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On the relationship between consumer-brand identification, brand community, and brand loyalty

Pedro Simões Coelho[a], Paulo Rita[a,b], Zélia Raposo Santos[a,*]

[a] Nova Information Management School, Universidade Nova de Lisboa - Campus de Campolide, 1070-312 Lisboa, Portugal
[b] Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), Business Research Unit (BRU-IUL), Av. Das Forças Armadas, 1649-026 Lisboa, Portugal

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies have highlighted the importance of social media brand communities to brand loyalty. This paper aims to stress the role of the brand in that relationship, suggesting a conceptual model in mass-market products in which consumers' engagement in social media brand communities, brand identity, and consumer-brand identification are related to brand outcomes, such as trust and loyalty. A qualitative analysis was conducted, through in-depth interviews with experts and focus group discussions with consumers, so as to evaluate their experience with brands on social media. The findings indicated that in mass-markets, consumers engaged in social media brand communities may develop positive attitudes towards the brand, such as trust and loyalty, and that consumer-brand identification may have a fundamental role in transforming consumer-brand community interactions into consumer-brand relationships.

1. Introduction

Social media represents a new challenge for brands and consumer researchers since it presents a new form of the consumer-brand relationship (Davis et al., 2014; Fournier and Avery, 2011; Laroche et al., 2013). An increasing number of companies are investing time and money into designing strategies and managing brand communities on social media to gain consumers' attention and interact with them (de Vries et al., 2012; Munnukka et al., 2015). These communities constitute new marketing research tools, since marketers can harvest reliable information about who consumers are and gain insights on various aspects of their everyday lives including lifestyles, needs, desires and consumption expectations (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; Brogi, 2014; Enginkaya and Hakan, 2014; Harris and Dennis, 2011). They can also act as relational marketing instruments, facilitating communication with consumers on a one-to-one basis (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; de Vries et al., 2012; Harris and Dennis, 2011). In recent years, many scholars and practitioners have been exploring this field of research concerning the new challenges brands are facing (Davis et al., 2014; Fournier and Avery, 2011). A major question is how the interactions within the brand community on social media translate into a relationship with the brand. Studies published thus far have focused on the relationship between the brand community dynamics (practices and relationships within the community) and customer loyalty (Brodie et al., 2013; Habibi et al., 2014a; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Labrecque, 2014; Laroche et al., 2013, 2012; Park and Kim, 2014). As seminal works, these studies explored highly dynamic brand communities, choosing high involvement brands (e.g., Harley Davison, Apple, Starbucks) or products (e.g., cars, motorcycles, computers or cameras).

Today, all sorts of brands from all product categories interact with consumers on social media, even convenience goods (Habibi et al., 2014a). Moreover, different types of consumers are increasingly available to these interactions (Baldus et al., 2015). Can one expect those same results in brand communities of low-involvement products? The mass-market is highly competitive, many products are designed for the same purpose and are undifferentiated from consumers' perspectives. Brands working in this market have until now, not had, a direct communication channel with consumers. Social media offers them the opportunity to listen to and talk with consumers. For marketers, being inside 'people's media' (Fournier and Avery, 2011) will provide access to consumers and consumer data and promote brand awareness (Spaulding, 2010).

Another important issue, which has not been found in previous studies, is the role of the brand in social media. No studies have explored the importance of the brand itself in this context. Researchers have been focused on community dynamics in predicting customer loyalty. This paper overcomes this research gap in the scientific literature by explicitly considering brand identity and consumer-brand identification in fostering brand loyalty. Even the mass-market involves different types of brands in consumers' minds. Hence, it is expected that

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[*] Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: psc@novaims.unl.pt (P.S. Coelho), paulo.rita@iscte.pt (P. Rita), D2014193@novaims.unl.pt (Z.R. Santos).

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brands that are able to promote adequate identification with consumers may expect better results from their exposure on social media.

In summary, this paper addresses important gaps in the recent literature, exploring the mass market and the importance of consumer-brand identification in social media. This study attempts to develop a conceptual model based on literature review and empirical evidence (Davis et al., 2000). Although this study is conceptual in nature, the contribution of this study to brand communities in social media literature is threefold. The first two aspects are related to the development of a conceptual model in the context of the mass market. The study will promote discussion about the importance of social media for brands operating in the mass market, in order to understand consumers' engagement in a brand community and also explore the link between brand community engagement and firms' outcomes. The last aspect is focused on helping practitioners understand the role of different kinds of brands in the same category of products.

The study framework is described in the next section, followed by the research methods and findings. This paper ends with a discussion of the results, addressing the study's limitations and recommending future research directions.

2. Conceptual framework

The traditional perception of brand community views members as brand enthusiasts or brand lovers, which induces the appeal to participate in related brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Related research on what motivates participation in brand communities found a range of intentions, from rational interests to more hedonic aspects (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Schembri et al., 2010). Consumers interact with the brand, the company, and other consumers to fulfil a variety of needs, such as social interaction or for more utilitarian purposes, such as seeking information about how to use a product or to receive some types of rewards. A study by InSites Consulting (2012) revealed that in Europe, 47% of social network users are connected to brands and actively follow an average of 7 brands. Approximately 70% of consumers have reported that one of the reasons they joined Facebook was to access information regarding new products and brands.

2.1. Consumer engagement in brand communities on social media

The conceptualization and measurement of consumer engagement were one of the top research priorities of the Marketing Science Institute (MSI)[1] for 2014–2016 because marketing literature does not have a common definition for this, despite the widespread use of them. Although consumer engagement has been used as a vehicle for creating and enhancing consumer-brand relationships, researchers and practitioners still discuss the conceptual definition, and especially its operationalization (Baldus et al., 2015; Brodie et al., 2013; Dessart et al., 2015). In marketing literature, one can find engagement definitions using a diversity of foci, such as brand, organization, community, advertising or online engagement, and even different subjects, as consumer or customer (Hollebeek et al., 2014). The common point of these definitions is that engagement involves a multidimensional approach based on cognitive, emotional and behavioural aspects (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014). A definition proposed by Brodie et al. summarizes engagement perspectives, stating that "customer engagement is a psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, cocreative customer experiences with a focal agent/object (brand)" (2011, p. 260).

Recently, some authors have begun to specifically study consumer engagement in brand communities on social media (Baldus et al., 2015; Dessart et al., 2015). The technological capabilities of this environment allow consumers to become active participants, supporting different interaction possibilities with the community, and over time, more and more consumers interact, generating different types of participation. In line with former perspectives, but having two foci in mind (the brand and other participants in the community), Dessart et al. (2015) presented a scale of engagement in brand communities on social networks based on three dimensions: cognition (attention and absorption), affect (enthusiasm and enjoyment) and behaviour (sharing, learning and endorsing). Baldus et al. (2015) focus their perspective on consumers' motives to continue interacting with the community and presented an operationalization of online brand community engagement based on eleven dimensions: brand influence, brand passion, connecting, helping, like-minded discussion, hedonic rewards, utilitarian rewards, seeking assistance, self-expression, up-to-date information and validation. This definition supports a broader vision, better reflecting the current environment of social media: more diversity of brands, types of products and consumers available to interact, "online brand community engagement is the compelling, intrinsic motivation to continue interacting with an online brand community" (2015, p. 979).

2.2. Outcomes for firms: brand trust and brand loyalty

Consumers' participation in the community is likely to increase the consumers' knowledge about the brand, reducing uncertainty and increasing the predictability of brand behaviour (Ba, 2001). Consumers tend to consider peer opinions and recommendations more trustworthy than company-generated information (Brown et al., 2007). Thus, social interaction based on information and experience shared among individuals with long-lasting relationships is a way of cementing consumers' brand trust (Bowen and Bowen, 2015; Laroche et al., 2013, 2012).

According to Srinivasan et al. (2002), communities are very effective in promoting via word-of-mouth, exchanging information, comparing product experiences, seeking advice and especially encouraging social relationships between members. Interactions among members and between members and brands largely influence consumers' relationships with and attitudes towards the brand (McAlexander et al., 2002) and generate emotional connections with the network subject, helping to establish customer loyalty (Casaló et al., 2010). The dynamism generated within the community will create value for the brand and the consumer (Schau et al., 2009) and hence, perceived benefits coming from the community lead to customer loyalty (Park and Kim, 2014). Social bonds established within brand communities create a special environment to develop communication strategies to conquer consumers' trust and foster customers' loyalty (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; Habibi et al., 2014a; Labrecque, 2014; Laroche et al., 2013, 2012). Accordingly, the following proposition is offered:

Proposition 1: *The dynamism of the social media community, expressed by consumer engagement, acts as a mechanism of informational and experiential exchange between the consumer and the brand, through a positive attitude towards the brand, reflected in brand trust and loyalty.*

2.3. The role of brand identity and consumer-brand identification

Given that consumption is a social act, recent studies have explored a social identity perspective of the relationship between companies and customers (Ahearne et al., 2005; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003) or between brands and consumers (He et al., 2012; He and Li, 2011; Kim et al., 2001). This social identity perspective is supported by two concepts: brand identity and consumer-brand identification (He et al., 2012). Brand identity refers to the unique characteristics of a brand, allowing consumers to distinguish it from competitors (He et al., 2012). Distinctiveness and prestige give brands strong identities, making them more attractive for consumers, and consumers have a tendency to identify with brands they perceive as having strong identities

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[1] http://www.msi.org/research/2014-2016-research-priorities/.

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