

Customers as a resource: a new perspective in strategic management?¹

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Résumé :

Si les pratiques évoluent fortement concernant l'interaction entre les organisations et leurs clients, les approches en management stratégique s'intéressant à ce sujet sont plutôt rares (Priem, 2007). La recherche en management des services et en marketing a, depuis longtemps, étudié ces différentes formes d'interactions (e.g. Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Heinonen *et al.*, 2010), et leur lien avec la performance des entreprises. Devenant source de performance, les clients peuvent être appréhendés en tant que ressource, intégrée dans le processus de création de valeur (e.g. Fosfuri, Giarratana and Roca, 2011). Analyser l'interaction entre firme et clients par le prisme de la *resource-based view* (RBV) fait émerger des questionnements sur des éléments clés de cette approche. Cette démarche interroge notamment sur la nature des ressources et la notions de contrôle de ces dernières, lorsqu'elles ne peuvent être ni possédées ou directement contrôlées par une organisation. En se fondant sur une approche multi-cas comparée notre étude empirique fait émerger deux éléments clés concernant les modalités d'intégration du client comme ressource. La première, est la prise en compte de la variété des rôles des clients, dans le processus de création de valeur. La seconde, concerne la question du contrôle de la ressource, qui prend racine dans le contrôle de l'interaction avec les clients. Notre recherche contribue au champ du management stratégique en proposant un cadre d'analyse (taxonomie) des modalités d'intégration des clients comme ressources. L'objectif de ce travail est de remettre l'interaction avec les clients au cœur de la réflexion en stratégie, et ainsi ouvrir la voie à de futures recherches.

Mots-clés : resources-based view, customers, strategic processes, performance, resource control

¹ After several reviews the initial communication has been rewritten to take account of reviewers' comments. Thus, this is an early version of this reconstructed communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

“The LEGO community, like the basic interchangeable plastic brick, is one of the company’s core assets [...] While we have 120 staff designers, we potentially have probably 120,000 volunteer designers we can access outside the company to help us invent”
(LEGO CEO Jørgen Vig Knudstorp)

If customers’ critical role within firms’ competitive environment has been acknowledged by academic research, their role in the construction of firms’ strategies has been scarcely studied (Priem, 2007). For a long time strategic management has followed a Porterian vision (Porter, 1979; Porter and Millar, 1985), focusing on external determinants of firms strategic positioning. In contrast, the Resource-Based View (RBV) introduces a new insight on strategy, focusing on organisations’ internal determinants in the construction of competitive advantage (Peteraf, 1993; Barney, 2001). Even though the roles of customers have started to be a subject matter in academic research, especially in marketing and services management (e.g. Heinonen et al., 2010; Lengnick-Hall, 1996; Skaggs & Huffman, 2003), their inputs have rarely been studied in relationship to firms’ performance (Fosfuri, Giarratana and Roca, 2011). From this observation, we seek to answer the following research question: how are customers leveraged by firms as a resource in their production process? Drawing on the existing literature in marketing, services management and strategy we show the variety of ways firms can apprehend their clients as resources, deployed in their production process. Focusing on resources as “stocks of available factors that are owned or controlled by the firm” (Amit and Schoemaker 1993 :35) the apprehension of customers as a resource raises the issue of resource control, considering that customers cannot be owned or directly controlled by the firm. We conducted a multiple cases analysis (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014) to investigate the mechanisms at stake, for a firm to mobilize its customers as a resource. We found that the integration of customers as a resource is determined by two factors: the nature of customers’ participation and the degree of control over the interaction with customers. Put together, these modalities led us to build a taxonomy of types of strategies integrating customers as a resource. Our study contributes to academic research in strategic management by setting a framework to analyse the determinants of strategies apprehending customers as a productive input. The aim of our research is to rehabilitate the interaction with customers as a core issue in the RBV, and pave the way for further research.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we review existing literature to outline the academic approach of customers’ roles as a source of firms’ performance. Then we conduct a multiple cases analysis (inter-cases and intra-case studies) to understand how firms integrate

those roles as a resource, in the construction of competitive advantage. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for further research in strategic management.

2. RETHINKING FIRMS' INTERACTION WITH CUSTOMERS AS A RESOURCE

2.1. RESOURCES: THE ORIGIN OF COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

A central question in strategic management seeks to understand why firms have higher performance (competitive advantage) than others on a given market. Strategic management literature stands on two different grounds concerning the origin of competitive advantage. On the one hand, seminal works in strategic management investigated the positioning of firms in their competitive environment, explaining the acquisition of competitive advantage by the strategic positioning determined by the analysis of its competitors' position (Porter, 1979; Shapiro, 1989). On the other hand, the RBV emerged in contradiction to an industrial paradigm, which regarded firms as a black box in a given competitive environment. Thus the RBV suggests that firms' given performance is likely to rest upon their internal characteristics, rather than on the structure of its competition (Barney, 1991). Barney (1991) defines competitive advantage as the situation when a firm "is implementing a value creating strategy not simultaneously implemented by a large number of other firms" (p102). However this definition has been criticised, as it is seen as tautological, in the sense that both the definition of strategic resource as well as that of competitive advantage are defined in terms of value and rareness (Warnier, Weppe and Lecocq, 2013). To tackle this issue, some academic research use the notion of firm's performance (e.g. Hansen, Perry, & Reese, 2004; Newbert, 2008; Warnier et al., 2013) to better apprehend the impact of resources and their deployment on a firm's strategy.

Several studies have asserted that firms' competitive advantage derives from their resources (e.g. Armstrong & Shimizu, 2007; Barney, 1991; Penrose, 1959; Peteraf, 1993; Prahalad & Hamel, 1990; Wernerfelt, 1984). Resources are inputs in a production process (Lockett, O'Shea and Wright, 2008). They are defined by Amit and Schoemaker (1993) as "stocks of available factors that are owned or controlled by the firm" (p35). The boundaries of resources' definition remain debated in the academic field. If typologies of resources have emerged (e.g. Barney, 1991; Grant, 1991; Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997; Wernerfelt, 1984), most research conducted in the RBV field put the emphasis upon strategic resources. Resting on an approach based on the consideration of Ricardian rents, the VRIN model (Barney, 1991) shows that only resources combining the following four characteristics can be a source of competitive advantage : they must be Valuable, Rare, Inimitable and Non-substitutable

(Barney, 1991; Armstrong and Shimizu, 2007). However, Barney (1991) underlines that not all resources have a direct impact on the construction of competitive advantage. Common resources are also valuable for firms, for they do not directly give firms a competitive advantage, but their misuse could lead to a great strategic disadvantage. Their use is thus necessary for an efficient production process (Barney and Clark, 2007; Warnier, Weppe and Lecocq, 2013). Other resources are acknowledged to have a negative effect on firms' performance, what Warnier, Weppe and Lecocq (2013) define as junk resources. They are overlooked by firms, considering that they are not valued on a firm's market of reference, and even seen as value destructor in a given context (Armstrong and Shimizu, 2007). The notion of value capture and creation is thus an issue in the resource-based-view. In this regard, the demand side of a market (customers) is a crucial factor to study in order to better understand the location of value a firm's resource bundle (Schmidt and Keil, 2013).

2.2. CUSTOMER AS A RESOURCE

2.2.1. The nature of participation

As we underlined it, the notion of resources needs further refinements. We observe that, if the literature recognizes roles of customers' inputs in strategy, their participation could be foreseen as a determinant of firms' performance. Several authors have acknowledged the client as a key stakeholder in the determination and conduction of a firm's strategy (Freeman, 1984; Donaldson and Preston, 1995; Martinet and Reynaud, 2001). However the way firms perceive customers is paradoxical, them being viewed at the same time as a source of uncertainty, detaining a bargaining power (Porter, 1979; Bateson, 2002; Plé and Lecocq, 2015), as a potential source of opportunities in gaining a comparative advantage (Bateson, 2002), and for some academics as a co-opetitor (Afuah, 2000). In the seminal strategic literature, customers have mostly been regarded as belonging to the external environment of organisations and an output for a firm's production (Ansoff, 1957; Andrews, 1971; Porter, 1979; Shapiro, 1989).

In the service management and marketing literature customers have for a long time been regarded as a resource for organisations. It stems from the fact that customers are actively participating in the value creation process of services (Gouthier and Schmid, 2003), while consummating the service (Bateson, 2002). Whereas products firms have been perceived as able to abstract from their environment, and have a value chain autonomous from interactions with their clients (Skaggs and Huffman, 2003). This assumption has been questioned in the recent years. A growing number of studies acknowledge the importance of interactions in any organisation between a firm and its clients, going beyond the only product delivery (Vargo and

Lusch, 2004). New information technologies have fostered the research on the power given to customers and their interaction with firms. With digitisation customers are more engaged and empowered, deciding and controlling their access to information as well as the knowledge they produce and share (Vernuccio and Ceccotti, 2015). This impact of new information technology is particularly significant concerning firms' reputation, which must take into account the power of customers especially on social media (Plé & Lecocq, 2015).

If the recognition of customers' satisfaction importance is not new (Levitt, 1960), different types of customers' participation have been identified in the literature. In order to understand how firms can improve their performance, managers can take into consideration the value perceived by customers and the crucial impact of meeting their needs (Du, Jiao and Tseng, 2006; Merle *et al.*, 2010). This approach underpinned the strategic orientation of organisations, which become customer-centric (Galbraith, 2005) or customer-oriented (Lengnick-Hall, 1996). This new approach to strategy, and the organizational changes it entails, has fostered the initiatives towards an individualisation of the firm-customer interaction. Customer-centric firms look for meeting customers' demands the best way possible to retain them and reach economic performance (Galbraith, 2005). For this purpose, products and services tend to be individualized aiming at constructing a unique value proposition for each customer (Bowen & Youngdahl, 1998). This individualisation action can take two forms : customization and personalization (Tseng & Piller, 2011). First, customisation relies on the construction of a firm's diverse value proposition, within which clients can choose and customised products or services (Schembri, 2009). Second, personalization is based the collection of customers' digital data and their analysis to adapt the interaction with the clients considering its preferences and habits (Tam & Ho, 2005).

Beyond the new consideration of customers in their individuality, communities of clients have long been regarded as potential strategic partners for firms (Fosfuri et al., 2011; Jeppesen & Frederiksen, 2006; Zwass, 2010). New emergent phenomenon like crowdsourcing (Jeff, 2008) or crowdfunding (Belleflamme, Lambert, & Schwienbacher, 2014) spur academics to investigate the new roles of customers in firms' strategy. The input from customers is well recognized in strategic innovation literature. The strategy can be opened to actors outside the firm especially in innovation process (Chesbrough, 2003). Customers are recognized as a real potential asset for innovation in organisations. Historically, firms have concentrated their efforts on "lead-users" or innovative users in communities (Jeppesen & Frederiksen, 2006; Von Hippel, 1986) and integrate them to foster innovation, sometimes with new technologies like 3-D printers (Rayna & Striukova, 2016). Firms can seek to integrate and value customers'

abilities and knowledge in their construction of competitive advantage. “Customers are part of the enhanced network: they co-create and extract business value. They are collaborators, co-developers and competitors” (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000: 80).

Some academic research in the last decades are matching, in their approach, the notion of resource and customers’ in strategic management (e.g. Amit & Zott, 2001; Bateson, 2002; Plé, Lecocq, & Angot, 2010). In this lineage, studies highlight how customers can themselves be a productive resource for firms, like creative resources (Plé and Lecocq, 2015) or a direct source of competitive advantage (Fosfuri, Giarratana and Roca, 2011).

2.2.2. The issue of resource control

Deriving from blurred definition of resources and their nature, investigations concerning their control are rare. The notions of property, and ownership of resources can be regarded as too restrictive, as the literature growingly recognizes intangible resources that can hardly be bought (Vargo, Maglio and Akaka, 2008; Prévot *et al.*, 2010). The resource control is an issue, rarely tackled even though it is an integrant part of the definition of firms’ resources (e.g. Amit & Schoemaker, 1993; Barney, 1991). The issue of control directly conditions the extent to which a firm can integrate a resource to its productive process. Indeed, the construction of competitive advantage is a resultant of a combination of resources and management strategic decisions. These actions are what effectively generate value, which is not totally inherent to resources (Hansen, Perry and Reese, 2004). Value creation is the result of managers’ decisions, and organizational processes. Looking in the black box of RBV showed that the role of these decisions is crucial in strategic management, especially in implementing actions to leverage firms’ resources (Ndofor, Sirmon and He, 2015). Considering customers as a source of competitive advantage raises the issue of resource control (Skaggs and Huffman, 2003), as clients cannot be owned by firms.

The RBV helps us to understand the origins of economic performance, especially considering the cases where customers are integrated in firms’ value creation process. However, studying customers under the light of RBV puts the emphasis on some of this approach’s shortcomings. Further investigations are precisely needed on the nature of resources and their control, especially when they cannot be owned or directly controlled by the firm. This leads us to the subsequent research question: how are customers leveraged by firms as a resource in their production process?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

Our research seeks to understand how firms can consider customers as a productive resource and deployed in their production process. The lack of ties drawn between customers and the notion of resource by practitioners, whereas strategic management theory seems to begin to tackle this question, led us to choose an inductive positioning (Locke, 2007), relying on a qualitative approach. We decided to rely on a multiple case study research (Yin, 1981; Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014), based on within-case analysis and cross-case analysis (Yin, 1981) in order to explore mechanisms specific to each case but also regularity among them.

3.2. CASES SELECTION AND DATA COLLECTION

This research is an exploratory study, setting the basis for further investigations on customers as a resource, and its deployment in organisations. To complete our research we decided to pick polar cases of customers' participation integration in firms strategies (Eisenhardt, 1989). We selected cases based on the fact that they mobilise customers beyond the only commercial relationship of buying a product or a service.

The four cases we selected are: (1) SNCF, which is the French public monopolistic railway operator. Facing new competition, especially from car sharing; the organisation had to seek new ways to retain its customers. We thus decided to focus on the main tool of interaction with its clients, its booking website voyages-sncf.com. (2) SOSH, which is a low cost mobile phone company, spin-off from one of the largest telecommunications operator in France (Orange). Its strategic positioning relies on the animation of customers' community at the core of the value proposition. (3) LEGO, which has been an often-studied example because of its close cooperation with its fans for innovation. (4) VITALITY, is a health insurance. The firm proposes to its clients discounts depending on their "healthy" behaviour, tracked by smart objects or a mobile application.

We decided to select cases based on the variation of the nature of customers' inputs in value creation. To perform our case studies (intra cases and cross cases) we decided to use mainly secondary qualitative data. The variety of sources selected gives us access to a larger data sets (Vartanian, 2010). Collected information are considered as giving us sufficient precision and the necessary material for our exploratory research, based on the analysis of 190 collected

sources (see Table 1). The aggregation of data was based on web available sources, aggregated between July 2015 and December 2016.

Table 1. Cases selection and data collection

		Voyages-sncf.com	SOSH	LEGO	VITALITY
Sector of activity		Railway	Phone operator	Games	Insurance
Annual revenue²	2014	€4,19 billions	2,459 million subscribers	€4 billions	Vitality £79,3 million
	2015	€4,32 billions	3,022 million subscribers	€4,8 billions	Vitality £92 million
Discourse transcription (Youtube interviews)		4	2	3	1
Secondary data (firms' resources)		11	8	9	10
Secondary data (press articles, reports, customers' publications)		32	39	38	33

3.1. DATA ANALYSIS

To pursue our study, our multiple cross-cases analysis is variable oriented (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014), focusing on defined themes across all cases. The scope of customers as a resource has been coded based on the existing literature concerning customers' participation. In order to analyse our data, we constructed our coding sheet based on key elements characterizing customers' mobilisation as a resource in strategic management. We analyse our data around two main dimensions that appear relevant to our research. First the nature of customers' input. Based on our analysis of the literature we identify different types of customers' participation to firm's value creation process. Second we rely on the modalities of control over the interaction between firms and their customers as resources (Barney, 1991; Amit and Schoemaker, 1993).

The first step of our research relies on an intra-case analysis, enabling us to shed light on case-specific features of customers' participation in the construction of competitive advantage. The second step of our empirical study is based on an inter-cases analysis, highlighting the common features across cases and the determinants of constructions of

² Because Sosh's annual revenue is not displayed by Orange, we decided to indicate the number of phone subscriptions.

competitive advantage integrating customers' participation as a resource. This help us to understand the organizational processes behind the deployment of customers' mobilisation as a resource.

4. RESULTS

4.1. INTRA CASE ANALYSIS

4.1.1. SNCF

Facing new competition from other modes of transportation, like carsharing, SNCF sought ways to get closer to its customers, aiming at better understanding their needs. A growing number of users in the last decade turned to new services and offers, especially on short distance journeys. With 70 000 collaborators and more than 4 million passengers per day, SNCF decided to focus on service quality to retain its clients, centred around its website voyages-sncf.com. This transformation has partly been led by the direction in charge of customers relationship, which is also responsible for performance.

To improve its relationship with customers, SNCF decided to reshape its strategy with its clients at the centre. The firm has been able to provide new offers, meeting customers' demands, based on a more holistic comprehension of clients' journey and expectation. In that aim, the firm extended its comprehension of customers' journey beyond the sole action of acquisition, to encapsulate other decisive moments from the beginning to the end of a trip. This especially relying on digital means of communication, in order to get in touch with the largest possible number of clients.

“The customer needs the digital when he is in the train, during his journey, the second moment is when he plans his trip” (Yves Tyrode's interview by French Web on Dailymotion)

To improve their performance SnCF chose to directly interact with customers outside the sole commercial relationship of buying/selling tickets. Customers bring key resources to the organisation, which can integrate them in the construction and adaptation of its offer. In this case customers are resource providers, as it is the information transmitted that can create value after its analysis by the firm.

“we know that not everything is perfect, that is why every day our teams analyse our clients' expectations and develop new innovative services to meet every transportation demands” (SNCF Voyageurs CEO Barbara Dalibard's tribune in Lesechos.fr)

“When the new website version was implemented, in June 2010, we set up a forum giving everyone the opportunity to give his opinion on ergonomic, functionalities, evolutions of Voyages-sncf.com » (Voyages-sncf.com)

Turning to customers to bring input for service innovation has been of great value for SNCF. Collecting directly remarks and expectations help the firm to better understand users' needs, and thus meet them in the most suitable way. Moreover, considering that the size of the firm is a hurdle to innovation, collecting directly the expectations and desire of customers is a great opportunity to accelerate innovation and service improvement.

“We were very surprised by customers' feedbacks quality. They brought us many constructive remarks, suggestions, ideas for new services and lots of encouragement” (Voyages-sncf.com)

Customers' participation rests on an idea of cooperation between the firm and its clients, as they are asked to give their opinion. These new resources (information transmitted by customers) is thus also of great value in combination of data owned by SNCF. It helps for example to bring a real-time update of some mobile applications with the information users upload.

“The mobile application is at the same time based upon data provided by SNCF, Open data and on data transmitted by users” (RawDataHunter.com)

Searching for data aggregation, correlated with the large use of digital means of communication, entailed the organisation to find ways to optimize the collection and treatment of customers' data. Personalisation of the interface with customers are key to provide an intuitive content, to adapt to new quality standards for customer experience on the market of railway booking (for example www.trainline.eu former Captaintrain.fr).

“develop a personalized marketing based on the analysis of data” (Strategies.fr)

SNCF is a “sumo by nature” (CEO Fabrique Digital, Régine Cambremont's Interview), for it cannot respond to every customer's demand. In the long run the aim of SNCF's is to retain customers, with a better knowledge of their preferences and provide a customisable offer based a large choice of services. If the size of the organisation restraints the firm's capacity to individualize the interaction with customers, its large clients base is a key asset to innovate. The abundance of information allows for the construction of a global offer, which can be more easily customised by a various range of clients.

“To meet the personal expectations of 10 million of passengers commuting every day and the mass” (Régine Combremont’s interview, La Fabrique Digitale’s CEO, for Visionmarketing.e-marketing.fr)

Thus, given the complexity of controlling millions of customers’ participation, but thanks to the large amount of information collected, SNCF has been able to construct a large offer, within which clients can customise their interaction with the firm and the services they choose. To reach as many customers as possible SNCF strongly relies on digital means of communication to interact with users. The aim of this strategy led by SNCF is to provide to customers a tool to facilitate the relationship with the firm during their whole experience. Customers can configure their account on the website with all necessary information and preferences, they can choose between several options for their travel like seats number, or a cab ride to the train station. Customers bring key inputs to help the organisation to understand their needs and expectations. The organisation retain the control over the construction of the offer however the clients remain in power of the interaction with the firm.

4.1.2. SOSH

SOSH is a low-cost spin-off from one of the major phone operator in France. It emerged to face the liberalisation of the mobile phone market, after the entry of Free mobile and its 2-euro subscriptions. Considering that the competition on this new market was fierce, Orange decided to strongly differentiate its new firm, and target a specific population of customers: the digital natives. To be in concordance with this strategic segmentation SOSH introduced itself on the market as a community-based brand.

“SOSH is the 100% connected, community-based and interactive brand, designed to meet the demands of “smart shoppers” used to take advantage of the internet to find good deals” (Orange press statement 2014 April 23rd)

The community of customers has rapidly grown with 393 930 members at the 1st January 2016 and 426 506 members nowadays. If SOSH is not the dominant player on the market (Free mobile) its approach of customers’ as a resource enables the firm to maintain itself in a very competitive environment.

The community, and *in fine* the clients, is one of the main resources of the firm. The brand has been modelled around a strong community of engaged clients within a larger community of SOSH’s subscribers. They rely on the input from targeted digital natives to construct an offer meeting their specific expectations. A strategy centred on a community of targeted customers aims at collecting valuable input from engaged clients, considering their

participation as more specific, based on a better expertise compared to other users outside the community. Managing a community of customers can be a great asset in the conception and improvement of the firm's value proposition.

“with a clear communication policy and in adequacy with its target customer base, Orange aimed straight and succeeded in developing a large community in very little time” (Lautremedia.com)

Orange decided, in order to give Sosh enough agility and new innovation capacities, to create the brand as an independent spin-off. This is profoundly different from its competitors, which mostly make no clear distinction between the traditional mobile operator and their new low cost subsidiary. For instance, Sosh has its own accounts on every social media, which is not the case for its competitors. This independence also beneficiates to Orange as a whole, considering that the community is regarded as a test sample for a larger consumer base. Because of the specificity of customers' competencies, insights and targeted knowledge can be collected within the community, on specific topics. SOSH inspired improvement concerning after sale services in the whole Orange group.

“[SOSH] is used as a laboratory for the whole Orange Group” (Spintank.fr)

The firm, in its conception has been customer-oriented, with processes driven to understand customers and naturally interact with them. It is a powerful tool to aggregate behaviours and communication channels with the digitalisation of the customer relationship.

“the customer is at the heart of the system: whereas being at the end of the process, the customer, its expectations, its practices are at the centre of conception” (Spintank.fr)

This unique interaction with clients give the firm the opportunity to rely on them for its product innovation, searching the co-construction of services and options, to improve the quality of its products. Their contributions are at the heart of offers and services' construction and their opinion is highly valued and their recommendations often considered. For instance, Sosh constructed the international option “Libon” based on a suggestion of one customers, and crowdsourcing to determine the call destinations included in the offer. Relying on customers' engagement and competencies on a common interest is a mean for SOSH to transfer some of the service production to them. For example, most of the after sales service is first handled by users on SOSH's platform. Customers are also actively involved in the brand marketing, assuming the unique bond established with the firm motivates them to communicate around what should be a positive experience. For SOSH its clients are an integrant part of its image and its representation. In some of SOSH ads real customers were casted. Its community is directly part of its image and convey the spirit of the brand.

Creating a sense of community within Sosh clients is key for the strategy of the firm, contrary to an aggregation of individualized customers' behaviours. The idea of community gives to customers a sense of belonging to something beyond a relation with a brand. A community of clients can share value and interests with each other, but also with the firm. The shared passion with the community members is key to the firm's strategic positioning compared to its competitors. SOSH gave a great importance to the geek culture and its shared passions with customers.

*“moving the relation from an operator to a client, to share an obsession, the one of innovation, the cutting-edge, with clients, whose geek culture needs to be valued”
(Spintank.fr)*

*“I do not know if a brand like SOSH has values. Our values are those of the community”
(Quentin Delobelle, for Lareclame.fr)*

However, the core role of the community could be a threat to the organisation, as the aggregation of SOSHers has more power than one individual isolated. Managing a community thus demands great attention to customers' needs and expectations. In the case of Sosh, the community managers retain the control on the animation of customers' participation. This concerns the debates opened by them, but also the attribution of the Top Contributeur status to most engaged clients. Only these customers, recognized as competent by the organisation, can propose ideas to improve Sosh's offer.

“Taking the risk of being exposed to a community, is not always simple because a community does not always praise” (Quentin Delobelle, for Lareclame.fr)

*“Debates are opened by community managers to collect the community feedbacks”
(lautremedia.com)*

The community, composed of engaged customers, is a key resource for SOSH, for the improvement of its offer as well as its image on the French market. To maintain the cohesion of this group of customers the firm continuously proposes new incentives for participation, adapting to a large range of customers' participation: from events open to everyone, to special events reserved to Top Contributeurs.

4.1.3. LEGO

Facing the success of video games in the beginning of the 21st century LEGO had to find new ways to get in touch with its customers, after being close to bankruptcy in 2003. The relationship towards its customers was complicated, considering that initially they were seen as

a threat for the firm's intellectual property. Short after the launch of Lego Mindstorms, the operating software, associated with the robot, was cracked and transformed by the fans. Instead of going to court, Lego's teams decided to integrate their customers in the improvement of the product. The organisation decided to loosen its control over the misappropriations of its models. From this point the firm decided to become more customer-oriented, to understand their needs and expectations.

"First of all they LEGO need to start looking and listening to their fans and they need to not be afraid of them" (Peter Espersen, head of LEGO co-creation).

With this new approach LEGO's customers are more active, especially on social networks. Fans of the brand are more visible and involved than its major competitor Mattel (for example LEGO has almost 11 million likes on its Facebook official page, when Mattel only counts 220 000 likes).

When Lego decided to turn to its clients they entered in dialogue with many existing fans communities. This groups of customers have emerged autonomously, without the firm's approval. Realizing that clients' habits were evolving, Lego decided to integrate them in the conception of new products. This particularly concerns adult customers, potentially more attracted to new forms of gaming. Thanks to new technologies LEGO aims at involving customers in the creation process of new games, and see customers input as a key resource for new products development.

"LEGO users have a long innovation tradition and share their creations and activities" (Expansion Management Review)

"our community and fans post, share and comment their creations from their own initiative" (Lars Silberbauer, LEGO's Head of Social Media)

This new role attributed to customers forced Lego to adapt its internal structure concerning the management of such fans' mobilisation. To maintain the creative emulation, it has been important to leave these communities of fans freedom of action. It is this freedom that enable them to bring new insights to the internal creative teams, which have to deal with more technical, financial and legal constraints than the fans.

« The fans are not LEGO designers. They can do whatever they want. [...]. But that's more what I would call unharnessed creativity. But the people who design things inside the company need to be harnessed. » (Interview de Peter Espersen, The Guardian)

This freedom is also reflected in Lego openness to every kind of customers' participation, from most experienced users to occasional players. The most significant example of LEGO's open-strategy towards customers is the collaborative platform LEGO Ideas (former LEGO Cuuso),

where fans can submit their own constructions, which might be commercialised. The firm involves a large range of clients: from the most experienced to the occasional player. The main input (the modelling of new products) is directly brought by expert players, who propose their model on the platform.

“by opening a creation web platform in 2005, LEGO addressed the “experts” fans of the brand, proposing them to conceive assemblies without limitations” (marketing-community.fr)

Less experienced customers can also participate to projects, if they do not want to submit one, by voting for their favourite creations. It is only after 10,000 likes that LEGO’s teams study the project’s viability for commercialisation. These same customers are also involved in the market study for the constructions proposed. After each vote they are asked to fill in a small survey concerning their opinion on the price they would be willing to pay, or whether the project is more suitable for children or adults. This step is of great importance for LEGO because the votes and the opinion of customers are an efficient way to ensure the potential commercial success of a chosen creation. The filtering of customers’ productions relies on a crowdsourcing logic. The firm transfers to these customers some of the first steps of a market study to evaluate the commercialisation feasibility of a new product.

This great amount of freedom left to customers shoves the firm to create incentives for customers’ participation, even though their sentimental engagement is strong. Customers as a resource for co-creation is a great source of value for the firm because it is a way of co-constructing the offer and the brand with them, leading to a better chance for success. This value is also perceived by customers, because they are directly involved in the creation process, feeling rewarding for their passion for the brand.

“LEGO managers have learned that the intrinsic satisfaction to have participated to the conception and development of a product is often more motivating than any financial compensation” (Expansion Management Review)

With its implementation of incentives, and rewards (financial or symbolic) Lego relies on customers’ satisfaction to convey a positive image of the organisation. Various forms of fans’ communities play a great role in the construction of the brand identity and the firm’s exposure. It is for example an important role of the Adult Fans Of Lego (AFOLs) across the world. Customers and their passion are a key resource for Lego in the preservation of its strategic positioning.

“since the ends of 2000s, LEGO has learned to lean on its community of fans to build with them the LEGO universe” (Nouvel Obs).

To retain customers LEGO decided to fully integrate them as a resource in its strategy, especially for the conception of new products. Considering the existence of an important number of fan communities across the world the firm decided to open means of participation with a great degree of freedom and few control mechanisms over the creativity of its clients.

4.1.4. Vitality

The evolution of customers' role in value creation is very significant in the insurance sector. New emerging technology and practices force insurance companies to adapt: from self-driving cars or the sharing economy, these evolutions are questioning traditional actuarial models. The rise of the Internet of Things (IoT) with innovative smart, connected, objects, generate a growing amount of digital data every day. Insurance companies are starting to consider these data, produced by their clients, as a new resource to better understand, and thus better insure client in their everyday life. Regarding customer's data has been an asset for VITALITY's performance. Its offer enabled the firm to sustain a 16% revenue growth between 2014 and 2015, based on a 38% increase in new subscriptions.

The key resource brought by the client for insurers turning to digital innovation is their personal data, which are the raw material for analysis and improvement of traditional actuarial models. By better knowing their customers' behaviours, insurance companies can innovate in services they provide, and improve their offers by adapting to new forms of consumption and behaviours. These data are collected through devices provided by the insurer or with mobile applications or smart objects (like VITALITY). The data collected vary from their basic behaviour to more personal information, for example about your health.

“By taking out a plan with us, you agree to us processing your personal information and sensitive personal information (e.g. health information). We will also use your information for statistical data analysis, management information and fraud prevention purposes.” (VITALITY, terms of use)

To ensure the robustness of the analysis, VITALITY need to collect a large amount of data. In our cases, insurance firms seek the abundance of relevant data, in order to improve their methods. The more data they collect, the more accurate is their strategy, adapting the offer to each customer. But this deluge of data available implies for the firm to adapt its innovation process and its technical infrastructure.

This need for an automatized collection of data leads to a situation where customers are mostly passive during the resource appropriation, the firm being in control of the data aggregation. This can rest upon a device provided by the firm, or sometimes partnerships with

other data agregators. For example, Vitality cooperates with Apple to complete its own base constructed on data collected through their mobile app. Nonetheless, even if insurance companies can cooperate with other data collectors, they seek to build their own data base.

This partly rests upon customers' fidelity, which is often generated by incentives. Indeed, Vitality and Snapshot propose a discount calculated on their clients' degree of "good" behaviour. The consequences of this system are twofold: it is an incentive for customers to adjust their behaviour in order to get discounts, and thus incidents are less likely to happen. To reinforce the incentives for customers' participation Vitality created a community of customers to entail a virtuous circle, based on ambassadors and VIP members. This, combined with a better understanding of customers' behaviours, help insurances like Vitality to construct a global offer within which clients can choose between options.

« Once you engage them in the process, they'll have better retention and stay with you longer» (insurancetech.com)

The analysis of data provided by customers is a powerful mean for insurers to construct an offer most suitable for people than do not want to participate in programs resting on the tracking of their activity. Thus for more transparency and individualisation of customers' experience, Vitality proposes "flexible cover options" for health insurance, in order to leave to the customer a certain power of action.

Customers bring their data as a resource to the firm, but the real value rests in the method of treatment of raw information. the data, has no intrinsic value. The value resides in its treatment and its combination with other data, to produce a global analysis of customers' behaviours.

"The approach is based on principles of behavioural economics; clinical, actuarial and lifestyle data, and integration with technology." (Solvencyiiwire.com)

4.2. DETERMINANTS OF THE INTEGRATION OF CUSTOMERS AS A RESOURCE

Our cross-cases analysis led us to identify the determinants of the integration of customers as a resource. We first can identify different types of customers' participation in the value creation process. Second, we highlight that the control of the resource rests in the control of the interaction with customers, solving the fact that customers cannot be directly owned or controlled by the firm.

4.2.1. Various types of customers' participation

The different types of customers' participation, regarded as resources can be classified in two categories: the customers as resource contributors and customers as direct resources. The difference between these two categories lies in the value created through the customers' input (either in association with other resources or directly integrated as a productive input).

Customers as resource contributors

In certain cases, customers' participation needs to be associated with other resources in order to create value in firms' production process. When customers are resource contributors, their input becomes valuable through treatment and analysis.

The most salient example is the personalisation strategy based on data aggregation and analysis. For instance, the collection of data by Vitality, requires analysis by the firm to create value. The raw information collected on customers' behaviour is not sufficient itself to create value in the production process. Concerning value creation based on the collection of data produced by customers, the value creation lies in the tools for analysing subsequent data. Indeed, algorithms to process this information are strategic resources. Customers transmit to the firm the raw material for value creation. This data collection can improve actuarial models (Vitality) but also can be used to personalise the interaction with the customers. For instance, the SnCF uses data analysis to propose destinations suggestions based on the frequent chosen travel options.

This type of customers as resource contributor is also to be found when customers give their opinion and are consulted by organisations to improve the firm's value proposition. For example, SnCF, regularly consults the customers concerning the service proposed and options they would like to see included in an enhanced value proposition. These comments and advices from customers are collected and analysed by the firm's team in order to adapt the offer. It is the aggregation of all these inputs from customers that can constitute a raw material for the organisation to create a more adapted value proposition. Through the selection and analysis of customers' inputs, firms can aim at proposing a global offer, which shall be customised by each clients. The rationale behind this strategic process is to collect as many inputs as possible to create a large offer to meet most of customers' demands, and at the same time individualize the interaction.

Customers as direct resources

Some customers' participation can be directly integrated in the value creation process. As opposed to the contribution brought by customers, their participation is directly valuable and integrated to the production process. This concerns situations where customers are co-creators of products (Lego) or services (Sosh). For example, the proposition of creation by Lego users on the platform Lego Ideas is directly valuable by the firm, especially if the project collects 10,000 votes. The creator of the selected model is part of the creation and production process, and earn, as the creator, 1% of the revenue generated by the sales of his/her model.

The customers are intrinsically valuable when the firm transfers to them some parts of the value chain and production process. Customers' input can be sought in order to create customer-to-customer interaction, like Sosh's after sales service. The contribution of customers' expertise in order to give other customers advice, is a source of performance, considering that Sosh's employees are less requested, being able to focus on other key issues. Customers can also be of direct value concerning the image of the firm, like it is the case for Sosh advertisement campaign integrating real customers.

4.2.2. Interaction with customers: control of the resource

We saw that customers' participation can be a source of value creation and *in fine* performance for firms. However, the consideration of customers as a resource is a complex issue to tackle in terms of organisational structure in order to ensure the integration of customers' participation in the production process. Customers cannot be owned or directly controlled by firms. Specific mechanisms of interaction are implemented in order to capture and deploy the resources, brought by or incarnated by customers. Organisations adapt the modalities of interaction to target and integrate customers' as a resource. We observe that considering the type of customers' input sought firms exert a higher or lower degree of control on the interaction.

Low degree of control on the interaction

Firms seeking a creative input from customers tend to control less the interaction with them. Indeed, in order to collect valuable input from customers firms tend to propose modes of interactions as tools to give their clients the space to express themselves and contribute to the value creation process. For instance, organisations searching for advice from their customers, like SnCF, tend to leave them a great freedom of action to collect valuable feedbacks. This could be reinforced by the size of the organisation (SnCF). Considering the number of customers transiting every day the modes of interaction are less controlled because less targeted towards a specific category of customers. Moreover, those customers, whose inputs are integrated in the

adaptation of the offer remain in full control of the execution of the interaction, choosing within several options.

This low control over the interaction with customers is crucial for open-innovation strategies and the co-construction of the offer with them (Sosh). Created by Lego, the platform Lego Ideas represents a tool for the interaction. Customers are free considering the models and constructions proposed on this medium. The importance rests in the complementarity of customers innovation and the organisational competencies. In order to bring in new ideas the firm stay at a certain distance of customers participation. This is even more relevant for Lego considering that most of communities of fans were pre-existing the firm's strategy to open its innovation process. The organisation cannot impose a strong control considering that its customers already have an autonomous activity.

High degree of control of the interaction

Other firms oversee more closely customers participation. This could be explained by the need for a specific and targeted participation to create value. This is especially the case for data collection. To keep the control over the creation of a data base, constituted with relevant data collected, firms ought to control all the interaction with customers. This can be implemented through specific means like connected objects or mobile applications (Vitality). In this case the interaction is mainly unilateral, the customers being mostly passive during the collection of data. However, in this particular case the high degree of control of the interaction is growingly questioned by a need for transparency. Indeed, customers are more aware of the potential value of their data and the limit of the protection of their privacy. *In fine* the intensity of the control, especially on personal data collection, can be limited by customer awareness, and more globally by codes of ethics and regulations.

A high degree of control can also aim at overseeing customers' participation to meet the firms' need in terms of resources. This for instance concerns the management of a community, created by the firm (Sosh). The organisation seeks to keep the control over the participation of customers with a constant interaction with community managers inside the firm. The latter grant the status of "Top Contributor", thus selecting customers with the possibility of proposing new ideas. The same process is used to select the Soshers that can test new products and services. The important difference here with Lego is the "origin" of the community solicited to participate. Indeed, in Lego's case the communities are autonomous and pre-existent to Lego's

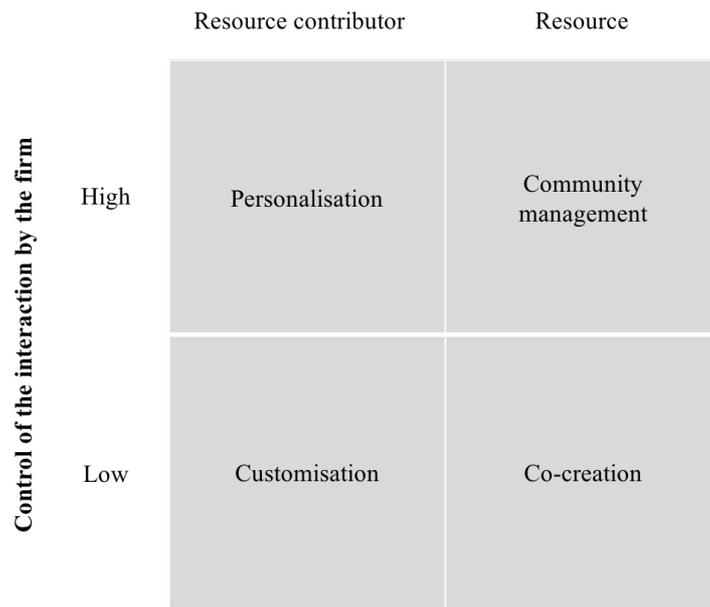
strategy of integration. In opposition, Sosh's community was created from scratch and is completely dependent from the organisation. In this regard, for now Sosh aims at keeping the control over its community, considering that this aggregation of customers could also represent a threat for the organisation, with the important number of clients constituting this group.

As shown in our intra case analysis the nature of customers' participation and the degree of interaction's control is not unique within our cases. The variation across these dimensions can be a mean to handle different nature of participation and different interaction with customers. For instance, Lego exert a low control of the interaction with its most experienced users, proposing models on the platform Lego Ideas. At the same time, the firm propose a more controlled interaction to all other customers wanting to vote and fill in the form concerning the potential price or targeted consumer for the model. Thus, we see that different forms of participation can be handled with different degree of control at the same time.

5. DISCUSSION

Our analysis allows us to identify different categories of customers' mobilisation as resources in the value creation process. They vary considering the control of the firm, and the nature of customers' input. Indeed, the firms exert a control over the interaction with clients, with a varying degree of intensity, considering the nature of the participation the firm seeks. This participation reveals two roles customers can play for the construction of competitive advantage: they can be a resource contributors, considering that the information they bring must be analysed by the firm to be turned into a source of performance. They can also directly be a resource, as their competencies and direct contribution are intrinsically valuable for the firm and sometimes other customers. Based on these first findings we draw a taxonomy of customers' mobilisation for the construction of competitive advantage (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Taxonomy of customers' as resources



A personalisation strategy is based upon a data collection and the use of analytical methods to aggregate and predict customers' behaviours. In this case the evolution of the interaction towards a more adapted value proposition is automatically led and the consumer has no direct power of action on this transformation. This strategy relies on customers' digital data as a resource to improve the offer, which is for instance implemented by Vitality. We found this pattern also for SNCF, which aims at personalizing the booking website interface.

Customisation relies on the idea that the firm transfers to consumers the power to lead their experience with services and devices provided by the organisation. Declarative information (opinion, suggestions for example) transmitted by customers is the core resource in the construction of strategy. For the firm, the purpose is to create a global offer, that each user can customise. It is a mean to respond to significant customers' needs for more individualized relationship with organizations, with more autonomy for each client. This type of customers as a resource is particularly important for SNCF's strategy. We found initiative to implement such action in Vitality's strategy, in order to adapt its offer centred around a set of options, between which customers can choose.

Managing a community is based upon the strategic role of customers, who are interrelated, and share a common passion with the firm. The community is a strategic resource for it is directly linked to organisational performance, with the creation of a particular interaction with customers. Clients, as in SOSH case, are empowered with new responsibilities transferred by the firm (for instance after-sale service). Lego rapidly decided to efficiently co-

conceive products with their customers, they should turn to their communities of fans and the management of their inputs.

Adopting a co-creation strategy implies to let the consumer take part in the conception of a product or a service, like LEGO, and other phases of the value chain. Here the participation of customers is proactive and conscious. Customers' input is strategic as it constitutes a core step in the production process, and thus links to the construction of competitive advantage. Aiming at proposing a new offer, firms' control over customers' participation remains low not to hinder customers' capacity to think without the firm's constraints. This pattern of customer mobilisation is tested by Sosh with the status of Top Contributor. Only a scarce part of the community can freely propose ideas and directly participate in the construction of the firm's offer.

6. CONTRIBUTIONS

By exploring the role of customers as a resource this research provides contributions to two academic fields that rarely coexist: customers' participation and strategy (especially the resource-based view). By studying the extent to which customers can be a source of performance and value creation, we showed that the service logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), which has considered for several decades that customers are co-creators of value, should be extended to all sectors and industry. We thus bring new insight on some existing work on customers' role and influence in management (Plé, Lecocq and Angot, 2010). If customers can be seen as a threat (Plé and Lecocq, 2015), we argue that organisations should perceive strategies mobilising customers as a means of hindering this risk and involve their clients in the production process. For a long time, the link between firms and customers have been studied mainly in marketing and service economy, and our research shows that studies in strategic management ought to pay more attention to this actor, as it is an important issue for the construction of performance and competitive advantage, in light of new means of communication.

By rehabilitating customers' roles and their mobilisation by firms as a potential source of competitive advantage, we bring two main contributions. First, we constructed a taxonomy of customers mobilisations. We thus propose a framework, in strategic management to analyse how firms can mobilise their clients in the construction of their strategic positioning. This framework brings a new light on the role of customers in strategy. Second, this framework, build to understand how firms can mobilise their customers, sets the basis for further research on this topic in strategic management. We believe that it is a first step towards other studies,

aiming at better understanding the logics of customers' mobilisation in the construction of competitive advantage.

This study aims at contributing to the investigation of resources scope in strategic management (Wernerfelt, 1984; Barney, 1991; Plé, Lecocq and Angot, 2010; Warnier, Weppe and Lecocq, 2013). We bring new insight on an issue overlooked by the academic research: the notion of resource control (Amit and Schoemaker, 1993). Indeed, the case of customers as a resource shed a new light upon resources that cannot be owned or directly controlled by the firm. We also shed light upon a new kind of resource: personal data, which has rarely been identified as a form of customers' participation (Plé, Lecocq and Angot, 2010; Fosfuri, Giarratana and Roca, 2011). The study of this particular type of resource, reinforces the argument that value and rareness are not necessarily related to competitive advantage (Newbert, 2008). In the case of personalisation strategy, resources are not intrinsically rare and valuable, but are necessary to the construction of competitive advantage. Studying the resources brought by customers shed light upon the demarcation between resources (data) and the services operationalizing them into productive input (Penrose, 1959; Warnier, Weppe and Lecocq, 2013).

This research also provides new insights for practitioners as we constructed a taxonomy referencing different possible construction of competitive advantage by considering customers as a resource. Our study could give practitioners the possibility to apprehend the different resources their customers can constitute, and transform their potential input into a competitive advantage.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

As it is regarded as an exploratory research further studies can test our taxonomy on a larger sample of cases and with new sets of collected data. Furthermore we use no frame of reference to encapsulate the place of resources in the value creation process, like business model frameworks (Plé, Lecocq and Angot, 2010). It could prove beneficial to our work to acknowledge customers as a resource in such theoretical approach. For our exploratory study, we decided to adopt a more descriptive approach in order to understand mechanisms at stake, but once this research will be more robust, it could be relevant to understand the limits of customers as a resource and the variables influencing such strategies: size of the firm, regulation on an international and national level for example.

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