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Conceptualizing the brand in social media community: The five sources model

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of social media is challenging the ways that marketing academics and practitioners conceptualize and manage brands. This research explores the consumers' specific motivations for the purpose and structure of the consumption of brands in social media community. Keeping the evolving economic relevance of social consumption in mind, the resulting conceptual model has been designed to give a better understanding of the unique branding opportunities and relationships that social media present to brand managers. The research employs a triangulated method that includes a social media-based Facebook focus group and face-to-face interviews. The findings suggest that consumers expect some very specific two-way interactions with brands and that social media may be the only way to effectively deliver these demands. This study identifies five core drivers of brand consumption in a social media community articulated in the *Five Sources Model*: functional, emotional, self-oriented, social and relational. These core drivers represent unique opportunities for brands to enhance their relationships with their customers and to increase the likelihood of an active and beneficial online community built around their brands. Future research implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In 2013 one in four people globally use social networks (1.73 billion people) and this will rise to 2.55 billion in 2017 (eMarketer, 2014). In sum, social media is changing the game and it will have a major impact on business (Sands et al., 2011; Corstjens and Umblijs, 2012); transforming consumer behavior, relationships and traditional brand practice (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Consumers now possess almost unlimited opportunities to engage with brands (Christodoulides et al., 2012; Helm and Jones, 2010). The results of this increased brand access mandate changes in branding strategies towards engagement platforms (Naylor et al., 2012; Verhoef et al., 2010; Van Doorn et al., 2010).

Therefore, understanding brand consumption in a social media community demands a shift from marketer led brand to customer ownership and co-creation of meaning (Ostrom et al., 2010). Brand consumption is increasingly carried out in a social community collective context in which consumption value is an uninterrupted social process of stakeholder interactions (Vock et al., 2013; Merz et al., 2009). Consumption then becomes the social co-production of shared meanings (Tuominen, 2007; De Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2001). As Laroche et al. (2012) found, brand communities in social media had positive effects on the brand as well as shared community foundations, value creation processes as well as service quality (Ellahi and Bokhari, 2013). This continuous process of consumption and re-production intensifies the intangibility of the process, magnifies extensions (Van Riel et al., 2001): making it difficult for brand and consumer to have defined points of meaning (McDonald et al., 2001, p. 345). Even for product brands, which are not actually consumed within social media, the shift to social media as an additional channel for sales or advertising is relevant (Hoffman and Novak, 2012; Toral et al., 2009). Consumers are transformed from quiet, unnoticed individuals into a loud rambunctious noisy collective who want to 'change' the world (Libai et al., 2010; Patterson, 2011). Consumption now orients around a community of stakeholders that create and exchange content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) democratically (Reyneke et al., 2011), in cluttered, excessive spaces (Vanden Bergh et al., 2011; Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2013) where real-time accessibility and exchange are a social norm (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). Service brands are also increasingly being consumed within the social media community, increasing the need for a better understanding of this consumption behavior.

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1.1. Research question

Despite the unique challenges faced by brands, few models exist that explain the role of the brand in the relationships with consumers' and their social media consumption. As a result, marketers have had to impose traditional rules in brand communities. Like a large echoing room full or shouting people, this has created a torrent of continuous organized chaos that makes up brand consumption in the social media community. Therefore, to address this deficiency, we pose the following research question:

How are brands conceptualized in the consumption of social media community?

In this study the practice of consumption plays an important role in a consumer's everyday existence and reality. Therefore, our definition of consumption is based on Holt (1995): consuming is comprised of structure and purpose. In this way consumption encapsulates the unique characteristics of the two mediums; brand and social media technology: (1) structure of consumption is both brand and community and (2) purpose of consumption for the individual oneself as well interpersonal interactions with community.

To start building a theory of the social media brand we apply the grounded theory approach to the development of the conceptual model (Campbell et al., 2011; Goulding, 2005). A review of theoretical and practitioner literature on brands and social media lays the groundwork for a series of non-directive face-to-face interviews (Hirschman, 1986) with brand consumers who actively participate in brand social media communities. A concurrent social media Facebook focus group (Kozinets, 2010) allows triangulation of the data and informs the development of a framework that suggests that brand consumption in the social media community is characterized by five core consumption values called the *Five Sources Model*: functional, emotional, self-oriented, social, and relational. Understanding these values is an important way to understand the structure and purpose of consumption in the consumers' everyday lives and experiences (Campbell et al., 2011).

1.2. Paper organization

In the following section we review prior literature on the social media community and on brands. Specifically with aim of understanding social media brand consumption. Consistent with the grounded theory approach, this section provides a theory-based context for the subsequent data analysis and the development of the conceptual model. The next section describes the method employed to develop the conceptual model and uncover the consumer's consumption habits and motivations in the social media community. The remainder of the manuscript lays out the resulting propositions and *Five Sources Model* that will inform the discussion and the practitioner implications that follow.

1.3. Contribution

The main contribution of this paper is three-fold. First, while, some studies have focused on brand related constructs (e.g., Georgi and Mink, 2013), most do not purposefully build a brand-specific model in social media community. Therefore, this research constructs a new model based on empirical evidence called the *Five Sources Model.* This model is important to branding theory as it positions social media community-based brand consumption around five core consumption values. Second, this model begins the process of conceptual model development. We are confident that this model and empirical evidence will motivate debate and discussion. Therefore, our paper places a strong emphasis on future research. Finally, the grounding of this process in consumer evidence also helps practioners understand the relevance to everyday branding practice. The comprehensive evidence collected online and offline helps us understand the role of these consumption values in the consumers' daily lived experiences.

2. Understanding social media branding

The conceptualization of community has a long history in sociological, cultural and communication research (Peck, 1987). Often the term is applied to almost any group of people, regardless of online or offline context, where the type of bond between the stakeholders defines the community. The idea of a consumption community arose because consumers have shared feelings and activities in the consumption of common objects (Friedman et al., 1992), for example, of brand cited such as Macintosh, Harley Davidson and Star Trek. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) define these communities as a human consumption context where members are non-geographically bonded and their structured social relationships are defined by shared morality, consciousness, rituals and traditions: communities as linking places or communal affiliation (Cova, 1997). Further, Schouten and Mcalexander (1995) argue that these relationships help to form consumption subcultures to meet specialized needs (Fournier and Lee, 2009).

Often consumption resolves around the brand: a human affiliation in which a shared passion or interest toward a particular product, service or consumption activity unites the members. The brand becomes a fulcrum or bond of specific interrelationships (Davis et al., 2000). Therefore, consumers in brand communities are 'psychically' connected: a union that helps members gratify functional or emotional needs (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; Murray, 1991).

However, in recent years social media has intensified instant personal interaction between the brand and its community (Nambisan and Watt, 2011). The ease of participating in online social communities removes both the physical and temporal barriers, increasing the likelihood of participation from consumers who may not have been able or inclined to do so previously. Access has moved beyond the fixed physical space of the computer screen to the ubiquitous mobile channel of the smart phone: instant consumption and interactivity is now further fueled by brand and conversation related content from other connected channels of communication (e.g., radio and TV) (Davis and Sajtos, 2008). For brands, this enhanced interaction capability is an efficient way for users to share their experiences and opinions of the brand. Their inherent intangibility adds to the potential for community members to actually shape the brand offering and impact other users' interpretation of the brand.

We argue that the discussion of brand consumption in a social media context enhances previous work that defines brands. For example, as a promise (Berry, 2000), a process (Merz et al., 2009; De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1999), a relationship partner (Fournier, 1998), a fulcrum of experience (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Davis et al., 2000) and a performance (Rahman et al., 2009). The common theme of these descriptions is the concept that the brand is the outcome or fulcrum of the interactions between the brand and the consumers (De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1999; Berry, 2000), where interactions are based on value co-creation (Merz et al., 2009).

In addition we are that given the importance of community in defining the meaning of the brand to individual and collective self-identity, emphasis is placed on brand personality in social media community brand consumption (Avis, 2012; Seimiene, 2012; Aaker, 1997). Aaker (1997) suggests that consumption is motivated by the brands human characteristics. The power of intense collective social interactions pivoting on the brand will created a valued experience for consumers. Not only will it help the consumer and marketers make the brand interaction more tangible in the mind of the consumer, it will also enhance the subjective

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