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Community in context: Comparing brand communities and retail store communities

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ABSTRACT

Most studies on community in marketing examine a branding context. Few look at community in the retailing context. The present study aimed to examine whether retail store communities exist in the same way as brand communities. We collected data via a field-based, student sample and a national panel of adult consumers. These data revealed three characteristics of community. The findings also showed that some consumers did not experience community in the retail store. Based on these findings, we discuss differences between retail store communities and brand communities.

1. Introduction

Many grocery store chains engage with the community as a key component of their mission statements. For example, the mission statement for Publix states that it wants to be "involved as responsible citizens in our communities" (http://corporate.publix.com/about-publix/company-overview/mission-statement-guarantee) (Publix Corporate website, 2018). Whole Foods lists "serving and supporting local and global communities" as part of its core values: "Our business is intimately tied to the neighborhood and larger community that we serve and in which we live. Caring for the communities in which we reside is hugely important to our organization" (http://www.wholefoodsmarket.com/mission-values/core-values) (Whole Foods Corporate website, 2018). These profitable grocery store chains enjoy strong brand equity and loyalty among consumers. This success is not surprising, as research in retailing shows that stores benefit from participating in their local communities. Simply put, "a marketer's positioning within a community may engender important retailing outcomes, such as financial performance or customer loyalty" (Landry et al., 2005, p. 65–66).

In the marketing literature, the traditional idea of community has evolved from Tonnies (1957) original conceptualization of community as constructs of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, which roughly equate to "community" and "society," respectively. More recently, community has been defined as "customary, familial, collective, emotional, and rural" and society as "mechanical, contractual, individualistic, rational, and urban" (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412–413). *Gemeinschaft* encompasses two common elements: shared interests and geographic locality (Landry et al., 2005; McMillan, 1996; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Warren, 1978). Recent research in marketing proposes that the community construct can be based on shared perceptions among consumers and, thus, common geographic locality is not necessarily a pre-requisite (Anderson, 1983; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). Since 2001, research has supported the idea that community is based on social relations, defined as "a set of brand admirers who acknowledge membership in the community and engage in structured social relations," and on psychological perceptions, defined as "an unbound group of brand admirers, who perceive a sense of community with other brand admirers, in the absence of social interaction" (Carlson et al., 2008, p. 284–285).

Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) and McAlexander et al. (2002) first introduced marketers to this psychosocial sense of community, which they dubbed "brand community." Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) define a brand community as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" (p. 412). This kind of community specializes around a brand. Many studies have examined brand community and its antecedents and outcomes. However, most studies in marketing examine a branding context. Among the few that concentrate on community in the retailing context, most focus on traditional community constructs of shared interests and geographic locality.

No studies to date examine the psychosocial markers of community, as defined by Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001), in the context of consumer

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shopping in retail stores. Retailers that attempt to leverage community as part of their strategies also appear to focus on the traditional form of community, as exemplified by the previously mentioned mission statements of Publix and Whole Foods. The present study thus aims to examine whether retail store communities exist in the same way that brand communities do. Toward that end, this study addresses the following research questions. Do retail store communities exist among consumers in the grocery store shopping context? If so, do retail store communities share the same markers as brand community? How do retail store communities differ from brand communities? In the following sections, we review the literature on community in the retailing context and discuss the methodological details of our study and findings. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications.

2. Literature review

To examine whether retail store communities exist in the same way that brand communities do, we first review the seminal works in the brand community literature and then delve into the retail store community literature.

2.1. Brand communities

As previously explained, Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) first introduced brand community to marketers. They define three core characteristics of brand community: shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility. Shared consciousness exists when members of the brand community feel a common connection to the brand and others in their group, described as “we-ness” or “sort of knowing one another” (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001, p. 418). Rituals and traditions encompass social processes that make up the community and “typically center on shared consumption experiences” (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001, p. 421). Moral responsibility is the “sense of duty” among members of the brand community to integrate and assist each other (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001, p. 424).

McAlexander et al. (2002) define a brand community from the customer's point of view as “a fabric of relationships in which the customer is situated” (p. 38). These relationships exist between the customer and the brand, the organization behind the brand, the product, and other customers. For Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) and McAlexander et al. (2002), brand community is not necessarily geographically bound, but socially and psychologically derived, and it can exist in cyberspace.

Since the publication of these two seminal works, more than 851,000 papers about brand community have been published, according to a search of Ebscohost databases (https://www.ebsco.com/) (Ebscohost website, 2018). In the interest of parsimony, not all brand community papers are discussed below, and this study's literature review focuses primarily on community in retailing as they are the most relevant to this study. However, it should be acknowledged that the marketing literature examines brand community from numerous perspectives including, but not limited to, online and social media (Cova and Pace, 2006; Granitz and Ward, 1996; Habibi et al., 2014a, 2014b; Laroche et al., 2012; Schau and Muñiz, 2002), anti-brand communities and rivalry (Ewing et al., 2013; Hickman and Ward, 2013; Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2010), social interactions and meaning creation (Hajli et al., 2017; Muñiz and Schau, 2005; Schau et al., 2009; Zaglia, 2013), business-to-business relationships (Andersen, 2005; Bruhn et al., 2014), new product adoption (Thompson and Sinha, 2008), and related antecedents and consequences (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; Casaló et al., 2010; Chan et al., 2014; Marzocchi et al., 2013; Millán and Díaz, 2014; Stokburger-Sauer, 2010; Tsai et al., 2012).

2.2. Retailer brand communities

The retailing literature has examined community in a much smaller capacity, compared to the literature on brand community. Samu et al. (2012) propose that “retailer brand communities” share the same characteristics as the brand communities proposed by Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) including shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. However, they define retailer brand communities as a franchisor brand and its retailer network, rather than a retail store and its shoppers (Samu et al., 2012). In their perspective, “retailer brand communities are important in developing and sustaining a group of retailers working together to achieve the goals of the franchisor brand” (Samu et al., 2012, p. 1582). Their results show that franchisees in the community who identify strongly with the franchisor brand have high purchase rates and profitability.

Jones and Kim (2011) are among a few of the other researchers who examine brand community in a retailing context. However, their study focuses on single-brand retailer communities, not retail stores and shoppers. They find that self-identification and social identification with single-brand retailers (e.g., GAP, Abercrombie) affect brand community, which in turn affects behavioral loyalty among a sample of 43 undergraduate students. Jones and Runyan (2013) confirm these findings by showing that previous experience with a brand affects self and social identification. These authors assert that single-brand retailers, in contrast to multi-brand retailers, have a stronger impact on consumers via brand community; yet, they collected no data on multi-brand retailers in their study to provide a comparison.

2.3. Virtual communities in retailing

Flavian and Guinaliu (2005) study virtual communities in a retailing context. Virtual communities comprise “individuals who use electronic means such as the Internet to communicate and share interests without the need to be in the same place, have physical contact, or belong to the same ethnic group” (Flavian and Guinaliu, 2005, p. 407). Simply put, virtual communities provide a forum to share experiences and knowledge. They also promote resource sharing, relationships, fantasy fulfilment, and trade (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996). Virtual communities differ from brand communities in that they can focus on interests other than a brand, such as news, images, music, and videos. Flavian and Guinaliu (2005) analyze five case studies of successful companies that use virtual communities to increase brand awareness, assist with market segmentation, and improve supply differentiation.

Kim et al. (2008) similarly examine virtual communities in a retailing context. They assert that consumers join virtual communities for two primary reasons: social support and information exchange. They propose and test a model of membership size, member involvement, interaction quality, and members knowledge as important aspects of sociability. They find partial support for their model in their study of Korean members of online communities: ease of use and convenience are related to information exchange, but information design and access are not. Thus, Kim et al. (2008) conclude that virtual communities provide some social and functional benefits for consumers and that these benefits should be considered when companies implement virtual community into their marketing strategies.

2.4. Local retail communities

The retailing literature also examines community in a traditional sense by looking at retailer engagement with local geographic communities. This type of engagement differs from brand communities, because local communities do not have a brand focus. Arnold (2002) reviews the world's top six retailers to identify their best practices and finds that “responding to the community” is a common practice. These successful retailers create corporate cultures that support the local community and environment, as exemplified in the previously

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