The roles of brand community and community engagement in building brand trust on social media

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ABSTRACT

Brand communities and social media often overlap. Social media is an ideal environment for building brand communities. However, there is limited research about the benefits and consequences of brand communities established on social media platforms. This study addresses this issue by developing a model depicting how consumers' relationship with the elements of a brand community based on social media (i.e. brand, product, company, and other consumers) influence brand trust. The findings include that three of the four relationships positively influence brand trust. However, customer-other customers' relationships negatively influence brand trust, which is counter intuitive and interesting. The prominent role of engagement in a brand community is also investigated in the model. Community engagement amplifies the strength of the relationships consumers make with the elements of brand community and it has a moderating effect in translating the effects of such relationships on brand trust. Finally, theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The emergence of social media has dramatically influenced marketing practices. The conventional well-established marketing practices are not highly influential anymore and in many cases can backfire on the firm (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, & Bloching, 2013). Therefore, there is an ever increasing need for updating the understanding of social media and further develop knowledge which suits the imperatives of marketing in social media environments (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2013). One main challenge for marketers has been to see how their efforts can pay off and how their social media activities can influence important brand related variables (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010).

This article takes the brand community literature as the main theoretical lens to address this issue. The concepts of brand community and social media meet at a critical juncture: community or socialness. Brand communities are essentially a place (physical or virtual) for people who admire a certain brand to socialize in the context provided, at least partly, by that brand (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Brand community practices gradually gained more attention from marketing researchers and practitioners. At the same time the Internet

technologies evolved to their current highly social forms. Today, the brand communities and their online platforms are a match more than ever before; the social aspects of brand communities are strongly backed by the social and networked nature of social media. Not only is social media a natural place for brand communities, but there are recent empirical studies showing the existence (Zaglia, 2013), quality and unique aspects of brand communities embedded in social media platforms (Habibi, Laroche, & Richard, 2014).

This article develops a conceptual framework that shows how building blocks of a brand community established on social media can influence brand trust. Indeed one main marketing objective is to gain consumers' trust in the brand. Trust is important during the shopping process (Powers, Advincula, Austin, Graiko, & Snyder, 2012) and is a main antecedent of patronage (Pentina, Zhang, & Basmanova, 2013; See-To & Ho, 2014). Therefore, knowing if/how social media based brand communities (SMBBCs) influence brand trust is essential for marketers. In addition, this might be helpful to managers in social media contexts because measuring social media ROI is a challenge for them and one way of measuring ROI is to examine what kind of "marketing objectives" the social media activities would satisfy (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010, p. 42). Thus, this article focuses on brand trust and examines how SMBBCs influence customers' trust in a brand.

The article also looks at the role of engagement in brand communities as it is a very relevant variable in social media. Perhaps

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one of the main goals of being present in social media is to gain a higher share of consumers' attention and engagement (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). The article investigates the moderating role of brand community engagement in the conceptual framework and also examines the direct role this variable has on the building blocks of a brand community (i.e., consumer relationships with product, brand, company and other consumers; McAlexander et al., 2002).

Despite its importance, limited research was done in the area of SMBBC. The current knowledge of online brand communities does not fit with the new aspects of SMBBCs in which the structure of the communities, the social context within which members communicate, the size, and the way stories are being told are different from previous types of brand communities (Habibi et al., 2014). This research makes important contributions by filling this void. Unlike research that treat brand community as a whole (Moran & Gossieaux, 2001; Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012), this article looks at the brand community through its building blocks (McAlexander et al., 2002) and it examines how each element influences brand trust. More importantly, it measures and includes community engagement and examines how it influences the brand community elements and how it moderates these effects on brand trust. The findings provide detailed insights for marketers and identify which elements of a brand community can be detrimental and which can be beneficial in building a trustworthy brand through brand community building practices on social media.

The paper is organized as follows. First, an extensive literature review of brand communities is conducted. We describe different research streams related to brand communities and situate this article within the brand community literature. Then we argue why brand communities on social media are unique and must be studied separately. Next, we develop our hypotheses which relate to our conceptual model of how SMBBC can influence brand trust. Finally, we report the results of our study. We conclude with a discussion of our findings, limitations of our research and avenues for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Brand community

The brand community concept developed in response to two increasing challenges that faced by marketers. The first one was the difficulty of keeping up with one-on-one relationships with customers, which was one main idea behind relationship marketing (Berry, 1995). Although keeping long term personalized one-on-one relationships with customers would bring many benefits to firms (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2000), it would increase its costs and the time spent on developing relationships, which makes relationship marketing less efficient in practice (Iacobucci, 1994; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Thus, brand communities that can perform many important functions on behalf of the brand, such as providing assistance or socializing the customer with brand elements, can play an important role in realizing the values of relationship marketing with higher efficiency. In a brand community consumers play the role of the brands' agents within the community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). The second challenge brand communities address is a lack of having a powerful analytic category to study consumer behavior. Consumers' interpersonal activities and life styles have more explanatory power in understanding how consumers spend their time and money than conventional categories marketers used to segment consumers such as age and gender (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Therefore, brand communities provide a reliable analytical category to marketers which

facilitate understanding consumer behavior (McAlexander et al., 2002).

A brand community is a "specialized, non-geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412). Similar to other communities, a brand community has three indicators that make a community recognizable. These indicators are shared consciousness, shared rituals and traditions, and obligations to society. *Shared consciousness* is a felt sense of connection among members within a brand community. These feelings lead members to feel that an invisible hand connects them to each other and separates them from outsiders (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006b; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). *Rituals and traditions* are symbolic acts or gestures that are developed throughout the history of the brand and aim to perpetuate and communicate the symbolic meanings and culture of the brand community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). For example, consumers use a specific jargon inside the community which is a cultural element of the community that solidifies members' bonds. The third marker is *obligations to society* which is the sense of commitment members have toward the welfare of their fellow members and the community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). This commitment is the main driver in participating in brand use practices through which members help each other optimize their brand use (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009).

In addition to these three markers, a brand community is essentially constructed on a set of relationships that community members develop with the brand, the product, marketers, and other customers. As opposed to initial models of brand communities which assumed only relationships between consumers, the *customer centric model of brand community* considers the relationships among all involved elements in a brand community (McAlexander et al., 2002) . Therefore, the building blocks of a brand community are four relationships: customer-product, customer-brand, customer-company, and customer-other customers. This provides a useful framework for analyzing brand communities as well as brand community building practices. Later we build on this model to develop our hypotheses depicting how these relationships can enhance brand trust.

2.2. Main research streams about brand community

In brand community research, three main research streams are gaining attention from researchers. The first stream relates to the conceptual aspects of brand communities which together conceptualize a brand community and identify its defining characteristics and limits (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau et al., 2009; Muñiz & Schau, 2007). Articles in this research stream do not address the outcomes and consequences of brand communities directly but they mainly focus on brand community elements and activities (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), but they also indirectly mention the outcomes brand community practices would bring about for firms and consumers (Brown et al., 2003; Schau et al., 2009; Muñiz & Schau, 2007). The other streams specifically deal with the outcomes (and their antecedents) of brand communities for consumers and brands. Also many articles examined how brand communities are established.

2.3. Where and how to identify brand communities

Researchers wondered if brand communities exist on different platforms, in different sizes, and around different products. This question is important because several brand community success stories tempted marketing managers to establish brand communities in different settings and contexts. One cannot call any collective a community unless the collective presents the markers of a