

VIRTUAL FORUMS AS RESEARCH ENVIRONMENTS UNDER THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE BOURDIEU METHOD

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### ***ABSTRACT***

*This study presents a theoretical essay on the adequacy of the concepts and the researched method elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu to the virtual discussion forum tool, aiming at its application in academic researches in the field of the management sciences. The results from this analysis lead to the use of the virtual discussion forum, showing in its execution, the concepts proposed by Bourdieu, highlighting the opportunity of enlarging the research method, as well as other applications to be researched.*

**Key-words: Virtual Communities; Research Methods/ Bourdieu; Virtual Discussion Forum.**

## 1. INTRODUÇION

As a result of the constant technological revolution, as well as the globalization, consumption habits have changed, therefore, making the means of distribution more complex. "Officeless" companies have come up and are inserted in the e-commerce environment, such as Amazon and Submarino, and other sales channels, which do not demand physical sales places (sales on TV, through catalogs, among others). The physical sales places have similarly been given a new marketing perspective, aiming at providing the customers with convenience, agility, service quality and memorable purchasing experience. It is understood by the theoreticians that the multi-channel strategy is necessary to generate competitiveness within a global reach.

This business context acquires meaningful sense only if a clear understanding concerning the change of habits and the life style of the consumers – the permanent agents and indicators for the activities of the companies – is considered. These changes lead to the development of product driven strategies. A lot of companies opt for the market segmentation, meeting more and more their customers' needs and expectations, demanding a more direct marketing, in opposition to the mass marketing. Both the strategies of the relationship marketing and the 'one-to-one' marketing have increased, which emphasizes the personal interaction with the customers (PEPPERS e ROGERS, 1994).

Among the several internet-based tools used to establish a line of communication between the customers and the companies there is the discussion form. According to Domingues (2006), the forum is an environment aiming at the debate of ideas related to a determined issue.

This study has sought for the understanding of Thiry-Cherques reanalysis of the investigation method proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, as it contributed to the epistemological discussion in the construction of the scientific knowledge broadening the thematic of social and human sciences. According to Thiry-Cherques (2006), the study of Bourdieu does not propose the separation between the object and the place where the research is carried out, which converges into the new scenarios derived from the advent of the internet-based tools. This work intends to investigate the virtual discussion forum to find an

answer to the question: Can the virtual forum be used as a research instrument under the perspective of *Bourdieu*?

In order to achieve that, it relates theoretical constructs about the organizational context in the informational age, on-line learning by internet learning communities, concepts and functionalities of the virtual discussion forum. It is worth mentioning, that this is a theoretical essay which provokes the continuity of other scientific researches with application to the management sciences.

## **2. PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH**

This study aims at showing how the virtual forum is a research instrument under the perspective of Pierre Bourdieu.

The specific goals to attain the final purpose are the following: (i) understanding of the methodological presuppositions elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu; (ii) contextualization of the cultural cyberspace and its implications in the present organizational management; (iii) understanding of the construction of knowledge from networks, social interactions and co-operations in the cyberspace; (iv) understanding of the concept and identification of the functionalities and the applications of the virtual forum; (v) correlation of the characteristics and functionalities of the virtual forum with the methodological fundamentals elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu.

## **3. THEORETICAL REFERENCE**

### **3.1. Concepts, types, characteristics and applications of the Virtual Forum**

The discussion forum, presenting an asynchronous nature, that is to say, each member of the group participates at different moments, allows the debate to be extended in time, also permitting the access to messages previously posted. The forum is a written tool, with complementary images and videos.

There are two types of forum: the public, featuring free access and participation, without any time and space limits for the exchanging of written messages, in environments made available by the companies or institutions, and the private, where an organization or institution opens a space for

discussion of specific topics related to a target area, for a period of time, with registered users, in order to obtain the competent password.

The development of the forum depends on some important procedures that Domingues (2006) points out: (i) definition of the issue and the reading material which will guide the discussion (ii) startup of the forum with one question or statement which instigates the discussion (iii) elaboration of provocative open questions which can be easily understood by the participants.

Generally, the organization and execution of the virtual discussion forums depend on moderators, who can edit, erase, or exclude undesired topics and messages, as well as ban members of the group who do not allow the discussion to occur within its ambit.

The moderator plays an important role both in the dynamics and in the management of the discussion Forum, since, according to Prado (2001), he/she acts as a motivator for the participation and the interaction of the members, being in charge of the selection of the appropriate topic/ issues and the profile of the members, elaborating provocative questions, using clear and objective language, intervene in a neutral way so that the participants can interact, making sure the discussions do not lose their main focus, potentializing the participations and the discussions through regulations and orientation defined before the execution of the forum (GONZÁLES, 2006).

### **3.2 Methodological Presuppositions elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu**

According Thiry-Cherques (2006:31), Bourdieu's method comprises the phenomenon of social action as a plot, therefore, unbreakable, not susceptible to the separation of its parts without compromising the whole (BOURDIEU *et al.*, 1990). In this sense, he considers it as "genetic structuralism", or constructivist, where the individual actions are a consequence of the whole system of relations, in which and by which they occur. (BOURDIER *et al.*,1990:32).

Thiry-Cherques (2006: 30) starts from a phenomenological constructivism, which comprises the interaction of the individual and the groups within a "historicized" structure imposing over thoughts and actions. Bourdieu

believes that the formation of the individual relies on the social practice, where the relations and the existing conditions, the consciousness, the practices, the ideologies are determinant in the constitution of the individual (BOURDIEU et al., 1992b: 188-190).

According to this perspective, there is a direct relation between the “mental structures” of the social agents and the objective structures, where the facts take place. These relations are dynamic and establish some reciprocity, understood as *habitus*, that is to say, a system of dispositions, a way of understanding, feeling, doing, thinking, which leads us to a determined manner of acting, under a given circumstance. (THIRY-CHERQUES, 2006, p.33).

Another primary concept devised and broadened by Bourdieu was the *field*. This is understood as a specific segment, an environment of objective relations among the individuals, communities or institutions, social microcosm with specific values (*capital, background*) objects and interests. A set of forces which affects the agents involved, establishes a dispute that defines the relative position and maintains or transforms the structure. In this sense, the position in a *field* determines the way we consume – things, ideas and ideologies.

The *field* is a result of social differentiation, the way of being and of understanding the world; it is capable of creating the object (artistic, educational, organizational, political and so on). Every *field* features agents who hold the same *habitus* (BOURDIEU, 1996).

This established relation generates interests which Bourdieu named *capital*; it can be economical, cultural, social, symbolic, etc. Unconsciously, the agents make use of strategies which allow them to keep or conquer positions. The way the *capital* is built up and distributed occurs according to the internal relations and defines the structure of the *field* (BOURDIEU et al., 1984:114).

The concept of *capital* by Bourdieu is derivative from the economic notion that starts with the accumulation and the transfer of inheritance, and increases according to the skills of the holder. The cultural *capital* comprises the knowledge, the skills and the information; the social *capital* is the set of social

accesses – relationships and the network of contacts; the symbolic *capital* is the set of rituals which generates knowledge and prestige.

Each *field* is guided by specific interests of its agents who, in turn, follow the *doxa*, meaning the collective beliefs and practices. But the interpenetration of the *fields* is made possible because the cultural production influences the symbolic hierarchy of the *field*, by the effect of conflicts, as well as by contamination of ideas (BONNEWITZ, et al., 2002:55).

According to Bourdieu's conception, the scientific work is empirical, dynamic and systemic, not following a linear operation order, being capable of changing the problematic, the hypotheses and the variables along the research.

#### **4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In order to approach in a combined way the questions presented in the research, this work adopted the bibliographic research, mainly comprising books and articles. The method of comparative approach was also adopted, correlating the experiences made available by the companies (Nike, FIAT, Cacau Show and software companies), authors and the theories which adopted an experimental and procedural character, allowing the reader to access a view of the concepts in applications of the present reality.

#### **5. ANALYSIS OF THE DATA**

Nowadays, the companies are already carrying out forums as an instrument of assessment research of service, satisfaction, transformation and creation of products/service, as well as other actions, defining previously who the participants should be. These forums take place in their own closed environments.

However, it is worth mentioning that the forum with random participation will not be comprised by this study because of its complexity.

The method defined by Bourdieu can be classified in genetic structuralism, which considers a phenomenological constructivism; searching, in interactions between agents/institutions, the identification of "historicized" structures about the perceptions, thoughts and actions (social genesis) (THIRY-CHERQUES, 2006:30).

The discussion forum allows the interactive conversation among the several actors – regardless the place/time as the participants do not need to be connected online for the conversation to occur in the exact moment.

*NIKE*, for instance, has been developing with its customers of “Nike Plus” environments where its consumers make available the records of their running practice on the site, by means of a sensor attached to their shoes. This enables the monitoring and the comparison of their performance, the participation in the discussion forum and the establishment of a relationship with other runners all over the world. Also, the clients interact with the software companies, presenting doubts, opinions and questions about the use, performance and applications of the products.

Bourdieu has as presupposition, the “non-separation” between the research and the place where it is applied, without losing its systematization and its purpose. This reinforces the fact that the discussion forum is compatible with his method, since it is an environment for interaction and allows, virtually, the congregation of people with similar characteristics or experiences; besides, it enables the researcher to go to the *field* and obtain elements for the construction of hypotheses and delimitation of problems as part of the investigation process.

In Brazil, the initiatives to researches are incipient and without scientific approach, but the interest has been increasing. Some proposals have been presented by the product marketing development and research/innovation segment, where the consumer is motivated to participate and co-operate.

This tendency started with the products and services related to the technological market, but the daily consumption products such as food, clothes, vehicles and others have presented some initiatives, which combine a proposal of entertainment with information and the possibility of taking part in a network of contacts. An experience already used in the market is a site simulation of the test driving of a car by FIAT, where the participant maintains the interaction with the company through forums, promotional actions and other relationship activities.

For further studies of the investigation processes devised by Bourdieu, the analyses will follow the steps proposed by him:

a) Definition of a social segment with systemic characteristics (*field*) – In this step, the researcher defines the goals and conceptual scope which will support him through the research.

b) Previous elaboration of the scheme of relations of the agents and institutions as the purpose of the study. This step is essential for the guidance of the discussion forum, as the researcher previously identifies the profile and the relations of power among the agents and institutions, aiming to construct the guiding strategy of the forum, which will depend on this previous analysis.

It is a part of this step, the planning of the research application, made up by the following activities: structurization of the guiding of process, setting of rules and supporting material, and also the elaboration of instruments for the evaluation and the follow up of the research.

The technological systems allow the forum tool the adoption of mechanisms to monitor the access, posting of key words, quantification of answers to related enquiries, among others, permitting the statistical controls foreseen in the Bourdieu method. (THIRY-CHERQUES, 2006:48).

The discussion forum enables the execution of both quantitative and qualitative researches; the researcher should define the methodological strategies to be used in order to reply the question of the research.

c) Breakdown of each meaningful event, characteristic of the position systems of the *field* – in this step, the interactions and relations among the participants of the group are established. In the virtual discussion forum, the role of the moderator is essential for the success of the data survey. The moderator welcomes and integrates the agent to the group and to the environment of participation and co-operation, motivating the participant to join the group. The moderator mediates the discussions guiding the group by means of, images, provocative questions and reflections.

However, at this point, some incoherence is noticeable when Bourdieu understands the difficulty of the full insertion of the interviewer and the interviewee, the observer and the observed, since all of them are part of the group, creating, therefore, a direct relation between “*fields*” and “*habitus*”, capable of transforming ideas, or even contaminating the positions.



Thiry-Cherques (2006:48-49) highlights the inter-relation of the concepts *field*, *habitus*, *capital* e *doxa* proposed by Bourdieu, which are able to maintain a structure of ruling power, or change it into something different, where the cultural, social and symbolic *capital* influence the relations of power in the group.

Conversely, the group is also subdued to the *doxa*, which is the set of standards and interventions that the moderator can use upon the group, in addition to the rules created by the group itself.

d) The other steps proposed by Bourdieu – analyses of the objective relations among the positions in the *field*; analysis of the subjective dispositions (*habitus*); construction of a relation matrix adjusted by the arrangement among the positions within a logical structure of the *field*, and the synthesis of the general problematic of the *field* – are common to any other type of research technique.

## **6. CONCLUSION AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

From this study, it is possible to conclude that the “tool” structured virtual discussion forum adopted by the organizations can be considered an environment for opinion research, and identification of information as a source of management recommendations and that its approach vis-à-vis the investigation method is outlined by the principles proposed by Pierre Bourdieu.

The positive response from this study indicates for the researchers of the business management science the importance of the theme for future researches, as a random participation forum, the structurization of strategies and methods for the use of the forum in researches concerning the area.

The study also shows that the tool virtual discussion forum can be a research instrument to be applied to other methods, which have the same necessity of interaction with the participants, but considering the possibility of transformation in the action of the agents involved.

Nevertheless, it is understood that the procedure methods of research need to be broadened, in order to meet a new social and technological order which is presented in these modern days.

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