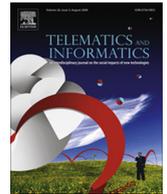


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The impact of online brand community characteristics on customer engagement: An application of Stimulus-Organism-Response paradigm

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ABSTRACT

The advent of interactive digital platforms has led people to progressively interact on such platforms, urging organizations to create online communities to engage customers with them and with each other to enhance brand loyalty. This study attempts to investigate what motivates customers to engage in these brand communities. Through a questionnaire survey of 430 Facebook users, this study investigates whether and how the unique characteristics (information quality, system quality, virtual interactivity, and rewards) of online brand communities affect customer engagement. The consequent effect of customer engagement on brand loyalty is also examined. This study frames and empirically validates a model for engaging customers with online brand communities on Facebook, considering the moderating role of gender. The Stimulus-Organism-Response paradigm is solicited to justify the theoretical background of this study. The data were analyzed using structure equation modelling. Results reveal that each of the characteristics positively influences customer engagement, with information quality and virtual interactivity bearing the strongest influence. Customer engagement also exhibits a strong positive impact on brand loyalty. This results further reveal that gender gap in the online environment is declining as the impact of all the four characteristics of online brand communities on customer engagement was invariable across male and female members.

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1. Introduction

Recent advances in interactive (digital) technologies have given rise to new platforms for information sharing and self-expression (Jang et al., 2008). People are progressively interacting on digital platforms to achieve personal as well as mutual objectives (Dholakia et al., 2004). As more people are becoming proficient with the Internet, organizations are creating online communities to engage customers with them and with each other. The online communities generally have a consumption activity or a brand as focal point. When a consumption activity is the focal point, the online community is termed as consumption community, signifying a group of individuals “held together through shared emotions, styles of life, new moral beliefs, senses of injustice and consumption practices” (Cova, 1997, p. 301), while when a brand is the focal point, the online community is labeled as brand community and is “an enduring, self-selected group of consumers, who accept and recognize bonds of membership with each other and the brand” (Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009, p. 316).

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The rising popularity of online brand communities has offered a social platform for consumers to meet and share their experiences and enthusiasm regarding their preferred brands (Trusov et al., 2009; Zhu et al., 2016). With their unprecedented communicative and interactive capabilities, online brand communities warrant organizations to enhance brand awareness (Barreda et al., 2015), magnify trust (Nadeem et al., 2015), generate positive word of mouth (Wang et al., 2016), heighten customer brand loyalty (Zheng et al., 2015), and achieve competitive advantages while marketing their offerings (Jang et al., 2008).

The last decade has seen a thriving research interest with respect to online brand communities (Habibi et al., 2014; Islam and Rahman, 2016c; Zhang and Luo, 2016). The existing research in this domain has either focused on the brand-related outcomes of participation in an online brand community or on the interactions of consumers and their behavior in the online environment they operate in. The role of online brand communities in engaging customers, developing and strengthening customer relationship has also been of significant academic interest (Dessart et al., 2015; Manchanda et al., 2015). Many of the world's biggest brands have developed brand communities on Facebook to advertise, promote, and communicate their offerings to their customers, as well as engage them so as to build long-term customer-firm relationships (Zaglia, 2013).

Regardless of the extensive adoption of online brand communities and the organizational quest for engaging customers therein, scanty literature is available regarding what motivates customers to continuously interact on these communities (Balduş et al., 2015). To boost returns on the investments made in creating online brand communities, marketers require finer customer insights about the motivations to participate and engage in these brand communities and the resulting benefits (attitudinal and financial) to the brand. Better knowledge of the engagement motivations can help in achieving excellence by improving the operational standards for this advanced platform of brand communication. Because large number of customers spend time with online brand communities, it is worthwhile to explore customers' motivation in participating and engaging with them (Brodie et al., 2013; Balduş et al., 2015).

The urge for customer engagement research in online brand communities is extensively conceded in the marketing literature (Brodie et al., 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Dessart et al., 2015). Marketing Science Institute (MSI) also recommends scholarly attention towards customer engagement (MSI, 2014). In the recent few years, research on customer engagement in the context of online brand communities has gained a significant heed (Dessart et al., 2015) but the empirical exploration in this domain is still underdeveloped (Brodie et al., 2013). Albeit this realistic need, research on the motivations of customer engagement in online brand communities has not kept pace with the ever changing scenario of the industry (Brodie et al., 2013). Earlier studies have emphasized the need to examine brand community characteristics and their impact on customer engagement (e.g., Brodie et al., 2013; De Valck et al., 2009) because these characteristics reflect a customer's overall impression of a brand community. A few studies have illustrated online brand community characteristics and their impact on satisfaction, commitment, and brand awareness (Barreda et al., 2015; Jang et al., 2008). However, studies exploring brand community characteristics and the paths through which these characteristics cause customer engagement are rare (Kang et al., 2016).

This study attempts to address this research gap by comprehensively examining some customer motivations to engage with online brand communities on Facebook and the resulting effect of customer engagement on brand loyalty. The current study is the first of its kind to conclusively investigate whether and how the unique characteristics (the building blocks) of online brand communities predict customer engagement. Furthermore, prior research suggests the exploration of the effects of gender differences on customer engagement in online brand communities (Cabra-Fierro et al., 2015; Hammadi et al., 2015) as consumer behavior is likely to differ across genders (Ruane and Wallace, 2013). In the social media contexts, gender analysis studies are at an early stage (Verbraken et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2014). Therefore, considering the dearth of understanding regarding the moderating role of gender in relation to online brand communities, this study further analyzes how different genders (male and female) influence the relationship between key characteristics of online brand communities and customer engagement.

By addressing the above mentioned gaps, this paper makes significant contribution to the marketing literature as prior studies have not considered how prime characteristics of online brand communities influence customer engagement following interactions on them. Because customer engagement in the online context is initiated within social media applications (e.g., Facebook) via a website, this study specifically looks at some constructs that have frequently been cited within the website and brand community design literature. Characteristics such as information quality and system quality have been considered as imperative to incorporate while designing an effective company website (Cao et al., 2005; Hung and Lin, 2015; Ou and Sia, 2010), whereas interaction and rewards have been suggested to enhance satisfaction and brand awareness as well as generate favorable customer attitude towards online brand communities (Barreda et al., 2015; Jang et al., 2008; Mollen and Wilson, 2010). This study, therefore, studies the collective impact of these four key characteristics (information quality, system quality, virtual interactivity, and rewards) of online brand communities on customer engagement. The solicitation of Stimulus-Organism-Response paradigm and the empirical validation of the conceptual model in the context of Facebook, taking into account the gender differences, also adds to the contribution of this study as the findings of this study can be applied to different social media platforms such as Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube etc., which are appropriate for academic research.

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