How virtual brand community traces may increase fan engagement in brand pages

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Abstract Brand pages in social media are a great way to foster consumer gathering around a brand, but it can be challenging to keep fans engaged and coming back to see updated content. Brands with millions of fans on Facebook have seen organic reach fall below 2% of their base. In this article, we describe how the creation of virtual brand communities can help brand managers increase fan engagement. We suggest the steps, conditions, advantages, and limitations involved in nurturing a brand page as an online social gathering that assumes some of the characteristics of a virtual brand community. The results of our study show that a brand page can have some of the characteristics of a virtual brand community—topical information exchange, identity communication, and establishment and internalization of cultural norms. We also show the importance of having celebrities among fans in order to foster social interactions and legitimate social practices on brand pages.
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1. What are the benefits of communal brand pages?

In 2007, the first Facebook pages for brands, companies, movies, artists, and sports teams were created to give these institutions a new tool to create a two-way relationship with their consumers. In 2017, brand pages remain one of the tools that Facebook offers for companies to reach current and potential customers and to promote

their products and services. Originally named fan pages, brand pages are a platform that allow the brand to be present, to create a community around its users, and to create economic value. Brand pages use the news feed to introduce new information about products, promotions, or content of interest in order to develop the fan-brand relationship. By promoting and paying for its content on brand pages, a brand may accumulate many more fans than if it did not promote itself. Brand pages are used mainly as a communication tool, but research on brand communities (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009) suggests that more value can be created in cultivating communal environments.

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Social media environments were not created for brands to communicate with consumers or to sell products and services to them (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Facebook is a place for people to interact with family and friends and to read, comment, and share selected content coming from multiple content creators that users find interesting (e.g., Buzz-Feed, *Daily Mail*, *Washington Post*, *The Guardian*). The multiplicity of content on Facebook is one of the reasons big brands' organic reach has dropped significantly since 2013 (Delo, 2014), a problem named 'Reachpocalypse' (DeMers, 2015). There is much more content than time to absorb it. On average, 1,500 stories could appear in the news feed every time someone logs in. The news feed algorithm chooses approximately 300 stories based on thousands of factors relative to each user (Boland, 2014).

Brands would profit from organically getting more attention and increasing the engagement of their fans with brand content. We borrow from the literature of virtual brand communities (Schau et al., 2009) to show the importance of communal aspects of brand pages for increasing fan engagement. Communal characteristics can increase the number of individuals who have interest in the topic and in the social relationships that may take place in brand pages. These individuals might come back regularly to the page in order to have access to its social, informative, and symbolic resources.

The objective of this article is to present how some communal aspects of brand pages contribute to fan engagement and to describe the steps, conditions, advantages, and limitations involved in nurturing a brand page as an online social gathering that assumes some of the characteristics of a virtual brand community (VBC). We present three cases of brand pages in which the benefits of communal pages are shown and the traces of virtual brand communities are presented and discuss the actual limits and proximities that brand pages have with virtual brand communities.

2. Engagement on virtual brand communities

The study of engagement in virtual environments is contextually, theoretically, and pragmatically relevant because the relationship/contact of individuals with brands is more and more located in virtual environments such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Airbnb, Amazon, or Netflix (van Doorn et al., 2010) and because the longtime benefits of customer engagement with companies, online or offline,

have been amply discussed (e.g., Kumar, Petersen, & Leone, 2010).

Engagement in virtual brand communities was defined by Brodie, Ilic, Juric, and Hollebeek (2013, p. 107) as "interactive experiences between consumers and the brand, and/or other members of the community" and also as "a context-dependent, psychological state characterized by fluctuating intensity levels . . . comprising a cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral dimensions." The work of Brodie et al. (2013) is in line with several other authors who aimed to define consumer engagement in virtual brand communities previously (Mollen & Wilson, 2010).

Many users participate in virtual brand communities either because they already had experiences with the product or service of that brand or because the product is complex and they wanted to learn more about it, both from the company and other users (Wirtz et al., 2013). Consumer engagement in virtual brand communities is a process with several subprocesses that include sharing, learning, co-developing, advocating, and socializing (Brodie et al., 2013). The positive consequences of consumer engagement in virtual brand communities involve effective commitment to the brand (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu, 2008); positive word-of-mouth (Kumar et al., 2010); self-brand connections and brand usage intent (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014); trust, loyalty, satisfaction and empowerment (Brodie et al., 2013); and customer knowledge value (Kumar et al., 2010). Consumer engagement in virtual brand communities is a central concept for a customer relationship (Brodie et al., 2013).

Brands can foster increasing levels of engagement in brand pages by managing content characteristics such as entertainment and information levels, vividness, and interactivity (de Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012) or through posts that have content-oriented (functional/hedonic), relationship-oriented (interactions with brand/users), or self-oriented (self-expression) content (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). The evolution of engagement over time from the user perspective has also been studied (e.g., Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011; Parent, Plangger, & Bal, 2011), evolving from viewing, forwarding, and creating content to moderating groups and arbitrating brand or users disputes. Brodie et al. (2013) showed that consumer engagement is highly interactive with several subprocesses—learning, sharing, advocating, socializing, and co-developing—and that these engagement processes are influenced by consumer need for information.

Brand engagement requires aspects of the virtual brand community like self-brand connections,