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Testing an extended model of consumer behavior in the context of social media-based brand communities



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ABSTRACT

Due to the benefits of brand community initiatives and the potential advantages of social media, many marketing managers made significant investments in building brand communities based on social media. A noticeable issue is how to measure the success of such investments in ways that are understandable and comparable to other marketing initiatives. To address this issue, it is essential to understand how social media-based brand communities influence customers' perceptions and behaviors. The purpose of this article is to develop and estimate an extended model of how different aspects of customers' relationships with such communities influence their perceptions and behaviors. The paper describes a way a customer's identification with a brand influences relationships with brand community elements, brand community markers, and ultimately brand relationship quality and brand loyalty. Then using a large sample of brand community members in social media and structural equation modeling, the authors estimate how social media-based brand communities influence brand relationship quality and brand loyalty. Managerial implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

"Social media has transitioned into an obsession and almost a way of life for online culture, changing the way we communicate with our colleagues, loved ones, and our favorite brands." (Jones, 2013)

Marketing in the social media environment is much more complicated than marketing before the advent of social media. Perhaps the best metaphor to describe marketing in the turbulent environment of social media is what Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, and Bloching (2013) use as the "pinball" game as opposed to the "bowling" one. Marketing in social media environments is as interactive and chaotic as the game of pinball. Part of this complexity comes from the consumer who has gained the power of a strong voice due to the dense networked nature of social media and user generated content capability (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2013; Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2015).

When social media was at its emerging phase, some scholars were skeptical and considered brands as crashers of social media (Fournier & Avery, 2011), rather than entities that consumers might embrace (Habibi, Laroche, & Richard, 2014a). Bringing up many intimidating instances in which the brand's reputation was damaged by masses of social media-empowered customers, some scholars advised managers to protect rather than build brands on social media (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). However, this was changed by the advances in social media research. According to recent studies, there is no doubt that social media use by brands and consumers enhances sales, brand performance, brand loyalty, brand trust, awareness and other marketing measures (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013; Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012; Rapp, Beitelspacher, Grewal, & Hughes, 2013; Sonnier, McAlister, & Rutz, 2011). However, these studies are fragmented as they investigate the effects of social media on various outcomes and from different perspectives. Specifically, questions such as what are the effects of marketing efforts in social media environments on fundamental marketing variables such as loyalty? And what framework should be used as a guide to reveal such effects? Thus, there is a need for a more integrated approach of consumer behavior in the context of social media.

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Building on the research streams that take the brand community literature to investigate consumer behavior in social media (Habibi et al., 2014a, Habibi, Laroche, & Richard, 2014b; Laroche et al., 2013; Zaglia, 2013), as well as the brand community literature that investigates intertwined and dynamic relationships within brand communities, this article develops and estimates an extended model of how customers' identification with a brand community influences their perceptions and behavior within the context of social media. This article argues and—through the estimation of an extended model—supports that an important lens through which researchers can investigate the mutual effects of social media on brands and consumers is the “brand community” theory (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Due to the success stories of brand communities (Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003), as well as the potential advantages of social media, many marketing managers made significant investments to build brand communities on social media (Zaglia, 2013). A noticeable issue is how to measure the success of such investments in ways that are understandable and comparable to other marketing initiatives (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010; Romaniuk, 2012). We address this issue by linking consumer behavior to brand loyalty, one ultimate measure of brand success. This research contributes to the literature on brand community and social media in different ways. It provides a bigger picture of consumer behavior in the context of brand communities that are established on social media. Additionally, the article develops measures of value creation practices (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009) and brand community markers (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) that may be used by future researchers. One way to measure brand success is through achieving the ultimate goals of branding such as loyalty and relationship quality. This article provides a bigger picture of how this can be done within the brand community context. The research has considerable implications for marketing managers as it provides a framework for understanding how to create value for their firms.

The paper is organized as follows. First we briefly present our conceptual framework and argue why using the brand community lens is appropriate for studying branding activities on social media. Then we develop our hypotheses, which together provide an extended model of consumer behavior in the context of social media-based brand communities. Next we report the findings on testing the proposed model. We conclude with a discussion of our findings, research limitations and avenues for future studies.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Social media

If we review the history of marketing in recent years, we may divide it into two different parts; marketing *before* and marketing *after* the advent of social media. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2013) use the “pinball” metaphor for marketing in social media as opposed to the “bowling” metaphor for marketing before social media (p. 237). Contrary to bowling, which is a linear and plain game, pinball is a multi-directional, highly interactive, and turbulent game. Many elements play a role in this game and the ball can change direction at any time. Similarly marketing in social media environments is a different game which marketers and researchers are gradually learning how to master and play. Considering this metaphor the question is: what is unique about social media that makes marketing in social media similar to the pinball game?

Apart from its technological aspects which is known as web 2.0 technologies (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), the most prominent aspect of social media is the increased power and proactive role of consumers in creating content and getting involved in conversations as opposed to their previous passive roles as mere recipients of the

content in web 1.0 (Labrecque, vor dem Esche, Mathwick, Novak, & Hofacker, 2013). Brands no longer have any significant control over the content, timing, and frequency of conversations (Mangold & Faulds, 2011), and this authority is delegated to consumers through the virtues of web 2.0. Another unique characteristic of social media is the dense networked interconnectedness among consumers which leads to an extremely high transparency in the marketing environments, that is, all consumers' and brands' activities are immediately visible to a large group of other consumers on social media (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2013) and content can be passed through the network very rapidly and efficiently (Kohli et al., 2015).

These unique aspects caused dramatic changes to online consumer behavior and consequently to marketing practices. Take high visibility and transparency, for example. Transparency is evident in all aspects of social media usage. Consumers do not use pseudo user names as their identification anymore. In social media, most users use their real identities online. This is perhaps the main reason why the population of internet users has changed from more introverted personalities to more extroverted ones (Ross et al., 2009).

New technological cores, highly empowered consumers, transparent environments with users using their real identities, online populations with different personalities from before, and other important factors, all add to the complexity of the pinball game of marketing on social media and mandate us to revise our understanding of online consumer behavior in order to tailor it to the unique aspects of social media. Among all possible approaches, we believe that looking through the brand community lens is appropriate since building groups and communities comes naturally in social media (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Social media is a place for socialization, networking and forming communities with like-minded people, so is the brand community. We elaborate on this in the next section.

2.2. Brand community lens to study consumer behavior in social media

Related to our context, researchers tried to empirically address two issues; what are the outcomes of brand related activities in social media and how are these outcomes realized? The former deals with the concern that whether spending time and budget on developing social media activities pays off and the latter deals with how it pays off. To do so researchers took different approaches. Some focused on the content, valence and volume of conversations about a brand or a topic among consumers. The assumption is that what consumers talk about can be a good proxy for their preferences and hence a predictor of important performance variables such as sales (Asur & Huberman, 2010; Kumar, Bhaskaran, Mirchandani, & Shah, 2013; Sonnier et al., 2011). These articles—often using mathematical modeling approaches—showed that spreading word of mouth (Kumar et al., 2013), positive and neutral comments (Sonnier et al., 2011), and the volume of content about a brand (Asur & Huberman, 2010) enhance the sales and performance of a brand.

Other researchers tried to examine how consumer behavior influences fundamental marketing variables. The reason is that these fundamental variables are a proxy for measuring the Return on Investment (ROI) of social media investments (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010). This research stream shows that social media uses by brands and their customers enhance brand performance and brand loyalty (Rapp et al., 2013); consumer involvement with brand-related user generated content enhances brand equity (Christodoulides, Jevons, & Bonhomme, 2012), and involvement in co-creation of value enhances transfer of Word-of-Mouth (WOM) and purchase intentions (See-To & Ho, 2014).

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