

Does Size Matter? An Examination of Small and Large Web-Based Brand Communities

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Abstract

We investigate the causal relationship between brand community identification, brand affect, community loyalty, brand loyalty, brand evangelism, and community evangelism, developing a structural equation model set within the context of online brand communities for newly hybridized roses. The analysis considers size as a moderator for the relationships between constructs, comparing small and large web-based brand communities. Findings highlight that small communities operate differently from larger ones with regard to numerous aspects, and possess specific strengths and weaknesses. Members of small communities develop higher community loyalty; brand loyalty in small community stems more from community loyalty than from brand affect; small communities engage in word of mouth for the community more than in word of mouth for the brand. Managerial implications are addressed.

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Keywords: Size; Brand community; Loyalty; Word-of-mouth; Affect

Introduction

What do Star Wars fans, Harley-Davidson owner clubs and David-Austin roses gardening fans have in common? For the organizations who sponsor them, they represent loyal users and potential future purchasers of their brands. Where a low percentage of customers re-purchase the brand of the product they currently own, retaining loyal customers is particularly challenging for practitioners. One way to achieve this goal is through brand communities: organizing and sponsoring communities of customers can significantly reinforce consumers' loyalty to a brand and their willingness to recommend it to others. Communities are described as social groupings that exhibit shared relationships (Rheingold 1993), social convention (Hesselbein 1998) and sense of membership (Bender 1978). In short, a community is a social network where individuals create and share meaning (traditions, experiences, influence), developing a sense of belonging.

In a brand community, the consumption of certain intangibles becomes tangible (Boorstin 1974) and is embodied

by the brand. Brand communities are 'based on a structured set of relationships among users of a brand' (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, p. 412). In brand communities, shared consciousness is 'informed by an explicitly commercial [...] marketplace ethos' (*ibid.*, p. 419). In numerous definitions of brand community, the explicitly commercial nature emerges, with a shift in the sense of community from geographically determined bonds to common bonds of brand consumption (see for example, McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Schouten and McAlexander 1995).

Due to new communication technologies' ability to unite geographically dispersed individuals, today brand communities are an established reality also on the Internet, and they are studied alongside the more traditional off-line communities. Shankar and Malthouse (2007) observe an increasing trend in the dialogues and interactions between firms and customers and, especially, between groups of consumers which interact through the networks formed on the Web (Dellarocas, Zhang, and Awad 2007; Mayzlin 2006; McWilliam 2000; Sun et al. 2006; Winer 2009). Firms are enabled to "listen in" on these dialogues (Urban and Houser 2003) and to reply (Dellarocas 2003) online relationships are often not perceived less real than offline interactions (Kozinets 2002; Li 2004), and consumers

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use digital media to communicate, showing none of the passivity usually displayed by mass media audiences (Deighton and Kornfeld 2009). Countless studies have reported the breathtaking rate of growth of the Internet, the improvement in the quality of connections, its unique features, and its potential. Furthermore, the Internet gives the opportunity to communicate “one-to-many” (Sun et al. 2006) enabling a greater permeability to individual ideas, which in turn leads to the formation of complex networks of interpersonal relationships based on information interchange. Based on these considerations, our analysis is set within the context of online brand communities. We believe this idea is backed by the literature on brand communities, which looks with increasing frequency to online communities (for example: Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann 2005; Carlson, Suter, and Brown 2008).

Aims and structure

We consider the causal relationship between community identification, community loyalty, brand affect, brand loyalty and word of mouth, developing a structural equation model. We collect data from small and large communities, and look at the differences in the relationships based on community size.

Our objective is to provide hypothetical links, addressing the role of community size and contributing to the study of small brand communities. We therefore draw on diverse theoretical perspectives, referring to works on brand communities online and offline (Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo 2004; Jang, Ko, and Koh 2007; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001), to works on neo-tribes and sub-cultures of consumption (Cova 1997; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), and to the literature on small world networks (Dorogovtsev and Mendes 2003; Uzzi, Amaral, and Reed-Tsochas 2007; Watts and Strogatz 1998).

Theoretical foundation and hypotheses

The literature on subcultures of consumption and brand communities devotes increasing attention to the role played by identification with the brand community (Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann 2005; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Studies conducted in different fields also highlight the positive impact of identification on behavior toward the organization (Bhattacharya and Elsbach 2002; Bhattacharya, Rao, and Glynn 1995; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail 1994; Mael and Ashforth 1992). Identification is “the perception of belongingness to a group classification: the individual perceives him or herself as an actual or symbolic member of the group” (Mael and Ashforth 1992, p. 104). Identification has been described as the degree of overlap between ego and community, on the basis of shared values and experiences (Bergami and Bagozzi 2000; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Carlson, Suter, and Brown 2008). Identification is usually seen by members as a reward *per se*, as within the brand community one finds social recognition, people with similar consumption values, and interactions rotating

around a common object of desire. It should come as no surprise that identification is key to the understanding of brand communities and has an impact on relevant consequences: establishing strong ties with the customers is at the heart of (relationship) marketing. In defining the factors reinforcing relational ties with customers, the literature on relational marketing has attributed a central role to the constructs of brand affect (see for example Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001), while research on brand communities has pointed to a positive relationship between community identification and brand loyalty (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Klein 2004; McAlexander, Kim, and Roberts 2003).

As the individual is reinforced in repeating and manifesting behaviors leading to social reward, and in avoiding behaviors leading to punishment and isolation (Festinger 1950; Keller and Berry 2003; Lascu and Zinkhan 1999), brand community identification should lead to a stronger intention to be loyal to the community. Loyalty towards the community should stem from the fact that identified members are not (only) driven by considerations of functional advantages (such as finding an answer to a specific problem, Kozinets 2001) but (also) by a feeling of belongingness and shared values. Indeed, identification also includes an enduring desire to maintain the relationship with the community and expresses the degree to which an individual feels a sense of oneness with the community, with shared values and self-connection (Bergami and Bagozzi 2000; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Brown et al. 2005; Fournier 1998; Gruen, Summers, and Acito 2000; Sen and Bhattacharya 2001).

Members of a brand community share the feeling that they know each other (the ‘we-ness’) (Bender 1978; Cova 1997; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001), but the relation is triadic as they also feel an important connection with the brand and often note a demarcation between users of their brand and users of other brands. One could therefore argue that members who intend to be loyal to the community, remain loyal also to the brand at its heart. In fact, switching brand would likely spoil the relationships with the other members and lead to cognitive dissonance. Indeed, the interactions between consumers have to be included in the analysis of brand loyalty because individuals tend to form groups, and groups exert a normative influence on individuals (Holt 1995, 2002). The managerial interest in brand communities stems from the belief that the social bonds built through brand consumption and shared experiences can influence future purchases and loyalty. According to Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), loyalty can be attitudinal (a long-term commitment toward the brand), and behavioral (a set of actions such as word of mouth, brand endorsement, etc.). This analysis focuses on behavioral loyalty. In particular, we consider two actions as manifestation of behavioral loyalty: repeated purchase of the brand, and positive word of mouth regarding the brand.

It is also important to consider the effects of identification with a social group from an affective-emotional perspective. Following the mainstream literature, we refer to brand affect as a possible consequence of social identity in a brand community.

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