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Trust transfer in social media brand communities: The role of consumer engagement

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ABSTRACT

Social media brand communities (SMBCs) provide firms with a potential tool to develop brand relationships. The goal of this study is to understand the value of an SMBC to that brand by examining how the community contributes to one of the central brand relationship variables—brand trust. From the perspective of trust transfer, this study considers whether and how consumer trust in a brand can be transferred from other trusted parties in the SMBC, and the mediation of consumer engagement in this process. Based on a survey of 279 SMBC participants, this study demonstrates that consumer-to-consumer trust and consumer-to-marketer trust have positive impact on consumer engagement, which subsequently influence brand trust. Also the device usage was found to moderate the impact of consumer engagement on brand trust.

1. Introduction

As the popularity of social media increases dramatically, firms invest substantial resources and efforts in marketing through social media platforms (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010). Social media brand communities (SMBCs), which are defined as firm-initiated communities built among admirers of a brand on social media platforms (Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012), provide firms with a potential tool to develop and maintain relationships between their brands and consumers (Muniz & O' Guinn, 2001; Zaglia, 2013). However, in most cases firms have no idea as to the extent to which, and in what way, efforts expended on SMBCs are paying off (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010). Therefore, there is an increasing need to obtain in-depth understanding of the circumstances under which SMBCs benefit the brand relationship (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013; Schau et al., 2009).

Brand trust has been viewed as a central construct of strong and long-term brand relationships (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán, 2001). Cultivating consumers' trust in a brand can improve their willingness to patronize, co-create, and increase brand loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; See-To & Ho, 2014). Hence, enhancing knowledge of how brand trust is built has been deemed critical to the success of marketing via SMBCs.

Previous literature on brand trust has demonstrated that a consumer's trust in a brand can be transferred from that in other, related, entities, such as the brand community (e.g., Jung, Kim, & Kim, 2014). Trust transfer theory suggests that an individual's trust can be transferred from a trusted source to an unknown target if there is a specific association between them (Doney & Cannon, 1997; Stewart, 2003). Trust transfer can work through two processes: the communication process and the cognitive process (Stewart, 2003). The communication process of trust transfer occurs when the trustor is directly influence by the trusted source during their communication, while the cognitive process of trust transfer occurs when the trustor bases his or her trust in the target on knowledge of the association between the target and a trusted source. However, most extant research has focused on the cognitive process, while the communication process has received less empirical attention. This may have led to the effect of additional variables (such as mediators) being overlooked during the process through which brand trust is transferred.

To fill this gap, we introduce consumer engagement in this study as a key factor that influences the communication process of trust transfer from trusted other parties (e.g., other consumers) to the brand. Consumer engagement refers to the overall psychological experience of consumer interactions with the focal brand, as well as other relevant objects including the company, employees, and other consumers (Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, & Ilic, 2011; Hollebeek, 2011; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In the context of SMBC, consumer engagement reflects consumers' strong motivation to participate in activities in the community, such as information sharing/storing, social activities, word-of-mouth (WOM), value co-creation, etc. (Brodie et al., 2011; Harmeling,

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Moffett, Arnold, & Carlson, 2017; van Doorn, Lemon, Mittal, & Nass, 2010). Consumer engagement will enhance consumers' direct communication with the trusted parties, and the possibility of being exposed to brand-related information generated by trusted parties will increase (Habibi, Laroche, & Richard, 2014). Therefore, consumer engagement may be a critical factor within the communication process of trust transfer, which entails the influence on a consumer being exerted directly by those whom he or she trusts.

In this study, we examine two possible sources in SMBCs from which brand trust can be transferred: consumer-to-consumer (C2C) trust and consumer-to-marketer (C2M) trust. Previous online brand community studies have mainly focused on C2C trust (e.g., Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; Chen, Zhang, & Xu, 2009; Lu, Zhao, & Wang, 2010). These studies have therefore overlooked C2M trust, which is particularly important in the context of social media-based brand communities, where there are frequent interactions between consumers and marketers (Wang, Min, & Han, 2016; Xie & Lee, 2015). The need for this double focus on trust has also been supported by other researchers, such as Wirtz, den Ambtman, & Bloemer (2013) and Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2015, who have suggested that in online brand communities, community members interact both with other individuals and with marketers. Therefore, this study emphasizes both types of trust as being likely to influence the establishment of consumer trust in the brand through consumer engagement.

Through a Web-based survey of Chinese social media website users, we find that two forms of the trust relationship in SMBCs—i.e., C2C trust and C2M trust—can contribute to brand trust both directly and indirectly through consumer engagement. The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it enriches the theory of trust transfer by extending it to the context of SMBCs. We find that consumer engagement plays a key role in the process of communication-based trust transfer. Second, this study deepens our understanding of consumer engagement in terms of its antecedents by examining the impact of two types of trust relationships on consumer engagement in SMBCs. Third, this study contributes to knowledge of brand trust by empirically demonstrating that consumer engagement acts as an important influencing factor of brand trust, and that the impact of consumer engagement on brand trust is contingent on consumers' device preference accessing to SMBCs.

A conceptual model is developed in order to illustrate the relationship between interpersonal trust factors associated with SMBCs, consumer engagement, and brand trust. In Section 2, the literature related to this research is reviewed. Section 3 develops the research hypotheses. Section 4 details the data collection process and model testing strategy. Finally, Section 5 provides a discussion of our research results, as well as the theoretical and practical implications of our study. We also discuss our study's limitations and future research directions.

2. Theoretical background and literature review

2.1. Consumer engagement

The concept of engagement was originally proposed and studied in the field of organizational behavior and psychology (e.g. Huo, Binning, & Ludwin, 2009; Schaufeli, Salanova, & González-romá, 2002), and then introduced into the field of marketing approximately eight years ago (Bowden, 2009; Vivek, 2009; Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009). Researchers have offered a wide diversity of definitions of consumer engagement (Table 1). These definitions can be categorized into three streams, either from a unidimensional or multi-dimensional perspective. First, from a behavioral viewpoint, consumer engagement can be viewed as a consumer's behavioral manifestation toward a brand/company (e.g. van Doorn et al., 2010; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; Zhang, Jansen, & Chowdhury, 2011). Second, consumer engagement can be conceptualized as a psychological state that occurs in conjunction with a customer's interactive experience with a focal brand, as well as a multidimensional construct comprised of cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions (e.g. Brodie et al., 2011; Brodie et al., 2013; and Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014). In addition, Vivek et al. (2012) added another dimension, referred to as the social elements of consumer engagement. Third, researchers regard consumer engagement as a psychological process, which describes the underlying mechanisms in operation when a new customer forms loyalty or a repeat customer maintains loyalty (Bowden, 2009). Of these three main definitions of consumer engagement, the second one is the most comprehensive and most widely accepted (Abdul-Ghani, Hyde, & Marshall, 2012). The concept of consumer engagement as a psychological state and multidimensional construct has recently been gaining increasing attention and acceptance in relevant areas (Cheung, Zheng, & Lee, 2014; Cheung, Shen, & Lee, 2015; Dessart et al., 2015).

This study follows the psychological state point of view. We define consumer engagement in an SMBC as a consumer's psychological state consisting of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions with respect to their interaction experiences with other consumers, marketing representatives, and other related parties that occur within the SMBC.

Despite its similarity to other concepts in marketing, engagement has been argued to differ from constructs such as satisfaction and commitment (Vecina, Chacón, Sueiro, & Barrón, 2012). Satisfaction deals with individuals' emotional attitude based on their overall evaluation of one specific offering (Gustafsson, Johnson, & Roos, 2005). In contrast, engagement describes one's motivational state when participating in interactive activities (Hollebeek et al., 2014), and focuses more on people's intrinsic motivation than on their evaluations (Wefald & Downey, 2009). The most intuitive difference between satisfaction and engagement is that satisfaction is "backward-looking," whereas engagement is more "forward-looking." Another "forward-looking" construct in marketing is commitment (Gustafsson et al., 2005), which refers to people's desire to maintain a valued relationship with a committed partner (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Unlike engagement, commitment relates less to personal motivation and more to extrinsic surroundings (Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006).

2.2. Trust transfer theory

Trust transfer occurs when a person (the trustor) bases his or her trust in a target (the trustee) on his or her trust in some other related targets (Doney & Cannon, 1997). Trust transfer may work through two different processes: the cognitive process and the communication process (Stewart, 2003). The cognitive process of trust transfer means that trust in an entity can be transferred to an unknown target based on knowledge of the relationship between the target and the trusted entity (Belanche, Casaló, Flavián, & Schepers, 2014; Robert, Denis, & Hung, 2009). First, trust transfer may occur when the trustor experiences similarity and interaction between the target and the trusted entity (Stewart, 2003). For example, if there is a hypertext link from a trusted organization's website to the website of another organization, people tend to trust the linked organization because of the perceived possible business relationship and similarity between the two organizations (Stewart, 2003). Second, trust may be transferred when the target and the trusted party are contextually related (Pavlou & Gefen, 2004). This means that people will trust the target if they trust the situation in which the target is encountered (McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002; Stewart, 2003), and vice versa (Chen et al., 2009; Doney & Cannon, 1997). For example, if consumers have trust in an e-marketplace intermediary, they tend to trust in and purchase from sellers within this marketplace, because the sellers should comply with the rules put in place by the marketplace intermediary (Hong & Cho, 2011).

The communication process of trust transfer means that such transfer may occur when the trustor is influenced by the experience of related others through communication and social interaction (Kuan & Bock, 2007). People can obtain secondhand information about a target during this process (Walczuch & Lundgren, 2004). A good example of