

START-UPS AND THE MOBILIZATION OF SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

“The world is suffering from a range of political and financial crises and organizations today fresh ideas to help them rethink social and institutional change. In response, many companies are moving to a purpose-driven model. This book is an unprecedented rallying cry for change that builds on over three decades’ worth of research and business ingenuity into the idea that business needs to operate with genuine purpose and community. *Start-ups and the Mobilization of Social Interactions* isn’t just for entrepreneurs, either. It is for everyone who wants to understand how to build a new way to do business that harnesses the power of social connectedness, community and the spirit of activism. Everyone who is excited about the positive possibilities of enterprise should read this book!”

Robert V. Kozinets
Professor, University of Southern California, USA

“With this volume, the three authors offer an approach that combines the development of a social movement and the emergence of an entrepreneurial project. The book offers an interesting and original key for understanding this combination that has not yet been sufficiently investigated, but is rich in implications for today’s world. It also highlights the close relationship between consumption and entrepreneurship phenomena which are addressed separately in traditional management approaches but that are today increasingly connected.”

Simone Guercini
Professor, University of Florence, Italy

“Based on extensive research, this book’s authors share a clear and simple approach to enable success in high-impact projects. This is an inspiring read for entrepreneurs and allies – coaches, consultants mentors – alike.”

Dafna Kariv
Professor, Adelson School of Entrepreneurship,
Reichman University, Israel

START-UPS AND THE MOBILIZATION OF SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

In view of the environmental problems threatening the planet, the crisis of weakening social ties that has only deepened during the pandemic, and the more and more glaring limitations of the capitalist system, we believe it is important to present an alternative to the standard model of business creation. The one we propose in this book makes community – understood as a social phenomenon that emerges and develops to support a movement and defend a cause – the basis of all initiative.

What led us to this alternative? We want to take advantage of this introduction to reveal what took place behind the scenes while we were writing the book you are about to read. We hope that what we have to say in these few lines will help you decide on the legitimacy and the relevance of the position that we put forward in this book.

The book began as a creative encounter between three men and three continents.

In 2017, Bernard Cova, a professor in the Department of Marketing and New Consumption at the Kedge Business School in Marseille, France, spent four months with the Department of Entrepreneurship and Innovation at HEC Montréal in Québec, Canada, where he pursued his research on brand communities. While there, he met Franck Barès, a professor of entrepreneurship who is also from France and who specializes in entrepreneurial support. The two compatriots developed a friendship and quickly decided to collaborate on research centring around the passion that entrepreneurs share with their communities.

A year later, Bernard and Franck created a training seminar for Executive Education HEC Montréal that was called *Supporting Passionate Entrepreneurs*, which they then adapted for a series of workshops that they gave to entrepreneurs in the Kedge Business School incubation programme. At the end of a workshop in Marseille, one of the participants walked straight up to them and said,

‘Professors, everything you’ve presented today is in line with how I live my life – my adventure!’ This was how Anicet Nemani entered the lives of the two professors. Living in France and having a passion for music from his home country of Cameroon, Anicet had founded BIMSTR, a music platform dedicated to the emergence of new Cameroonian talent. After the initial encounter with Bernard and Franck at the workshop, there followed an exchange at the Kedge cafeteria, a few discussions over lunch, finally some work sessions – and the trio had come to be!

Together they compared the theories on entrepreneurship and on the management of brand communities with the reality of an entrepreneurial journey that has important communitarian dimensions. Using their knowledge and expertise, the two professors could decode the entrepreneurial behaviour of Anicet who, reaping the benefits of their advice, adopted an economically viable business plan to further develop his community project to defend Cameroonian music and emerging musical talent. From these exchanges there came forth a credo: ‘First community, second start-up’. This was how the idea for *Start-ups and the Mobilization of Social Interactions* was born.

This book is also a message that the authors have for management and entrepreneurship experts all around the world. Beyond the myth of the start-up nation, hypergrowth and speculation on future business value, there exists an alternative form of entrepreneurship that needs the support of young entrepreneurs and that should be fostered among them. We call it ‘entrepreneurial activism’. No more media mantras about ‘unicorns’, ‘fundraisers’, ‘spectacular gains’, etc. Contemporary societies – and this is even more true in a post-pandemic context – need social and community ties, whether their members are from Douala, Marseille, or Montréal. Entrepreneurial activism exists, first, as a way of answering these current issues, and then, second, as a way of supporting the entrepreneurial projects that individuals or groups attempt to undertake.

The term ‘start-up’ usually refers to an entrepreneurial project that has clearly defined growth ambitions, and one that is associated with a technology capable of bringing about a change of scale and creating an important need for capital to ensure development. In this book, however, the term ‘start-up’ has an acceptance that

is independent of these characteristics. We use it with an eye to its etymology, focusing on the notion of start-up projects of any nature and in any sector of activity – that are launched and carried out through the determination of the persons who undertake them. The term ‘community’ brings with it what binds people together, what allows for a sense of belonging that is necessary to their identity and that fosters social interaction. Entrepreneurial activism reverses the usual way of thinking about the coupling of these two terms. The community comes first in the entrepreneurial project, the start-up comes later.

Thus *Community 1st Start-up 2nd* is a rallying cry for all those who want to participate in developing an alternative to the dominant model of business creation. It is addressed to future entrepreneurs as well as to those in charge of entrepreneurial support programmes who wish to foster a new spirit of business creation and a new way of setting in motion promising initiatives.

In a word, through this book we hope to make our own contribution to a movement in which we firmly believe.

Franck Barès, Bernard Cova and Anicet Nemani

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1

UNDERSTANDING BRAND COMMUNITIES

The objective of this introductory chapter is to explain what brand communities are and to examine how they can be made to emerge, and also to distinguish the related phenomena of tribes, online communities, communities of practices and other types of fan groups. The first section of the chapter will be devoted to defining them conceptually. In the second section, it will then be possible to focus directly on brand communities in order to develop an understanding of how they function. The third section will introduce the central issue of this book: the methods for creating a community around a new brand.

A CONTEMPORARY HISTORY OF THE NOTION OF COMMUNITY

It is worth beginning by questioning the notion of community, for an overabundance of information and uses have made it somewhat of a cliché. Indeed, the term is used to refer to a variety of different and sometimes even contrary realities. During the last three decades, it has nevertheless shaped the perceptions and the models of analysts examining society and the market. Yet before the advent of this plurality of communities, other terms were used.

The Prehistory: Subcultures and Fandoms

Before the 1980s, the term ‘subculture’ was used in the rare texts addressing issues related to collective consumption phenomena. The term refers to groups of individuals on the margin of the dominant culture who share a separate style and a different set of values. The notion of a subculture makes it possible to qualify the specific culture of these subgroups inside society in general. These subgroups have a certain number of common cultural traits, but also more specific ones, which are not found in other social groups. Usually, these groups are viewed as deviant. During the 1970s, for example, British youth was the crucible for the punk and glam-rock subcultures, and for the powerful Rasta subculture imported to England by Caribbean migrants. Parallel to this, the phenomenon of fandom or fan clubs, which has been well documented by Henry Jenkins,¹ came to be understood as the subculture associated with a group of fans, that is, with everything connected to a specific group of people’s favourite sphere of activity and to their way of organizing or creating it. Thus, the notion of a subculture was used in reference to clubs of soccer fans, opera fanatics, bikers and other groups with marginal behaviours. At the time, marketing revolved around segments of average consumers – with the well-known reference to housewives – and showed no interest in the minority phenomenon of subcultures.

Today the term ‘subculture’ is still used, but mostly in sociology. For instance, it is used to refer to geeks – fans of imaginary fantasy worlds who have a passion for new technologies. On the other hand, the term ‘fandom’ has a relatively wide diffusion in contemporary societies thanks to the universe of TV and movie series, with *Star Wars* standing as a prime example. Changes during the last 20 years have led certain commentators to insist on the central role of fanaticism. The phenomenon of fanaticism can be illustrated by the numerous events during which individuals go to extreme lengths to disguise themselves so that they can spend several hours or even days playing the part of characters such as Darth Vader, Spock or even Super Mario. Taken separately, each of these cases seems to depend on the extreme practices of a limited number of individuals with marginal behaviours. Yet the

multiplication of these behaviours and their diffusion in every sector of contemporary society bring into question their abnormality and make fanaticism a commonplace phenomenon. There are no longer any average persons who can be contrasted with fans: we are all fans of something.

The Era of Tribes

At the end of the 1980s, the topic of tribes begins to generate discussion. It is important to recall that the period between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s sees the peak of individualism in Western societies and that, in line with almost all sociological analyses, marketing is oriented towards an approach favouring personalized relationships with each consumer. There is a move from mass markets to masses of markets, each individual becoming a specific target that can be identified and documented. It is during this period that customer relationship management developed, a field that required businesses to invest significant amounts of money in information systems that centralize, stock and analyse huge volumes of data on existing clients and on prospective ones, that is, on everything from consumption activities to contact logs. Businesses must then make this data available in real time, which leads to the personalization of product and service offers as well as business procedures. At this point, the web is still at the 1.0 version stage, with Internet sites operating in read-only mode. There is no interaction between parties. The one creates, and the other reads; the one offers, and the other buys. The only harbinger of the 2.0 revolution to come seems to be the discussion forums.

In this context of a frenzied individualism reinforced by technological developments, it may appear contradictory to refer to community. Yet some studies in everyday life sociology point to the advent of the era of tribes. Thus, at a time when every commentator on 1990s society is highlighting the incredible rise of individualism, Michel Maffesoli² detects numerous signs of a contrary tendency that he calls 'tribalism'. According to Maffesoli, far from being satisfied with an isolated individual life, contemporary human beings are creating a profusion of opportunities to share

experiences together and to live these experiences in a highly emotional mode. In choosing to use the term ‘tribes’ to describe these more or less ephemeral gatherings, Maffesoli adopts an anthropological perspective on this phenomenon. Today’s tribes are groups in which individuals interact with each other, develop strong emotional bonds and have shared passions and similar experiences. However, in contrast to the sense of belonging characteristic of traditional tribes, which is unique and impossible to dissolve, today’s tribalism sees individuals jump from one tribe to another. In this new sense, a tribe is a group of individuals who are heterogenous in terms of their sociodemographic characteristics but interconnected through a common emotion. And such a tribe is capable of collective action. Therefore, it is the opposite of a social class or market segment that only brings together homogenous individuals.

In the United States and France, studies on consumption and marketing begin to integrate the notion of tribalism in the middle of the 1990s. At the time, tribalism appears to be at best marginal, at worst highly questionable. Consumer tribes can be identified in society and through consumption practices – there are Goths, Mac fans, Jeep drivers, etc. – but few businesses adopt marketing approaches that can be described as tribal. Some emblematic cases make it possible to put forward the idea that consumers united around the same passion can provide a way to develop and sustain a marketing approach: Harley Davidson and the HOG (Harley Owners’ Group), the Wizards of the Coast and their game *Magic: The Gathering*, etc.

The Invention of Online Communities

With the advent of Web 2.0 at the end of the 1990s, there is a shift from the static web to the social web. A dimension of sharing and information exchange enters the Internet, with newly formed or reconsolidated groups emerging thanks to virtual exchanges on forums and to mailing lists, and then by way of blogs and other platforms. From the perspective of the evangelists for the new information and communications technologies, people like Howard Rheingold,³ these virtual groups are similar to communities – they