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The role of social network websites in the consumer–brand relationship

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ABSTRACT

Building and leveraging the brand community on a social network website (SN) such as Facebook is one of the popular social media strategies that companies employ to build a consumer–brand relationship. This research empirically tests a theoretical argument that the perceived benefits of a brand's social network website (BSN) influence the consumer's relationship with the brand's SN, which in turn leads to loyalty behavior. After qualitative exploration of the community to understand the practice of BSN, a quantitative method was utilized to test the hypothesized relationships. The results provide general support for the positive effect of BSN benefits on outcome variables. Specifically, experiential and functional benefits of a brand's SN positively influence the consumer's perception of relationship investment made by the brand, resulting in both brand relationship quality and the willingness to spread good words about the brand's SN. In addition, experiential benefits of BSN positively influence BSN relationship quality, which in turn leads to brand relationship quality, while the effect of functional benefits on BSN relationship quality is not found. The findings provide practical managerial suggestions to marketers and theoretical implications for future studies.

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1. Introduction

Brand communities, in which consumers create and share brand-related content and communicate with one another, have become of greater importance to the companies seeking to build a consumer–brand relationship (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). The brand community residing in a social network website (SN) such as Facebook is one of these communities. Indeed, 74% of Fortune 100 companies have Facebook brand pages, and 94% of them update the page weekly (Burson-Marsteller, 2012). Although a little behind the United States in terms of the development of brands' social media presence, many European brands have also started to find the value of SN (Ghedini, 2012). Since 2012, European brands – especially UK brands – have endeavored to create a strong relationship with their customers through their Facebook pages to further shift an emphasis from the growth of fan base to more meaningful customer engagement and monetization (Moth, 2012).

One of the unique natures of the brand community on a social network website (BSN)² is that consumers who visit the community are not necessarily “brand enthusiasts” or “active loyalists” (Schau et al., 2009); rather, they join the community for a variety of reasons

including getting exclusive offers and deals and following promotional events (Sung et al., 2010). This is a distinct characteristic of BSN compared to a “brandfest” type of community which concentrates on brand owners' engagement in brand consumption and celebrations (McAlexander and Schouten, 1998). Recognizing the distinctive nature of BSN, several researchers (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Libai et al., 2010) call for a systematic study that examines how online communities such as Facebook can be used for brand communication, what benefits a brand must offer to community members via BSN, and how consumers' behavior on BSN can be transferred to their actual brand loyalty behavior.

To respond to this call, this research identifies the benefits that consumers perceive from BSN and empirically tests their effects on the consumer–brand relationship. The relational view of the B2C relationship as opposed to the transactional view contends that consumers use the principle of relationship as a guide in their interactions with the brand and as a lens to evaluate the actions of the brand (Aggarwal, 2004; Li et al., 2006). The current research views consumer–brand relationship through a filter of social platform, BSN, and argues that consumers deepen the relationship with the brand when they perceive the benefits of a brand's SN. The main contribution of this study is, therefore, to provide a theoretical elucidation of the causes and consequences of consumers' engagement in BSN. One research gap in current online brand communities is understanding why consumers are connected to a certain brand's SN, where the brand attempts to develop “personal” relationships with consumers, and

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how consumers' engagement in the brand's SN influences their actual behavior about the brand. Several research constructs that are unique to a brand community within a SN will further provide fresh insight into how BSN is different from other types of brand communities (e.g., discussion boards) and how unique benefits of BSN influence the consumer–brand relationship.

2. Theoretical backgrounds and hypotheses development

2.1. Perceived BSN benefits

The research on online brand community tends to focus on the communities where members have strong associations with others who have similar needs and goals (e.g., knowledge sharing, problem solving) (Elliot et al., 2013; Nambisan and Watt, 2011; Mathwick et al., 2008). For example, reciprocity or voluntarism is predominantly explored in the studies of communities that are heavily information focused such as peer-to-peer problem solving (P3) communities (e.g., technology support group) (Casaló et al., 2013; Dholakia et al., 2009). What remains less clear is the consumer's motivation to participate in the community where members are emotionally connected with a brand but have loose associations with one another. BSN is a good example of this type of community.

To fill this research gap, this research identifies four benefits that consumers derive from using BSN based on the comprehensive review of literature.³ These include: social benefits (e.g., social interaction with others), informational benefits (e.g., obtaining information), hedonic benefits (e.g., enjoyment), and economic benefits (e.g., promotional deals). To explain these benefits in a theoretical frame, a deductive approach was used by identifying relevant theories. From numerous studies on consumer value and perceived benefits, two benefit dimensions appear to be most universal: utilitarian and experiential dimensions (Batra and Ahtola, 1990; Childers et al., 2001; Chitturi et al., 2008; Crowley et al., 1992). Utilitarian benefits refer to pragmatic and instrumental benefits of consumption offerings, whereas experiential benefits represent affective, emotional benefits that satisfy hedonic needs for sensory pleasure. In the context of BSN, informational and economic benefits can be viewed as functional benefits, whereas social and hedonic benefits can be viewed as experiential benefits.

2.2. Relationship mediators

2.2.1. BSN relationship quality

Social response theory claims that people perceive media (BSN in this study) as real people and places, and the rules that apply to

social relationships regulate human responses to media (Reeves and Nass, 1996). Drawing upon this social response theory, this study conjectures that consumers develop a relationship with a particular brand's SN, which potentially influences the relationship quality of the brand. Consistent with the brand relationship quality (BRQ) construct (Fournier, 1998), BSN relationship quality in this research is defined as consumers' overall assessment of the strength of their relationship with a particular brand's SN. Based on the reasoning that humans are motivated to form attachment to objects as well as to people, Li et al. (2006) assert that consumers develop a relationship with the website of an e-vendor. Furthermore, Brown et al. (2007) contend that the customer relationship with the brand can be extended to the customer relationship with the online community because a brand and an online community share common characteristics of being "inanimate market offerings" that can potentially develop personalities.

In addition, social penetration theory suggests that people will continue to strengthen the relationship with partners if they perceive that the relationship is beneficial (Altman and Taylor, 1973). Therefore, it can be hypothesized that consumers may build a relationship with a certain brand's SN if they perceive that the relationship is beneficial. Particularly, the experiential aspect of BSN such as conversation and interaction with others in real time can be a strong driver of BSN relationship quality. The benefit of information provided by BSN and monetary incentives can further strengthen the consumer's relationship with the community. Thus,

H1a. Experiential benefits will have positive effects on BSN relationship quality.

H1b. Functional benefits will have positive effects on BSN relationship quality.

2.2.2. Perceived relationship investment

Perceived relationship investment is defined as consumers' perception of the extent to which a company devotes efforts and attention aimed at maintaining or enhancing relationships with them (De Wulf et al., 2001). De Wulf et al. reveal that a company's relationship marketing tactics such as interpersonal communication and tangible rewards create psychological bonds that encourage consumers to continue the relationship with the company. Therefore, we hypothesize that experiential and functional benefits of BSN contribute to consumer perception of the relationship investment made by the brand. Particularly, when consumers enjoy browsing, participating in BSN, or having conversational interaction with others on BSN, they may positively evaluate the brand's effort to enhance the relationship with them. Also, offering information and monetary incentives on BSN can play a critical role in creating psychological bonds, which encourage consumers to stay in the relationship with the brand. Thus,

H2a. Experiential benefits will have positive effects on perceived relationship investment.

H2b. Functional benefits will have positive effects on perceived relationship investment.

2.3. Brand relationship quality

Consumers' interaction or communication quality in the brand community can contribute to their positive perception of the brand (Adjei et al., 2010; Hutter et al., 2013; McAlexander et al., 2002). Although Algesheimer et al. (2005) suggest a reverse relationship (i.e., BRQ contributes to the consumer's relationship with the brand community), their study is limited to car clubs where members meet face-to-face regularly and engage in many social activities and events such as boat trips and parties.

The effect of BSN relationship quality on BRQ is also alluded in Park et al. (2009) argument that a brand's marketing activities can

³ Top 10 academic journals that were ranked in the list of the Top 50 Published Marketing Journals (Steward and Lewis, 2010) and articles and working papers on online consumer communities searched on the Internet were used as a sampling frame. Using three key words including "brand community," "online community," and "virtual community," a total of 89 relevant studies on online consumer communities published in 2002–2012 were obtained. Among these articles, the final sample of this study was limited to the 34 quantitative studies that provided the constructs that can conceptually correspond to the consumer engagement in online consumer communities and its predictors. All constructs modeled in each of the 34 studies were carefully examined to determine whether they could be classified as the construct of perceived benefits of online consumer communities. Three benefits (i.e., social, informational, hedonic) were identified during this process. Further, given that most of studies were on general online consumer communities not the communities embedded on SN, trade journals and industry reports on social commerce and Facebook marketing were additionally reviewed. This review revealed that incentive seeking (e.g., receiving coupons, promotional deals or free samples) was another significant predictor of BSN commitment and future community participation intention. Therefore, economic benefit was added as a fourth benefit of BSN.

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