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Empowerment within brand communities: Overcoming the Achilles' Heel of scale-free networks[☆]

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A B S T R A C T

This study explored how consumer interactions evolve within an emerging brand community. Since newly formed brand communities are marked by the presence of scale-free networks, an ethnographic study among individuals in their second year of tailgating at American football games was conducted to examine whether group leaders were able to empower their followers and alleviate the Achilles' Heel of scale-free networks. The authors investigated whether member empowerment led to a more balanced network of consumers, whereby individual group members increased their involvement and loyalty towards the group itself and the larger brand. Social network theory was used to examine the changes in relationships among individual consumers within the brand community, specifically focusing on the construct of centrality. Marketing implications associated with the changes and developments of these evolving brand communities are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Recent evidence supports the view that sport entertainment properties such as sport teams serve as excellent illustrations of brand communities (Heere et al., 2011). Brand communities thrive on group experiences, traditions and rituals, celebrating history, and many fans experience a high level of group consciousness and moral responsibility towards the team (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Thus far, our understanding of how marketers can foster a sense of community among their fan base is still limited (Grant, Heere, & Dickson, 2011), and relies mainly on an examination of how the individual identifies with the team, the league, and the sport or the community in which the team is located (Heere, & James, 2007; Lock, Taylor, Funk, & Darcy, 2012). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) proposed that a brand community could be portrayed as a triangle composed of relationships between the consumer and the brand (vertical connection) and between consumers themselves (horizontal connection). The study of the 'vertical connection' has been strongly emphasized in the research agenda of consumer behaviourists in sport management and has led to extensive research on concepts such as team identity (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), psychological commitment (Mahony, Madrigal, & Howard, 2000), and attachment (Funk & James, 2006). Yet, the study of the 'horizontal connection' has received less attention, and only recently have scholars begun to examine these relationships through the lens of social network analysis (Newman, Barabasi, & Watts, 2006).

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Social networks, typically defined as sets of relations that apply to some set of individual actors (Prell, 2011), have attracted considerable attention from scholars in a wide-variety of academic disciplines. Under the broad lens of social network analysis, network research typically focuses on the relationships among social entities plus the patterns and implications of these relationships (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). A recent examination of new sport fan groups through the use of social network analysis produced a model whereby newly formed fan communities follow the principles of scale-free networks (Katz & Heere, 2013). Scale-free networks are a specific type of network where a small number of individuals (hubs) connect to a far greater number of other individuals (nodes) than the average individual actor or entity, resulting in a network marked by a power-law degree distribution of social relationships (Barabási & Albert, 1999). Similar to other scale-free networks, like the World Wide Web (Albert, Jeong, & Barabási, 1999), or the network of film actors (Watts & Strogatz, 1998), new fan communities seem to be characterized by preferential attachment; that is, not all actors are created equally. A newly formed fan community is not a homogenous collection of individuals, but rather a place where a select few persons have more connections and a heightened importance than the average consumer (Katz & Heere, 2013).

For new sport teams lacking success or popularity, these principles of scale-free networks have important implications since rituals, traditions and history are non-applicable to them (Grant et al., 2011). Rather than a fan base of thousands of individuals, fan bases of new sport teams are more accurately described as a collection of a smaller group of highly invested consumers who bring their own personal networks to consume the team's product (Katz & Heere, 2013). The presence of a select few highly invested fans indicates that for many new fans, the horizontal consumer-to-consumer relationships are more important in the development of brand allegiance than the vertical consumer-to-brand relationships. Before a consumer can directly connect with the brand itself, many require a prerequisite step of identification with a fellow consumer. The presence of scale-free network principles in new fan communities, then, helps shed light onto the developmental process of new brand communities; yet more work is required to better understand the dynamics behind the relationship between leaders and followers.

While these leaders are important in the development of a brand community, the existence of scale-free networks in consumer communities may also hinder brand identification formation. Barabási (2003) refers to network nodes, those highly connected hubs, as the ''Achilles' Heel'' of networks since the removal of a single hub can rather easily lead to the destruction of the network. Because scale-free network followers are more closely aligned with their network leader than with the brand itself, scale-free networks may actually retard the development of brand identity or commitment for the network followers. If only the leader feels a moral responsibility towards the team, and the followers are only at the game because of the leader, the entire network might collapse if the leader stops attending games because of other commitments.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how these followers start to develop a connection to the larger brand community, and what role the leader plays within this process. An examination of this process would allow us to better understand how these small networks move beyond (or not) the phenomenon of the Achilles' Heel. To that end, an ethnographic study among beginning tailgating groups of an American college football team has been conducted, with the aim to examine the relationships among consumers throughout a full season. Tailgating is a social event often held in conjunction with a sporting event where groups of individuals congregate, often in parking lots, before (and sometimes after) the event. Tailgates are particularly popular among American football attendees, with many college and professional football programmes reporting tens of thousands of individuals participating in the tailgate. Tailgating is often associated with grilling food and consuming alcohol, often served from the tailgate or back of one's car, though these are not prerequisites of a tailgate. The findings from this study should increase our understanding of brand community formation and thus aid in the creation and development of future brand communities within a variety of particular setting.

2. Literature review

2.1. Brand community formation

Despite the prominence of brand community research in marketing literature, few studies have explicitly examined how brand communities are initially formed. The majority of brand community research has focused on historically prominent brands like Harley Davidson (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), Saab (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001), and Nutella (Cova & Pace, 2006). Yet, a recent study by Yoshida, Heere, and Gordon (in press) emphasized the importance of these communities as they noted that attachment to the fan community explained the largest amount of variance within team identity. Moreover, using longitudinal data they demonstrated that fan community attachment was the only significant predictor of continued attendance throughout the year. As attendance constitutes one of the largest sources of revenue for sport teams, understanding these fan communities and how they are developed is pertinent to the financial success of a sport team. Since little research has focused on the processes underlying the formation and development of brand communities, there remains a void in our understanding of the early stages of brand community formation (Davidson, McNeil, & Ferguson, 2007). Scholars have determined various markers associated with brand community, such as a shared consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and a moral responsibility towards the brand (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). In a sport specific setting, Underwood, Bond, and Baer (2001) defined group experience, history and traditions, rituals, and a physical facility as the unifying characteristics of brand communities. Though brand communities may share these characteristics, we know very little about how these markers are initially created and developed.

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