in today's business world.

Keywords: online research community platform, qualitative research, stakeholder insights, marketing, virtual communities.

JEL classification: M31.

1. Introduction

The development of technology and communication platforms has led to the emergence of online knowledge communities. These communities involve individuals sharing information for different reasons, such as helping others, a sense of belonging, and a belief in generalized reciprocity (Tausczik & Huang, 2020; Chan & Li, 2010). By using collaborative filtering, these platforms transcend geographical and social boundaries, leading to a change in the way interactions occur and contributing to the accuracy and completeness of shared information.

The scope of online knowledge communities is diverse, ranging from personal subjects like medical conditions (Bellander & Landqvist, 2018) to professional fields such as software engineering (Aniche et al., 2018). The shared knowledge can be general or specialized, factual or based on personal experience, leading to a broad range of expertise (Deng, Tong & Fu, 2018). Online knowledge communities are virtual spaces where individuals pose and answer questions through asynchronous, text-based, computer-mediated communication (Hwang, Singh & Argote, 2015). These communities are characterized by their ability to transcend geographical and social boundaries and the presence of many unknown users. The dynamics of these online communities change constantly as users join and leave, and their interests change (Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane & Azad, 2013; Sieckenius de Souza & Preece, 2004). The widespread popularity of online knowledge communities has led to their proliferation on various communication platforms, including newsgroups, newsletters, mailing lists, online forums (Gheorghe & Liao, 2012), Q&A sites, and common interest groups on social networking sites (Yan, Wang, Chen & Zhang, 2016).

Bringing people with similar characteristics together in a group and studying the differences in behavior between different groups is useful for gaining a deeper understanding of different groups and obtaining meaningful commercial guidance. Customer segmentation can be done according to various criteria, based on biological and social attributes such as sex, age, interests, marital status, and place of residence, to study their behavior regarding different products, markets, or services (Kraft & Weber, 2012).

The influence of online knowledge communities is not limited to individuals but extends to organizations and society. The information gathered from these communities can influence decision-making, leading to a potential impact on society. As a result, these communities have become a valuable source of knowledge and information for researchers, practitioners, and the general public (Cole, Watkins & Kleine, 2016; Zagalsky et al., 2018).

In recent years, many online communities have been created at the international level. Some of the most representative such communities at the international level are (Insight Platforms, 2023): Recollective, CMNTY, PlushForums, incling, FlexMR, Liveminds, QualBoard, Further, Collabito, VisionsLive, invoke, Together, aha Insights Technology, Focusson, FocusVision InterVu, GroupQuality, Hatchtank, iResearch etc.

2. Literature review

Research agencies are resorting to increasingly innovative methods to listen to the voice of consumers, interact with them, and the penetration of the internet offers countless new opportunities. For research service agencies, the online research community is a "next-generation" service that they can offer to clients (Serrano et al., 2017). Online communities are indeed a research tool that has been increasingly talked about in recent years. These mechanisms are closely linked to the penetration of the internet and people's appetite to be there. It is very important for research agencies to discover ways to access consumers, and to find relevant ways to listen to their voice. For example, it can be observed that on the metro, about 84% of the passengers use their phones, surf the internet, read news, enter social networks, and so on (Liang & Hwang, 2016). Therefore, to better understand them, it is necessary to identify the spaces where it is relevant to talk to them, and the online or digital zone has grown very. Another important aspect is that a target group of consumers is found online, targeted by many of the agency's clients: people between 25-50 years old from urban areas.

An important advantage is that people in the respective community feel comfortable in this space and therefore create a lot of content. There is a certain freedom to intervene on such a platform, as it is possible to interact with consumers at various times of the day depending

on what the research companies want to find out or observe about them, an important advantage especially when studying several aspects of their lifestyle.

In a changing society, proactivity is desired rather than reactivity. Focusing on the consumer is the trend from which the idea of a community in business originated. The resulting business benefits include cost optimization, especially if it is a long-term community that identifies both needs and new ways to test products (Xie, Wang & Zhang, 2023). Another benefit for the organizations is that they receive real-time feedback on the products and services they offer, directly and unfiltered by other sources. Manufacturers can validate or invalidate hypotheses they have at any time and investigate situations that arise, among other things.

The rapid pace of change in the world and the need for quick results are pressing. When a platform is available with access to already known individuals, the recruitment effort is eliminated, and the research need can be resolved much more rapidly, providing practically real-time results. Some objectives can be met with answers from one day to the next. This means that the budget must be optimized, and the developed community must be kept alive. Results can be seen and used, so companies can bring things to their consumers much faster than if they had to wait to see them in the market on a large scale. It is a significant advantage to be able to anticipate things before competitors do (Robb, 2021). Adaptation to the consumer is also very important, and the best way to understand people is to give them the freedom to speak about their experiences (Bond, 2020). Such a community provides much more possibility to see the consumer from all angles and understand their experiences. Another advantage of the brand is that those consumers work for it and know that they need to be attentive because they are in a community, making members proactive for the company/brand. Brand advocates are also created, who can be found in other online structures and everyday life.

Creating a community does not happen overnight; it takes a certain amount of time to create a sense of belonging, a time necessary for people to get to know each other, which can take about a month. Creating a sense of community spirit and obtaining relevant data takes about three months. As the community is better developed and maintained, the desired results for brands begin to appear.

Members of such online research communities can express themselves, voice their opinions, and receive attention. They have access to a relevant platform to express their opinions, which is somewhat rewarding. Nothing that members say within the platform reaches the public or the internet, as the platform is secure. People have the need to feel valued, which is why they are motivated to be members of such communities. Another way in which research agencies can motivate community members is through gamification. Gamification is the application of game design elements and game principles in non-game contexts. It can also be defined as a set of activities and problem-solving processes using or applying game-like characteristics (Coursera.org, 2023).

Participants on online research platforms need to be challenged and respond well to game-like stimuli. Multiple levels can be established based on community involvement, and interest should be sparked so that platform members want to move from one level to another. Additionally, a micro-society is formed on the platform, allowing participants to create relationships, express their points of view, and become opinion leaders on various topics.

Online and offline research methods (face-to-face research) are complementary. This virtual space often provides greater freedom, and people feel more comfortable communicating there, leading to more openness. Another crucial aspect is engagement. When considering a research community versus a social community or any other online communication space, engagement is what makes the difference. This includes the way people are brought into the story, how they stay there, and how they participate in or even build their own story. Regarding participation and collaboration with clients and brands, engagement is focused on turning

respondents into members who work together with the companies. Brand values must be integrated into the platform, along with objectives and more. Engagement means looking at consumers as members. The difference between a consumer and a member is that the member has the freedom to advise the brand and is encouraged to do so, feeling that they are part of the brand, rather than just consuming the product. A sense of belonging to a group where one is valuable and has power is created. Their feedback is relevant, and true engagement is established between members and the platform that helped them be there.

It is recommended that companies investigate what consumers are saying beyond words in online communities. It is very useful to use projective techniques and more to find out what lies behind the consumers' words. Furthermore, what sets a research community apart from a social one is the correlation of the recruited profile with what is obtained from Google, for example. In the case of a research community, there is an aggregate of information. Another important difference between a social community and a research community is its purpose, which translates into a multitude of other things. The purpose of a research community is to achieve the client's business objectives, whether they reside in innovation, testing certain concepts, and so on. In a social community, the brand needs to become visible and interact on certain specific issues that mostly arise as they go along.

Unlike other countries, in Romania, there are no online research communities and platforms developed 100% in Romania. Some of the research agencies that have their parent company in another country, but are also present in the Romanian market (e.g. GFK or Ipsos) use the developed international platform. Other local agencies have entered into partnerships with international platforms and can thus offer such research to their clients.

Other agencies in Romania have developed platforms, but in the form of forums that have basic functionalities: only for discussions/chat or where different launches/events are announced, and they can be used more as tools in the human resources sphere rather than in the research sphere where engagement and the creation of a sense of belonging are needed.

We have highlighted above the importance of online research communities, and we have developed a concept for an online community to serve the Romanian market, called *ASECOMP Communities*, which is part of a bigger research project (POC) financed through a grant from the European Funds. Our online research community platform will allow participants to be recruited by research agencies and filtered according to criteria that the agency and client consider important, such as age, income, consumption habits, etc., as is done in traditional research. To build a user-friendly, effective, and engaging platform, and that caters to the needs of its users we had to conduct qualitative research among the stakeholders that would be interested in using such a platform. The ASECOMP platform also includes modules such as: Marketplace (Constantinescu et al., 2021), Market Research (Ioniță, Olaleye & Onișor, 2020) and Events.

3. Research Methodology

The main objective of this effort was to conduct a research study among relevant stakeholders (market research agencies, advertising agencies, professional associations, researchers, private marketing specialists, and future members/participants in the online community) and identify their needs for tools and technical solutions to design an online research community platform. Specific objectives include identifying the needs of relevant stakeholders to participate in online communities, pinpointing specific needs they have for these online communities, and identifying desired functionalities from the online community platform.

The research utilized the *selective survey method*, and the exploratory research technique employed was the *semi-structured in-depth interview*, based on a *conversation guide* (Pop, 2001, pp. 86-87; Cătoiu et al., 2002, p. 207).

Regarding the *structure of the sample*, participant recruitment, and information gathering, the qualitative research undertaken had an exploratory character, aiming to capture stakeholders' opinions about the designs of an online research community platform for the Romanian market. The *snowball sampling method* was used to identify respondents from the relevant stakeholders. On one side, we identified a representative of a market research agency, a representative from an advertising agency, one from a professional association, a researcher, a private marketing specialist, and three persons interested to be participants and respondents in the online studies conducted on the platform. They, in turn, indicated other people, reaching a total of 18 persons who agreed to answer the questions. To ensure study homogeneity, a balanced mix of specialists from the stakeholder list was ensured.

The interviews took place in August and September 2020, using Zoom platform, in Romanian, each having an average duration of 30 minutes. In the following section, the results obtained from analyzing the responses of the 18 respondents will be presented.

4. Main findings

Designing an online research community platform is a complex task that requires careful consideration of user needs and preferences. Expectations from user testing and evaluation can help to inform the design process and ensure that the platform meets the needs of its intended users.

After analyzing the results of the in-depth interviews, the ***key insights of the stakeholders*** interested to be part of an online community platform were:

- The ideal online community is first and foremost "*user-friendly*". Therefore, the software should be designed and developed to be as *intuitive*, *easy to understand*, and *easy to use* as possible, regardless of users' level of experience. In addition to this aspect of functionality and design, the ideal online community must create the *perfect environment for interaction with participants*, encouraging them to access the activities posted by moderators with pleasure and ease.
- To have *a wide range of functionalities*, so that the software allows for various types of studies, both *quantitative* and *qualitative*;
- The *Menu* page to have multiple functionalities:
    - *Home* page (containing all information related to how the respective community operates, participation rules, community purpose, and duration of the study);
    - *Activities* page (where the moderator periodically launches new questions/tasks);
    - *Forum* page (where participants can interact with each other and address topics of interest outside those set by the moderator);
    - *Chat* page (where participants can interact with the moderators).
- *Social stimulation*. The software should offer a "friendly" experience for users so that they are motivated to share their opinions and feelings more openly. The main benefit is to lead to the desired results. Additionally, implementing a button through which participants can earn various bonuses in points or other gifts captures the interest of respondents and motivates them to dedicate much more to the project;
- The online community should be able to *generate reports* that experts can access/download based on the specific needs of the project. This feature will facilitate the work of the analyst and also reduce the time allocated to analysis;

- The ability to *download responses* provided by participants in pdf, word, ppt, and excel format (without editing rights), for the analysis stage;
- Moderators should have *access to general information about participants*, such as status, response rate, quality of responses, etc.;
- The ability to *upload multimedia* (audio, video, photo content);
- The software should be available both on the *browser* and on the *phone* (application available on Android and IOS).
- *Visual customization capabilities*;
- The ability to *archive the studies*;
- *Private chat* or recruitment options for communication with participants (additional information, assistance, other questions);
- *A feedback section* (for improving the online community) that can be accessed by both organizations/researchers and participants;
- The ability to address *different types of questions*: open/closed, single/multiple answer, polls, boards, journals, ethnographies;
- The use of innovative and effective *motivational mechanisms* (e.g. point allocation system per question/activity);
- The *design* should be *visually pleasing*, *airy*, and *simple*, with each button/element on the page easily identifiable by the user.
- The *layout* should be customized according to the specifications/peculiarities of the clients/organizations/researchers.

The platform should have *four types of accounts*, namely the *Owner* account, responsible for providing technical support, the *Administrator/Moderator* account, responsible for moderating the community and communicating with respondents, the *Respondent* account, which allows participants to post responses to activities posted by the moderator in the Activities section, as well as in the Forum/Chat section, and the *Observer* account, which can browse activities and responses posted by moderators and participants, but does not have the same rights as moderators or respondents.

5. Research Limits and Future Research

The present qualitative research provides valuable insights into the preferences and behavior of online research community users, helping developers to design more effective platforms that promote knowledge exchange and collaboration. However, it is important to acknowledge some limitations.

The study's sample size was limited, and therefore the findings may not be statistically representative of the wider online research community market. As such, future research could involve a larger and more diverse sample to further validate the study's results.

Future research could include a quantitative study, in which more stakeholders participate in a usability test for the ASECOMP Online Communities platform. Lastly, the study was conducted with participants primarily from a single geographic location, and future research could aim to include participants from diverse cultural backgrounds to investigate potential differences in online research community usage and needs across different regions.

6. Discussions and Conclusions

Online communities enable the development of collaborative environments where organizations can interact with consumers in real-time. This approach allows for the building of insights, innovation projects, and gaining influence by accessing relevant audiences who are passionate about providing impactful responses. The platform needs to offer the latest online technologies, including webcam interviews, live chat, discussion groups, or blogs, to transform

static, linear research into an interactive and immersive experience. By incorporating a robust suite of qualitative and quantitative research tools, communities can be used to cover specific research objectives, from agile testing, overnight to iterative learning processes in the long term.

An online research community and the platform where this community gathers represent a cost-effective long-term instrument. The start-up phase represents an investment that is amortized over time and is a significant effort for companies because it is necessary to understand the consumer in a 360-degree view, to create engagement – it is different from talking to them on Facebook.

The ideal online community platform should offer a range of functionalities to cater to the needs of different users. These may include visual editing, archiving of studies, private chat rooms for communication with participants, a feedback section for both clients and participants, and the ability to ask various types of questions, such as open-ended, closed-ended, with single or multiple responses, polls, bulletin boards, journals, and ethnographies. Innovative and efficient motivational mechanisms, such as point allocation systems, should also be implemented to encourage participation.

To ensure a user-friendly experience, the software must be designed and developed with intuitive and easy-to-understand features, regardless of the user's level of experience. Additionally, the ideal online community should create a perfect environment for interaction with participants, encouraging them to access activities posted by moderators with pleasure and ease. A pleasing visual design that is simple and airy with clear identification of each button/element on the page is necessary.

The platform should allow for quick connection via both browser and mobile application. Other functionalities may include storing participant responses in folders based on specific settings, posting various types of questions, creating online discussion groups or interviews directly from the platform, posting audio-video content/pictures/articles from a phone/laptop or the internet, and having a digital whiteboard function. Customization of the layout based on client specifications/particularities is also essential.

Such a platform is not a cheap tool, especially if it is a brand community that happens in the long term. The company needs to evaluate the volume of research they want to conduct and answer questions such as: What are my research interests this year? What are my objectives? What are the issues I want to address? Once the answers are identified, it needs to be considered in perspective, looking at the established strategy and evaluating whether such a tool brings the brand the necessary return on investment. What is truly important is to apply it when and for what is necessary, as obviously, some benefits and opportunities come with such an online community. Understanding people and seeing them practically how they manifest is fabulous - hence the value brought by creating an online community.

One thing is certain, especially after the pandemic period: we cannot oppose what technology means, it is something we need to get used to and the faster we understand this, the better we can take advantage of it both in the present and the future, even in the short term, but especially in the long term.

Considering Romania's weak presence on the map of online research communities, the development of a tool that can compete with foreign platforms, a tool that can bring together research agencies, interested brands/companies, and members-consumers whose input is so valuable and crucial in today's business world is undoubtedly necessary and urgent.

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