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Explaining behavior in brand communities: A sequential model of attachment, tribalism, and self-esteem

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ABSTRACT

Given their societal presence, brand communities and tribes must, in some capacity, influence marketing strategy. With a player base exceeding 50 million and annual sales surpassing \$12 billion, the massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) community is considered a burgeoning cultural and economic consumer segment. Yet, quantitative examination of MMORPG community members' consumptive processes is sparse. To help fill this research lacuna, the current study tests a sequential choice model of attachment, tribalism, and self-esteem on MMORPG-related behavioral outcomes. Using a sample 970 MMORPG players, support is offered for the posited model, indicating among others, that brand attachment antecedes MMORPG brand tribalism, which in turn, augments player self-esteem. Implications and future research directions are offered.

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Across diverse categories such as motorcycles, clothing, gadgets, entertainment, and sports, consumers evince tendencies to become affiliated with brand communities that are characterized by admiration of the focal brand, shared beliefs, mutual identification, unique customs and traditions, and a sense of responsibility to fellow members and the community as a whole (e.g., McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Past research suggests that the cultivation of and engagement with brand communities may generate several positive outcomes for firms, including robust brand loyalty, brand advocacy, adoption of new products, increased purchase intentions and sales, and ideas for innovation (e.g., Füller, Matzler, & Hoppe, 2008; Gruner, Homburg, & Lukas, 2014; Madupu & Cooley, 2010). Therefore, the understanding of consumers' membership and behaviors in brand communities represents an important area of inquiry for marketing researchers (e.g., Gruner et al., 2014).

Within the extant literature on brand communities, a number of studies have simultaneously included variables denoting consumers' relationships with the focal brand as well as with the

community in their theoretical frameworks (e.g., Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008; Yeh & Choi, 2011; Zhou, Zhang, Su, & Zhou, 2012); importantly however, there is no consensus on the sequence of effects involving such variables. Some studies posit that consumer-brand relationships precede consumer-community relationships (e.g., Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005), whereas others argue that consumer-community relationships foster consumer-brand relationships (e.g., Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Stokburger-Sauer, 2010; Zhou et al., 2012). This study addresses this ambiguity by developing and testing a sequential process model of the drivers of consumer behavior within brand communities.

According to the model, consumers' relationship with a brand motivates them to identify and interact with social networks of other individuals who share their passion and enthusiasm for the brand. In turn, membership within these communities bolsters their self-esteem (Wilcox & Stephen, 2013) and, consequently, induces brand and community-centric behaviors. The model is tested with data from consumers who are members of communities constructed around massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs). In MMORPGs, thousands of players access an online game environment simultaneously, interact and collaborate with other players in real time, and achieve the game's objectives in a symbiotic manner. Around each MMORPG, numerous online communities are formed to facilitate player interaction,

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socialization, and the planning of collaborative missions that require organization and the combination of resources (Chen, Sun, & Hsieh, 2008). Testing the model in the context of MMORPGs facilitates the fulfillment of three important objectives.

First, players tend to immerse themselves in MMORPGs, develop a strong sense of attachment with specific games, and seek out others to discuss the game or engage in joint missions. This allows for examining the relationship between players' attachment with a specific MMORPG and a community of players centered on that MMORPG. Second, although MMORPG communities possess social and relational characteristics that are similar to brand communities (Park & Chung, 2011), they demonstrate more heightened forms of brand enthusiasm, hierarchies, value systems, and defense mechanisms (Badrinarayanan, Sierra, & Taute, 2014). Correspondingly, MMORPG communities are described here as brand tribes (Cova & Pace, 2006; Goulding, Shankar, & Canniford, 2013) and relationships between players within communities are conceptualized as brand tribalism (Taute & Sierra, 2014). Third, extending research that links participation in online networks and self-esteem (Wilcox & Stephen, 2013) we investigate the relationship between brand tribalism and self-esteem, emphasizing the role of self-esteem as the catalyst fostering behaviors that benefit the brand and the community (Acar & Polonsky, 2007). In the following section, we describe the relevant literature pertaining to brand communities, brand tribalism, and MMORPGs. Next, we introduce our sequential process model and outline the hypotheses. Then, we report the data collection and analysis procedures, followed by the results. Finally, we discuss the findings, study limitations, and directions for future research.

1. Background literature

1.1. MMORPGs

The consumption of video games has become a significant global economic, cultural, and entertainment phenomenon (Marchand & Hennig-Thurau, 2013) and MMORPGs are the fastest growing form of multiplayer video games with a subscription base of more than 50 million players who spend in excess of \$12 billion annually (PC Gamer, 2013; SuperData, 2013). Individuals in more than 11% of U.S. households play MMORPGs (Entertainment Software Association, 2013) and the average player spends approximately 20 h per week playing MMORPGs (Yee, 2009). Specifically, MMORPGs are perpetual virtual world games that are played by accessing the game's website. Popular MMORPGs can be classified into various genres such as fantasy, science fiction, historical, and superhero, among others. Each game is hosted on multiple servers, which are standardized, in that a similar game experience is offered on all servers, and closed, such that a large numbers of players are consolidated together to enable the development of a sense of community within each server.

MMORPG players must play the game online in conjunction with programmed game characters and other players who are playing simultaneously. To facilitate interaction between players, popular MMORPGs have "guilds," which are large groups of players with formalized norms, rules, and roles, to discuss game tactics and complete game objectives. Players complete game-related tasks to gain acceptance, respect, and power within a community, and, ultimately, assist their community to compete with other communities in order to achieve the game's objectives (e.g., Dupuis & Ramsey, 2011; Harwood & Ward, 2013). In fact, to encourage collaboration and the development of a sense of community between players, MMORPG developers have purposefully made guilds or formal player organizations a requisite part of the game environment (Chen et al., 2008).

1.2. Brand communities

Early research on brand communities focused primarily on the construction and nature of the consumer/brand relationship. Brand communities are brought together and strengthened through shared values and ideals (Maffesoli, 1996). In this vein, community members, even without social interaction (Carlson et al., 2008; Cova & Pace, 2006), share particular customs and traditions, feel a sense of moral responsibility to each other and the community as a whole, and are aware of differences between themselves and others (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Moreover, and essential to the consumer brand relationship, *brand communities* unite avid consumers in a uniquely structured, yet non-geographically oriented social relationship (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001); communities thus are recognized by their commonalities of mutual identification and construction of meaning (McAlexander et al., 2002). Brand communities have been examined in settings such as motorcycles and all-terrain vehicles (McAlexander et al., 2002), cars, 4-wheel vehicles and computers (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), and breakfast confectionaries (Cova & Pace, 2006).

More recently, the academic literature has focused less on the nature of the relationship and more on nourishing the community and fostering commercially viable outcomes. Members co-create value within their brand community via general procedure-based understandings, skills and abilities, and emotional commitment expressed through actions (Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009). It is here that the company relinquishes its control over the brand's meaning and enables the personal expressions of community members to flourish and spread; thus, customer empowerment of the brand strengthens via rites and rituals (Cova & Pace, 2006). A collective conversion experience is fundamental to brand community growth, where playful rituals and virtual play are quintessential to community maintenance (O'Sullivan, Richardson, & Collins, 2011). Through interdependence of social and economic resources, brand communities thrive even when heterogeneity among members works as a destabilizing force (Thomas, Price & Schau, 2013).

A number of recent studies also point to positive outcomes from community participation. For example, firm-hosted online brand communities increase success rates of new products (Gruner et al., 2014). Similarly, Adjei, Noble, and Noble (2010) found that for both company- and independently-owned websites, online brand communities are robust influencers of sales and are ideal platforms for retaining both novice and seasoned customers. Further, fashion bloggers, together with their readers, represent a robust community replete with intellectual value focused on style (Pihl, 2014). Identification with the brand community helps explain consumers' willingness to share their knowledge with producers regarding product innovation (Füller et al., 2008). Additionally, online brand community participation can be explained by information, self-discovery, social integration, social enhancement, and entertainment, with outcomes of such participation including shared rituals and traditions, sustainable brand loyalty, and brand recommendation intention (Madupu & Cooley, 2010).

The advantages inherent in social networks enable brand communities to develop and grow efficiently with lesser investment of resources (Zaglia, 2013); it is important then that marketers delineate differences between online social media networks and those of online or offline more traditional brand communities (Habibi, Laroche, & Richard, 2014). Recent research also provides caveats to the overwhelmingly positive view of brand community or interjects moderating or intervening variables. For example, Taute and Sierra (2014) find that the community and social structure constructs are ineffectual or counter-productive to brand attitude and repurchase intentions among mainstream brand users.

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