



Enhancing consumer–brand relationships on restaurant Facebook fan pages: Maximizing consumer benefits and increasing active participation



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ABSTRACT

Facebook has been widely recognized as a popular contemporary trend in marketing. Using a Facebook fan page can help a firm successfully establish and maintain positive consumer–brand relationships by offering special benefits to members who “like” the fan page on their Facebook accounts. The purpose of this study was to determine the correlation between four benefit components (functional benefits, social–psychological benefits, hedonic benefits, and monetary benefits) obtained by fan page members and members’ community participation, brand trust, and brand commitment. The results of data analysis revealed that fan page members are more likely to visit restaurant Facebook fan pages when they obtain social–psychological and hedonic benefits from their interactions on the pages. Because members can develop strong trust and commitment toward restaurant brands through active participation on Facebook fan pages, this study provides a practical foundation for future research investigating Facebook as a marketing tool and suggests brand management strategies for use in online communities.

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1. Introduction

Branding is considered a powerful means of establishing long-term relationships between a business and consumers (Carlson et al., 2008). Consumers that are committed to a brand are more likely to spread positive word-of-mouth, generate repeat purchases, and be willing to pay more for products and services from the preferred brand (Wood, 2000). Many businesses in the food service industry have realized the importance of managing consumer–brand relationships, particularly through the use of brand communication strategies (e.g., Bowden, 2009; Mattila, 2006). Wirtz and Mattila (2003) suggested that the brand information that consumers gain from diverse sources influences their consumption experiences.

Social networking sites (SNS) are defined as a second generation of web development and design features that facilitate communication, information sharing, and collaboration on the World Wide Web (Paris et al., 2010). The emergence of social networking sites (SNS) has provided a new medium for brand communications (Ahn et al., 2010). Many food service businesses begin to utilize these

sites to communicate with consumers who are willing to provide suggestions and criticisms about their performance (Lee et al., 2010). In addition, companies create unique social media pages for their brands (e.g., Facebook fan pages) where they connect with potential consumers, establish awareness, and build relationships with existing consumers (Facebook.com, 2011). Although these are generally perceived as benefits of using SNS, its effectiveness of building consumer–brand relationships has not been fully explained. In particular, the role of members’ active participation in building strong brand relationships is the focus of this study. Active members create highly interactive environment where they give more positive evaluations of service encounters and delivery procedures, which consequently lead to increased attitudinal commitment (Soderlund, 2002). This study aimed to develop a theoretical model to understand the foundation of consumer–brand relationships on restaurant Facebook fan pages.

It is believed that, through active participation in online communities, consumers generate trust and commitment toward brands (Flavián and Guinalú, 2006). A Facebook fan page is a mixed information warehouse co-created by both a business and its consumers (Hsu, 2012). The comprehensive information available on a fan page can assist members to make more objective judgments about the business and its products/services (Flavián and Guinalú, 2006). When members continuously receive positive information and feedback from an online community, they are more likely to

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display confidence and trust in the brand (Deighton, 1992). Moreover, feelings of trust can further enhance members' psychological attachment to a brand (Mattila and Wirtz, 2002), and accordingly generate brand commitment (Ha and Perks, 2005). Therefore, the extent of member participation plays an important role in building consumer–brand relationships on restaurant Facebook fan pages.

In order to build and manage an active online community, restaurant businesses need to understand members' motivations and the benefits that they pursue in return for their participation (Wasko and Faraj, 2000). Businesses can attract new members, connect like-minded fans, and motivate repeat visits on their Facebook fan pages by understanding fans' motivations and satisfying their needs (Antikainen, 2007). Research has been conducted to gain insight into members' motivational factors in online travel communities (e.g., Chung and Buhalis, 2008; Hwang and Cho, 2005). For example, Wang and Fesenmaier (2004b) identified four benefit components in online travel communities, including functional, social, psychological, and hedonic benefits. Yoo and Gretzel (2008) identified three factors that motivate consumers to visit online travel communities: support a travel service provider, concerns for other consumers, and needs for enjoyment/positive self-enhancement.

From a thorough literature review, the authors of the present study had identified no previous studies focused on consumer benefits in online restaurant social media communities, such as Facebook fan pages. Because the types of products and services provided differ significantly between the tourism and the restaurant industry sectors, the benefits that consumers pursue on their respective Facebook fan pages may also differ. This study sought to bridge the existing research gap and investigate member benefits on restaurant Facebook pages. It is possible that different sets of benefits can be found as influential to encourage members' active participation. Aside from the functional benefits, social–psychological benefits, and hedonic benefits that have been previously investigated in online travel communities, the item “monetary benefits” was added to the theoretical model in the present study in light of the special offers typically provided by restaurant businesses (e.g., discounts, coupons, free meals offered). Despite the fact that monetary benefits have been widely used in industry practices, no studies have questioned their role in encouraging member participation. The addition of monetary benefit to the research model gives researchers an opportunity to see if the monetary value can be a reason for consumer participation on the Facebook page.

This study established and tested a theoretical model that represents the correlations between benefits, community participation, brand trust, and brand commitment on restaurant Facebook fan pages. It was anticipated that the model would offer actionable implications for the leverage of consumer–brand bonds on restaurant Facebook fan pages, in addition to stimulating updated agendas in social media marketing research. The specific objectives of this research were to: (1) distinguish what benefits restaurant customers seek for by examining the effects of four benefit components (functional benefits, social–psychological benefits, hedonic benefits, and monetary benefits) on community participation; (2) assess the consequences of community participation on brand trust and brand commitment; and (3) assess the mediating role of brand trust between community participation and brand commitment.

2. Literature review

2.1. Facebook fan pages as online brand communities

A brand community refers to “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations

among admirers of a brand” (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412). As Internet brand communities become increasingly popular, marketers now frequently use the term “community” as a new marketing buzz-word in place of the traditional term “relationship” (McWilliam, 2000). Businesses establish their online brand communities with the purpose of fostering communication with consumers and offering a gathering place for like-minded people (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001).

Facebook is the dominant social medium used in the food service industry (McCarthy et al., 2010); restaurant brands set up fan pages in order to offer online brand communities where people can communicate with the brands. Through this medium, hospitality consumers have changed the way they obtain information, share experiences, and make purchasing decisions (Lee et al., 2010). The justification for offering Facebook fan pages is consistent with the definition of so-called “brand communities” which provide communication media for hundreds of thousands of consumers who share common interests about brands (McWilliam, 2000). The social nature is the major reason that companies choose SNS as an effective platform to implement their marketing strategies (Lee et al., 2010).

Facebook is currently the world's most successful site, with more than 800 million users (Facebook.com, 2011), a greater number than even Google users (McCarthy et al., 2010). Due to the vast number of members on Facebook, many foodservice businesses utilize it as a platform for connecting a large pool of existing and potential consumers and as a significant tool for brand management (Hsu, 2012). As of 2011, more than 600 restaurant brands hosted online communities through social networking sites (Quinn, 2011). As of May 2012, McDonald's had 19.5 million “likes” on its Facebook page, followed by Chick-fil-A (5 million), Wendy's (2.3 million), and Outback Steakhouse (2 million). With this large number of consumers on their page, these restaurants seem to be successful at a glance; however, people may be reluctant to join a fan page if they do not perceive dynamic communications in the online community (Preece et al., 2004). Many scholars have agreed that active member participation is the precondition for the success of an online community (e.g., Preece et al., 2004; McCarthy et al., 2010). In the following section, we elaborate the importance of active participation.

2.2. Active participation

Previous marketing studies have differentiated the levels of member participation in online communities via diverse approaches (e.g., Äkkinen and Tuunainen, 2005; Kozinets, 1999; Ridings et al., 2006). Burnett (2000) and Preece et al. (2004) characterized community participations as passive or active. Passive members browse an online community and take advantage of the benefits offered, but do not contribute to community activities. Such members have been referred to as “lurkers or free riders” (Preece et al., 2004). An online community may be deemed popular if it has a large number of lurkers because they generate website traffic and increase “hits”. However, lurkers do not necessarily contribute to the success of an online community (Ridings et al., 2006). In contrast to passive members, active members are highly motivated to participate in an online community by engaging in activities, such as creating messages, disseminating information, and providing emotional support to others (Casaló et al., 2007). Active participation can enhance members' brand knowledge (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) and thus enables them to help other members to solve problems with product usage and to make informed purchasing decisions (Flavián and Guinaliú, 2006). Therefore, converting lurkers to active participants is a critical goal in creating vital online communities (Kozinets, 1999).

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