



Brand communities embedded in social networks[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Brand communities represent highly valuable marketing, innovation management, and customer relationship management tools. However, applying successful marketing strategies today, and in the future, also means exploring and seizing the unprecedented opportunities of social network environments. This study combines these two social phenomena which have largely been researched separately, and aims to investigate the existence, functionality and different types of brand communities within social networks. The netnographic approach yields strong evidence of this existence; leading to a better understanding of such embedded brand communities, their peculiarities, and motivational drivers for participation; therefore the findings contribute to theory by combining two separate research streams. Due to the advantages of social networks, brand management is now able to implement brand communities with less time and financial effort; however, choosing the appropriate brand community type, cultivating consumers' interaction, and staying tuned to this social engagement are critical factors to gain anticipated brand outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Community activity “is the biggest change in business in 100 years” (Ahonen & Moore, 2005). Community research has been an important topic in different areas over time. However, since the mid-nineties communities have experienced a renaissance, and have since risen in quantity and relevance; from the point of view of the consumers, the extensive and still growing accessibility of the internet boosts the participation in virtual communities worldwide; corporations, on the other hand, invest increasingly in their installation and maintenance. Forward-looking, communities will be important for consumers, as well as for marketers, as they represent a reaction to the lack of traditional forms of collectivization (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995): consumers gather, interact, and participate based on the “norm of reciprocity” (Chan & Li, 2010); without companies' concerns that consumers might avoid relational devices (Ashley, Noble, Donthu, & Lemon, 2011). The recent development and success of such consumer communities, especially in virtual environments, show that “this form of online organization is creating a large impact in the business community” (Ganley & Lampe, 2009).

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Brand communities are a special form of consumer communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), and have become a major current issue in the study of brands, since they bind brand and community together. Social interactions between community members profoundly influence customers' relationship with, and attitude towards, the brand (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). These social formations offer many advantages (e.g., Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003), and serve as a tool to build strong and lasting relationships with customers (e.g., Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005).

In addition to the rise and the high value of brand communities, “saying that networks are important is stating the obvious” (Cross, Liedtka, & Weiss, 2005). The actual numbers of selected online social networks are impressive. Facebook, for instance, reaches more than 500 million active users around the world in April 2011 (Facebook.com, 2011a), LinkedIn represents over 100 million members in over 200 countries and territories around the world (LinkedIn.com, 2011), and Twitter counts 106 million people in April 2010, growing by a rate of 300,000 members a day (Huffingtonpost, 04/30/2010). “Along with other forms of computer mediated communication, they [social networking sites] have transformed consumers from silent, isolated and invisible individuals, into a noisy, public, and even more unmanageable than usual, collective” (Patterson, 2012). Consequently, successful contemporary brand strategies also entail exploring and seizing social network environments.

In such virtual environments users often gather together in sub-groups with a specific brand in its center (Woisetschläger, Hartleb, & Blut, 2008), a brand-related community; consumers sharing their interest for a brand, exchange information and knowledge, or they simply express their affection for this specific brand. Muniz and O'Guinn

(2001) introduce the concept of a network based brand community which they define as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand”. Hence, a brand community can exist everywhere, also virtually (Thompson & Sinha, 2008). This characteristic indicates that brand-related communities such as the Apple group with 110,015 members (Facebook.com, 2011b) or the Starbucks fan page with 21,238,192 members (Facebook.com, 2011c) potentially offer a multitude of benefits to marketers.

Research during the last decade has investigated the existence of, and primarily social processes within, brand communities. From various studies, one can derive that social exchanges in brand communities exist throughout different product categories and branches, cultures, and different types of communities. The latter includes offline and online brand communities (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Muniz & Schau, 2005), small-group brand communities (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a), virtual large network brand communities (Adjei, Noble, & Noble, 2010), and brandfests (Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007).

Consumers and companies connect in distinct and extended ways. Brand aficionados perceive social identities with small-group friendships groups, with virtual brand communities, with the brand, and with the company, all in a system of interconnected relationships (Bagozzi, Morandin, Bergami, & Marzocchi, 2012). Similarly, literature offers a range of studies in the fields of common virtual consumer communities (e.g., Algesheimer, Borle, Dholakia, & Singh, 2010; Dwyer, 2007), and online social networks (e.g., Cheung & Lee, 2010; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). However, to date, the existence, functionality and influences of brand communities and social networks have mainly been investigated separately. In fact, one of the few existing studies in this area researches the influence of customer-based brand equity on brand community dynamics and represent social networks as a well applicable environment for generating new brand community members; applying a quantitative research approach (Schäfer et al., 2011). A related study investigates the differences of consumer- versus marketer-generated brand communities (Sung, Kim, Kwon, & Moon, 2010), but does not focus on the distinct setting of a brand community within a social network. Thus, the combination of both venue and their coalesced meaning for marketing management and research still remain to be explored. Consequently, this paper aims to contribute to research by investigating the existence of brand communities embedded in a social network environment, and gaining further insights into the interplay of these related social concepts. Furthermore, building on recent identity research (Bagozzi et al., 2012), embedded brand communities allow their members to perceive multiple social identities: with the brand community, the brand, the company, and with the social network. Together with an analysis of the social and psychological processes of their members, this research seeks to contribute to marketing research and to help marketers understand how to best utilize such communities in social networks. The author therefore scrutinizes motivational drivers for participation, and differences between diverse types of sub-groups embedded in a social network.

First, this article provides an overview of the literature on social network and brand community research, on which this research builds upon. The study then explains the design of the empirical study, the netnography approach. Finally, the discussion of the findings highlights contributions to marketing theory and practice, and lays down a number of implications for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Social network

One of the main questions of social theory is how social relations affect behavior, organizations, and institutions (Granovetter, 1985).

Social network theory postulates that human behavior is embedded in a network of interpersonal relations (e.g., Granovetter, 1985), and prior research demonstrates that social networks influence their members’ behavior (de Valck, van Bruggen, & Wierenga, 2009). This insight becomes even more crucial as the number of social network members and the amount of time spent in these networks will continue to rise; in other words, the western world is increasingly developing into a society of networks (Raab & Kenis, 2009), and the strong growth of social networks in developing countries (Checkfacebook.com, 2011) indicates the global effect of this trend.

The number of connected and interacting people or groups of people, with patterns of connections and relations describe the characteristics of a social network (e.g., Doyle, 2007). Social networks exist, for example, as friendships between individuals, relationships between groups, and business relations between corporations (Mizruchi & Galaskiewicz, 1993; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Rapoport & Horvath, 1961). Online social networks are virtual places that cater for a specific population; on such platforms people with similar interests gather to communicate, exchange contact details, build relations, and share and discuss ideas (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). In the consumer-to-consumer area de Valck et al. (2009) describe social networks also as virtual communities of consumption, which feature characteristics like high consumer knowledge and companionship, and therefore influence consumer behavior. Among other activities, users can interact, share stories in written form, or visually, in the form of pictures and videos (Cheung & Lee, 2010).

From the perspective of information technology, online social networks are “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). In social networks members often use their real identities to create a profile. This characteristic is opposed to the classical use of pseudonyms and enhances the authenticity of interaction. Furthermore, along with text based information, profiles in social networks often incorporate visual information, audio and video content. Finally, blogging, instant messaging, chatting, update notifications for the profiles of one’s connections (“friends”), and planning meetings are only some of the common features found in such social networks; recent developments offer additional features like conducting and participating in polls, or “checking-in” to places (e.g., restaurants, public locations, or private addresses). Most of the latter elements describe “web 2.0” elements and members use them to pursue their objectives of socializing, content sharing, and having a good time (Messinger et al., 2009).

2.2. Brand community

Brand communities are specialized consumer communities; they differ from traditional communities due to their commercial character, and members’ common interest in and enthusiasm, or even love (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2008), for a brand. However, each of these communities contains three common markers: consciousness of kind, shared rituals and tradition, and moral responsibility (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

The primary community marker is consciousness of kind, which describes the perceived membership of participants and intersects with social identity theory (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a). Members feel connected with other members, and separate themselves from outsiders (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006b); literature also explains this social categorization as in-group and out-group comparison (Bagozzi, Dholakia, & Klein Pearo, 2007). Members therefore, often derive a feeling of belonging from their membership to the brand community (Algesheimer et al., 2005).

The second community marker comprises of shared rituals and traditions. Through these social processes members create their own

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