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Assessing flow experience in social networking site based brand communities

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ABSTRACT

The sustenance of the Social Networking Site (SNS)-based brand communities relies on user retention and their active participation. Therefore, understanding the intrinsic aspects of user behavior in such communities is important for devising strategies to ensure user retention and active participation. Especially, information about the elements that induce flow experiences—the intrinsically enjoyable and immersive experiences—of users in SNS has become important for organizations that host online communities. In our empirical study, we chose to focus especially on SNS-based brand communities, as they are increasingly interesting from an organization-community interaction perspective, but they lack the instruments needed for measuring user experience. The present study addresses this gap by developing an instrument aimed at measuring the user's flow experience on SNS-based brand communities. A cross-sectional survey with 577 Facebook brand community users was carried out. The findings show that enjoyment, concentration, and social interaction are the components that constitute a user's flow experience. In addition to providing a valuable tool for business practitioners, the developed instrument offers several theoretical and practical implications for improving user experience of social media.

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1. Introduction

Social Networking Services (SNS) have brought about significant changes in the communication practices of individuals and organizations. However, the impact of SNS on the social as well as personal well-being of people has been relatively well studied (Dhir, Kaur, Lonka, & Nieminen, 2016; Dhir & Torsheim, 2016; Dhir, Pallesen, Torsheim, & Andreassen, 2016) compared to that on organizations. Recent research suggests that the use of SNS has made it possible to maintain continuous interaction among participants of an interest group or a company-hosted community (Kaur, Dhir, Chen, & Rajala, 2016b). In addition to this, SNS has begun to influence the communication patterns of organizations that need synchronous interaction across different time zones and geographical boundaries (Kaur, 2016a,b). The increasing number of

users on SNS is encouraging organizations to establish a presence in online communities. For example, a report by Infographics (2012) showed that 80% of the studied businesses were present on Facebook. Moreover, organizations understand the importance of involving users in organizational processes, especially when dealing with innovating new products and services (Buur & Matthews, 2008; Füller, Matzler, & Hoppe, 2008; Kaur, 2016a; Von Hippel, 2005). This research shows that presence on different SNS actually helps organizations to enhance brand attractiveness, thus promoting their offerings for potential users, establishing closer ties with existing customers, empowering customers by providing them with a platform to express their concerns, and gathering ideas and feedback (Lin & Lu, 2011). In other words, SNS-based brand communities appear to be lucrative platforms for practicing user-centric service innovation.

Brand communities in the online environment have a long and extensive research history. A brand community is defined as a “specialized, non-geographically bound community, ... based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). In comparison, SNS-based brand communities are a relatively recent concept as a specific case of brand

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communities established on social media platforms (Habibi, Laroche, & Richard, 2014b; Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012), which have experienced tremendous growth in the past few years. The growing popularity of SNS-based brand communities has attracted researchers from a variety of disciplines. Most of the existing work is focused on brand loyalty, brand trust, and the characteristics of SNS-based brand communities (Habibi, Laroche, & Richard, 2014a; Kang, Tang, & Fiore, 2014; Laroche et al., 2012). Despite the popularity of SNS-based brand communities as a research subject, the crucial questions concerning user retention and active user participation remain unanswered.

The present study applies the theory of flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi 1988; 1990) to investigate the open challenge of user retention and user participation faced by SNS-based brand communities. Flow theory is a popular theoretical framework which is defined as “*the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it*” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 4). The existing research has shown flow theory to be a valuable framework for investigating user behavior (Chang & Zhu, 2012; Novak, Hoffman, & Yung, 2000). Moreover, the flow theory framework is considered especially relevant for examining voluntary user behavior (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In essence, user participation and continued use of SNS are forms of voluntary behavior. Prior research has suggested that flow experience can influence users' decisions associated with voluntary behavior such as continuation and loyalty intentions among users in different contexts (Chang & Zhu, 2012; Hsu & Lu, 2004; Zhou, Li, & Liu, 2010). Hence, an understanding of the elements that can provide flow experience to the users on SNS-based brand communities can be considered as key factors affecting enhanced user participation or user retention. Interestingly, the existing research concerning flow experience in the SNS context has focused mainly on the continuation intention (Chang, 2013; Chang & Zhu, 2012; Wu & Wang, 2011), loyalty (Qi & Fu, 2011; Zhou et al., 2010), interaction, and interpersonal relationships (Kwak, Choi, & Lee, 2014). Consequently, existing research has not paid sufficient attention to the development of instruments for measuring flow experience that can be used in the SNS context. To address this open research gap, the present study has developed a psychometrically valid and reliable measurement instrument aimed at evaluating the flow experience of users, particularly in the SNS-based brand communities.

2. Background literature

The emergence of Web 2.0 has given birth to new forms of online brand communities on a variety of social media platforms. The arrival of such platforms has also transformed users from passive to active entities. For example, SNS-based brand communities have made users more frank, and they are now expressing themselves openly using their real identities rather than their prior preferred communication mode of using pseudonyms (Habibi et al., 2014b; Zaglia, 2013). As previously mentioned, SNS-based brand communities bring several benefits for organizations such as the formulation of positive purchase intentions, the development of brand loyalty, connection with a large customer base in a fast and cost-efficient manner, possibilities of contact with potential customers, customer feedback on existing offerings, ideas for potential future offerings, and evaluation of existing services, practicing co-creation and user-centric service innovation (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Habibi et al., 2014b; Laroche et al., 2012; Lin & Lu, 2011; Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009; Von Hippel, 2005). Most recent of all, Habibi et al. (2014b) have found

that Facebook-based brand communities facilitate value creation practices. Habibi et al. (2014b) utilized a netnography approach on the Jeep and Harley-Davidson communities to explore the details of SNS-based brand communities. The main purpose of their study was to understand the differences and similarities between the SNS-based brand communities and the original conceptualization of brand communities. They found that the SNS-based brand communities also possess three markers of shared consciousness, shared rituals, and traditions and obligations to society similar to the original brand community conceptualization. On the other hand, the SNS-based brand communities also differ from brand communities in terms of (i) presence of social context, (ii) lack of established structure, (iii) enormous variations in size, with the ability to accommodate millions of users, (iv) the ability to establish connections with other affiliated brand communities, and (v) an attractive interaction pattern of storytelling.

2.1. SNS-based brand communities

Prior research on SNS-based brand communities addressed different dimensions including brand loyalty (Ho, 2014; Kang et al., 2014; Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013; Zheng, Cheung, Lee, & Liang, 2015), fan page loyalty (Chen, Papazafeiropoulou, Chen, Duan, & Liu, 2014; Ruiz-Mafe, Marti Parreño, & Sanz-Blas, 2014), brand trust (Habibi et al., 2014a; Kang et al., 2014; Laroche et al., 2013), brand experience (Chen et al., 2014), engagement (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2013; Gummerus, Liljander, Weman, & Pihlström, 2012), content (Smith, Fischer, & Yongjian, 2012; Yu, 2014), user behavior (Kabadayi & Price, 2014), continuation intention (Lin & Lu, 2011), intention to join (Muk & Chung, 2014), value creation practices (Laroche et al., 2012), and the customer's relationship with the company, brand, product, and other customers (Laroche et al., 2013). Interestingly, the majority of the prior literature has addressed brand communities established on the Facebook platform.

Brand loyalty and brand trust are among the significant research streams in the literature on SNS-based brand communities (Chen et al., 2014; Habibi et al., 2014a; Ho, 2014; Kang et al., 2014; Laroche et al., 2013, 2012; Zheng et al., 2015). Research on brand loyalty has been carried out using different theoretical frameworks. Laroche et al. (2012) used community markers and value creation practices, while Laroche et al. (2013) used a customer-centric model. These studies have successfully demonstrated that social media brand communities influence brand loyalty. Similarly, Zheng et al. (2015) investigated brand loyalty through the constructs of community commitment and user engagement. Their findings suggest that user engagement and community engagement influence brand loyalty. The user's engagement is positively defined by his/her perceptions of the benefits.

The concept of brand loyalty has also been examined using different terminologies (e.g., brand commitment, citizenship behavior). The study by Kang et al. (2014) investigated brand commitment through the lens of functional, socio-psychological, hedonic, and monetary benefits. The findings suggest that brand commitment and brand trust are predicted by active participation. The active participation of users is influenced by only hedonic and social-psychological benefits. Similarly, Ho (2014) examined users' citizenship behavior (or voluntary behavior) as in-role (e.g., purchasing or purchase intention) and ex-role (e.g., word of mouth, continuation intention) in Facebook-brand communities. The study findings suggest that loyalty is affected by users' participation, brand trust, and community identification. However, brand trust is found to exert a stronger influence on in-role user behavior, while community identification has greater influence on ex-role user behavior.

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