BEYOND THE SCREEN

Driving authentic engagement through hybrid online-offline communities

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IPSOS VIEWS

GAME CHANGERS

People do not put online and offline experiences into separate boxes; they all feel equally real to us. Communities should not be an exception. As tools that allow brands to stay connected with their audiences, communities need to be wherever people are to get to the most real, complete, and collective human understanding. The case studies shared here show how hybrid communities create impact, and how brands can easily reapply.

WHY HYBRID: THE REDEFINED SOCIAL SPACE

A huge chunk of our daily lives is dedicated to online interactions. According to Statista,[1] in 2021 people around the world spent on average 142 minutes a day on social media.

The academic literature reflects this reality. As early as 2003, before the explosion of mobile internet, Leander & McKim[2] argued that online and offline realms exist on the same continuum and that treating them as separate introduces an element of artificiality. Nonetheless, it took time for social scientists to adapt to the redefined social space. As Prince[3] puts it:

" The recent research suggests that participants do not find any significance in online experiences compared to offline experiences. It was the researchers themselves […] that fell victim to assuming online experiences were exceptional, not the participants.

Thanks to this realisation, today we know more about how identities are shaped and nurtured through the interaction of online and offline experiences. We also have numerous studies on how these two worlds interact in education, shopping and child play.[4]

" Online and offline are inextricably intertwined in everyday experience. […] Not only do [children's] online and offline friendships consistently overlap, but online play actually provides crucial context to how kids interact on the playground.[5]

Such overlap should not be ignored by market research. After the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted many of the industry's traditional approaches in favour of online interactions, it's important to think about the benefits of smartly combining online and offline touchpoints to maximise research value.

Importantly, these benefits go beyond the practical. To fully grasp the impact of hybrid methods, we may want to shift our focus away from the obvious efficiencies of combining different ways of collecting data. Instead, we should think about **expertise hybridisation** which combines the best of both worlds to maximise our understanding of people.

## HOW TO NAVIGATE THE REDEFINED SOCIAL SPACE: EXPERTISE HYBRIDISATION

Online communities have brought unique capabilities to marketing and market research. According to industry reports, communities have established themselves as a top-ranking market research solution in both current and projected use.[6] As interactive ecosystems where qualitative understanding merges with scale, communities provide brands with on-tap access to the right respondents and employ engagement strategies to yield a whole range of benefits.[7] Operationally, they deliver on speed and agility. They also provide great depth and high respondent engagement: evidence suggests that in online environments respondents feel less inhibited and that the data we collect through online means is, in some instances, more reliable.[8] Finally, when intrinsic motivation is systematically nourished by engagement, members bring more effort and attention to community activities, as our Research on Research (RoR) suggests.[9]

However, the reach of communities is not exclusive to online environments and many often extend into, or rather, blend with, offline experiences. This extra dimension allows us to gain a more holistic understanding of the human experience, no matter which category or research topics we are exploring. It also provides unique co-creation opportunities and has special impact on member and client engagement.

Our community experts have been tapping into a wide range of research and category expertise over the years, ranging from quantitative validation approaches, data analytics or social listening, to those on the qualitative end of the spectrum such as ethnography, activation or curation. We call this **expertise hybridisation**: moving towards full method-agnosticism through a spectrum of online and offline interactions, structured and unstructured data and analytical frameworks.

The following case studies demonstrate the value of community-based expertise hybridisation, through the more conventional designs that involve immersive offline modules, to the more experiential and wide-reaching customer-centric programmes. Combined, these methods were more effective in revealing the truth behind human behaviour and creating impact for the brand.
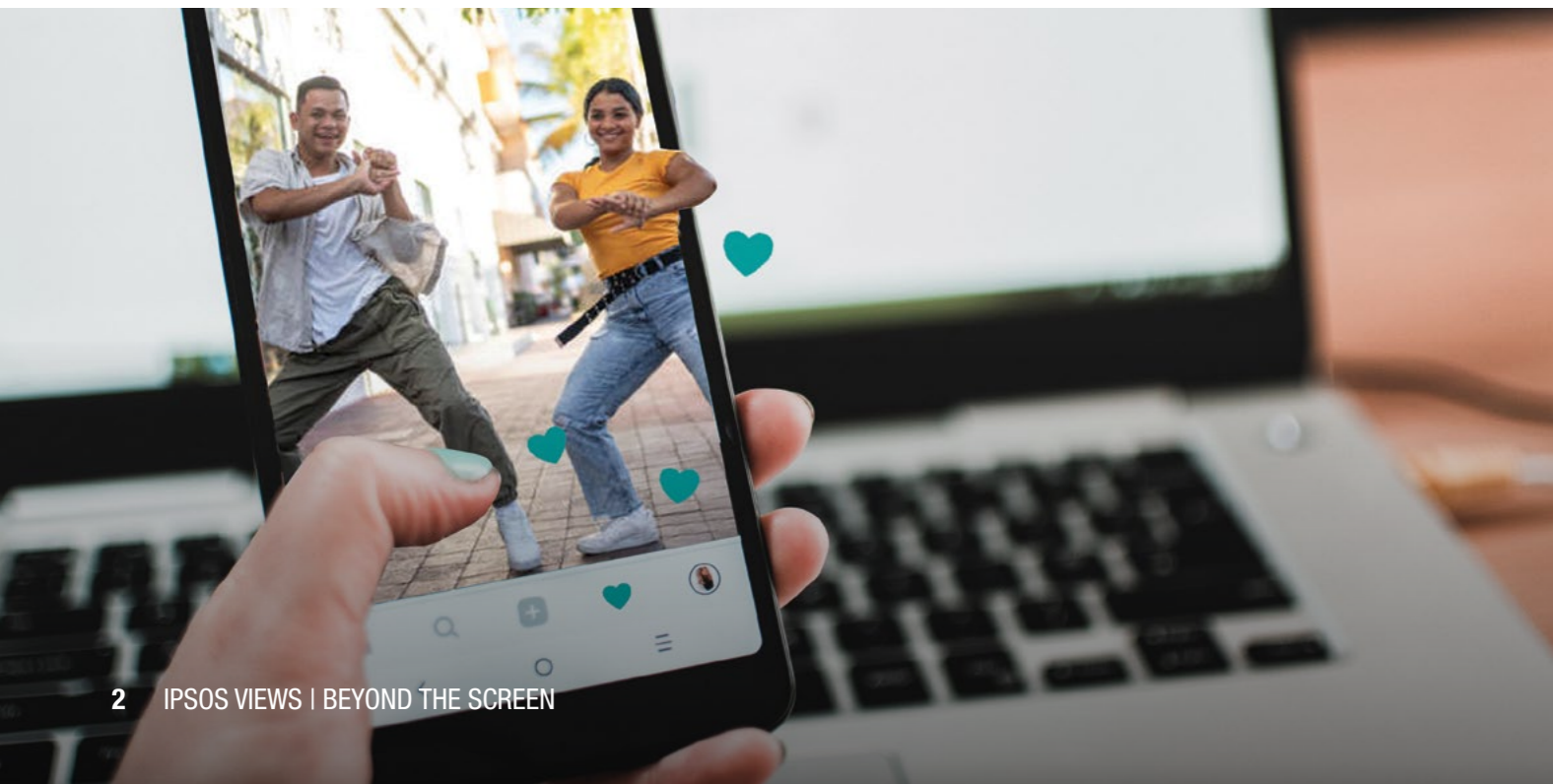
USING THE HYBRID LENS TO ACHIEVE HIGHEST POINT-OF-SALE CONVERSION

Typical applications of the hybrid approach include additional offline immersion modules, conducted in-home or at the point of sale (POS). Speaking to our members in person may expose variations in tone and gesture, and thus underlying tensions. Being with them in their natural environment also enhances observation, employing the expert eye when we need to go beyond the self-reported data, even when this data is visual and entirely contextual.

In a multi-stage shopper study for a well-known brand, we triangulated data sources to provide a 360-degree view of how different consumer segments purchase deodorant, with the ultimate business objective of achieving optimal presence at the point of sale.

The design leveraged community to gain category and shopper insight through open discussions, projective techniques, and a shopping trip exercise that brought to life members' experiences through visual content and storytelling. Armed with a better understanding of how consumers live the category, what criteria informs their choices out of store and what gets their attention in-store, we were able to select five out of a total of 100 members for a special in-store deep dive. This time, the researchers were able to observe shoppers as they navigated the aisles of unfamiliar stores. Based on the combined findings, we were able to inform a shelf display strategy that was validated quantitatively.

The combined strength of the approach was evident:

1. **Depth of insight:** members had the opportunity to participate in a range of activities, including reflective, in the moment, interactive and creative tasks. This gave us an in-depth look into the category from many different angles - from Usage & Attitude (U&A) type of qualitative information to unmet needs.

2. **Scale and efficiency:** quantitative validation aside, the qualitative community modules alone were able to efficiently collect insights and data from a bigger and wider audience than face-to-face approaches, sourced from across the country.

3. **More effective recruitment process:** the same qual modules allowed us to carefully select those members whose input was especially insightful, reflecting different shopper personas. In other words, the context of the community allowed for a deeper selection process based on more than just claimed data on demographics and attitude.

4. **Insights that only come from observation:** while observing how shoppers navigate the aisle, we were able to detect behaviours that were not evident through self-reporting. This allowed us to understand to what extent shopping on autopilot is an important factor when it comes to product choice in the category.

Imagine replicating this same approach through offline means only, followed by a quant stage. Collecting the same range of experiences, while allowing people to express themselves without inhibitions and reflect on what really matters to them, would have been burdensome, time consuming and expensive. Now imagine the same research done entirely online; we would have missed the nuances of decision making while shopping on autopilot. It was the combination of online and offline approaches that was able to tell the full story, expanding our understanding of how people shop in this category: community revealed the types of stimuli that are most effective at the POS and how to use them, whereas the offline module provided much-needed insight on the required "intensity" and positioning of such stimuli.

GIVING MASTERCARD A NEW ROADMAP FORWARD IN THE COMPLEX D&I SPACE

Hybrid expertise will have symphonic effects when combining collective and individual voices. Supported by engagement and research rigour, it relies on a careful combination of different types of interactions that allow people to share their story, through community and with others like them, and to tell their story individually, through ethnography.

In the "Rising to the Moment" study, Ipsos set out to help Mastercard bring to light the voices of black communities in Brazil, South Africa, the UK and US, with the goal of identifying what our client can do to begin dismantling racial injustice. The study leveraged community and the expertise of the Ipsos Ethnography Centre of Excellence (ECE), bolstered by expert interviews, and supported by behavioural science frameworks.

Through expert interviews and by capturing the collective voice in local communities and leveraging content analysis, we were able to identify key themes across many conversations that informed subsequent questions and shaped the ethnography module. It also allowed us to select the individual stories to go deeper with, reaching a holistic understanding of what it means to be black today in very different cultures.

Jointly, these approaches brought to life racial injustice as it is being felt today, stemming from historical and now institutional origins. They did so by revealing the social and communal experiences, as well as the intimate, personal ones. The impact is best summarised by our client:

" This work has helped me feel that there really is a path forward, that we're not going to be stuck in this perpetual cycle of racism, which is so important because I think so many times it's easy to get stuck in the status quo. And now we have a roadmap, and that makes me feel encouraged. As a black woman, it makes me feel seen that my co-workers and others can finally see how racism has impacted my community and for them to lean in and craft a world that's embracing and inclusive."

Marian Smith
Director, Research and Insights, Mastercard

BOOSTING STAKEHOLDER COLLABORATION FOR BETTER PRODUCT AND SERVICE DESIGN

There is an additional benefit to hybrid approaches: the experiential factor. Allowing our clients to witness first-hand how people shop for or use their category makes the research output even more meaningful. It also makes the output live on for longer if emotions are involved. This is because emotions are sticky, and they make a lasting impact.[10]

But we also involve clients in the experience of building together with consumers. Ipsos has developed a unique co-creation and idea optimisation approach that puts the client right in the middle of consumer interaction, without the barrier of a screen or a one-way mirror. The approach is called Dynamic Exchanges (DX) and consists of immersive, interactive, and engaging sessions that lift the client-consumer barrier.

Gamification is the main principle of Dynamic Exchanges. Consumers are engaged through various projective techniques, creative tasks, and even different sensorial stimuli, all designed to stimulate creative thinking. Just as important is **priming**.[11] Working with community members, who are already immersed in the category, we ensure that the adequate mental networks are activated while co-creating. This means their ideas are richer, more contextual and we are not ignoring any relevant details that may be key to improving an idea or a concept.

Ipsos clients point out the benefits of first-hand experience and what it does to involve internal stakeholders:

❝ Super discovery for me. The information you gain is very rich and real time. Consumers express their ideas more spontaneously and maintain their attention all the time because they know they have to give their conclusions during the debrief at the end. You can connect different stakeholders inside the room, advertising agency, marketing teams, CMI, so all of us understand the conclusions better.❞

Insights Professional, ex-McDonald's Spain

The combination of DX and community takes us a step further, providing an opportunity for 'multidimensional iteration'. For example, a large telecom provider used hybrid expertise to evaluate and optimise a pet tracker solution before launch. Product test was the first step: members – all customers of the telecom company and pet owners – had to provide real-time input each time they used the solution. In addition, they participated in a series of tasks designed to detect their unmet needs and unmask potential fears and tensions. A carefully selected portion of the member base later took part in a DX session to co-create a roadmap for the solution, together with the client stakeholders.

This experience was crucial to product development: the community feedback provided a much-needed reality check and the client team realised they needed to head back to the drawing board. The community members were more than willing to help the company do this: armed with deep knowledge of the product after prolonged testing, they dived straight into the co-creation stage to address the main pain points and work together with the client on potential improvements.

The result was much bigger than the sum of the preceding parts. As the sense of community prevailed well into the offline stage, the co-creation process felt very natural to all the stakeholders. There was no need for introductions and no time was spent on ice-breaking exercises. Furthermore, the community members felt a heightened sense of purpose because they could witness firsthand the relevance of their opinions and experiences:

❝ My pet dog already disappeared twice, so I really can't wait for this to be available in the market. And having played a part in making it better is priceless! Companies don't usually involve their customers in such a way, this has been great.

Community member

Finally, the overall design delivered important efficiencies. Despite the findings that called for a serious rethink of the solution, no changes were made to the product development deadline. This is because the team was able to interact simultaneously with different user segments, in one afternoon, moving rapidly to optimisation and decision making.

The value of interacting directly with consumers – and not being a mere observer – is a key benefit for the stakeholders. In a similar example, Ipsos and BNP Paribas created a Community-Lab approach to capitalise on the new ways of collaborative working. The approach is part of a wider effort, called BivwAk!, created to spread the innovation culture across BNP Paribas's entities and functions, and connect a large ecosystem: business and tech partners, start-ups, institutions, research and customers.

As an agile approach, Community-Lab has a specific purpose: helping the teams develop and commercialise Minimum Viable Products (MVPs) in six months. The approach is activated each time to answer a specific business need, bringing together different methodologies:

- **Community:** Lasting anywhere from 3 to 10 days with daily activities. This methodology is mainly used to explore, understand, and evaluate.

- **UX-Testing:** Conducted in specialised facilities, it consists of 10 to 15 specialised interviews.

- **Dynamic Exchange:** Used to engage client stakeholders during the process and accelerate concept optimisation.

- **Quant:** The final step employed to validate a concept and/or carry out a pricing test.

This multimodal approach has helped our client successfully launch several digital services:

❝ The Ipsos & BivwAk! Community-Lab is a great tool we use with our project teams to develop and commercialise an MVP in 6 months only! Our objective is to stay connected to customers' needs and insights during all of the development cycle by following the (speed) Agile loop. It's like a continuous co-construction directly with future clients and Developers/Product owners from the design of the product to the first launch on the market.❞

Insights Professional, ex-BNP Paribas

The programme has far-reaching benefits: providing both depth and agility, it also manages to bring together many different stakeholders both effectively and efficiently, allowing them to work directly with end users to "bring promising ideas alive". Several start-ups have secured financing thanks to the programme, including a co-living portal, a service that manages and provides elderly people with personal assistance at home, and a platform that makes leisure activities accessible to people with disabilities.

THE VALUE OF HYBRID COMMUNITIES

Communities are unique research ecosystems that enable agile ways of working and qualitative insights at scale. By making them hybrid, we can stretch these research ecosystems even further to capture the wider spectrum of human realities and create impact for all involved: members, clients, and researchers.

One of our community members describes such impact:

> " [Taking part in this research] felt like a journey. It started with us sharing our experiences with other users and discovering we were facing similar challenges. It was exciting then for us to connect in person and interact directly with [the brand]. I feel like I took part in something meaningful. I really hope my contributions will help [the brand] act in a more sustainable way, and I hope other brands will follow suit.
>
> **Community & DX Member**

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