Brand communities based in social media: How unique are they? Evidence from two exemplary brand communities

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ABSTRACT

Understanding how brands should operate on social media is very important for contemporary marketing researchers and managers. This paper argues that due to the social and networked nature of social media it is an ideal environment for brand communities. Taking a deep qualitative approach and with analysis of a vast array of data, the article articulates the existence of brand communities on social media. More importantly, it delineates five unique and relevant dimensions of brand communities based in social media. The authors advise researchers to consider these dimensions while conducting research on brand communities and social media. Further implications for practitioners and researchers are discussed.

1. Introduction

"We lived on farms, then we lived in cities, and now we're going to live on the Internet! "
        Sean Parker in "The Social Network" (*2010*), *Film by David Fincher*

Believe it or not, this is going to be our new reality. In the age of social media or, as renamed by some scholars, "people's media" (Fournier & Avery, 2011), people spend more than one third of their waking day consuming content on social media (Lang, 2010). Facebook alone, the hallmark of social media, has over one billion active users. The unique aspects of social media and its immense popularity have revolutionized marketing practices (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011) and consumer behavior from information acquisition to post purchase behavior (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Powers, Advincula, Austin, & Graiko, 2012). Despite this growing popularity and the general agreement on the influences of social media, a systematic understanding by brand managers of how to behave on social media remains elusive.

The networked and social nature of social media allows like-minded people to gather in groups and subgroups with a specific common interest (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). There are many groups in social media that are centered on a certain brand. These groups could be either initiated by brand managers or by consumers. Our research deals with several key questions: Are these groups related to the brand community concept introduced by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001)? Do they manifest brand community characteristics and benefits, as introduced by McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig (2002) and Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould (2009)? If so, how do these brand communities differ from previously studied brand communities such as online and offline ones?

To address these questions, we review and build on the literature related to social media and brand communities. Especially, we explore the unique aspects of social media that could represent unique aspects of brand communities on social media. Then, we conduct an in-depth qualitative study in two rich brand-generated communities on social media and analyze their brand community elements and practices. We explore the qualities of brand community elements, the structural relationships (McAlexander et al., 2002), and the value creation practices (Schau et al., 2009) within these communities. More importantly, we extract five unique characteristics of the social media based brand communities that have not been studied in previous research.

This research makes several contributions. While there is anecdotal evidence of brand communities on social media (e.g., Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011), we study such phenomenon and elaborate empirically on its quality and unique characteristics. Moreover, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to demonstrate how social media based brand communities differ from other online and offline brand communities. Although highly understudied, these unique characteristics are of the highest relevance to the brand community literature. This research also has important implications for marketers as they have a historical opportunity to reach their consumers through such brand communities. Thanks to Facebook, there are brand fan pages that reach several millions users.

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For example, the Harley Davidson page has more than 3 million and Coca Cola has more than 30 million members. This research sheds new light on how marketers can better exploit this historical opportunity.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Brand community

Despite the fact that the concepts of consumption community and brand community were established long ago, only recently has the concept of brand community become important in the marketing field (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) and it is defined as a "specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand" (p. 412). This definition covers a broad community gamut from virtual (Adjei, Noble, & Noble, 2010) to temporary small brand communities (Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007).

The brand community is very important to both consumers and managers. Brand communities provide many benefits for the brand and marketers such as sharing information and keeping in touch with highly devoted consumers (Andersen, 2005), integrating consumers into the brand identity and enhancing their loyalty (Andersen, 2005; McAlexander et al., 2002), obtaining valuable market research from consumers for innovation and new product development purposes (Von Hippel, 2005), and co-creating value with consumers (Schau et al., 2009). Brand communities allow sharing of essential resources such as information and experiences; strengthening the cultural norms and values of the brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001); and are conducive to sharing the most essential element in brand community that is "creation and negotiation of meaning" (McAlexander et al., 2002).

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985) explains partly why consumers would join a given brand community: they establish a social identity as part of their self-concept by classifying themselves into specific social groups such as brand communities, allowing brands to fulfill their needs to identify with symbols and groups (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). According to social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1983; Coleman, 1988) brand communities are a potential form of social network through which consumers realize social capital. For instance, it is stated that sharing information and resources is the essence of brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) and consumers derive hedonic and utilitarian values through participating in brand community events (McAlexander et al., 2002). Basically, consumers derive intangible social capital from their network of admirers or consumers of the same brand.

Brand communities encompass all three markers of traditional community, i.e., shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and obligations to society (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). *Shared consciousness* refers to intrinsic feelings of connectedness among group members and manifests itself through such processes as oppositional brand loyalty (Kuo & Feng, 2013; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), and in-group/out-group differentiation (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005). *Shared rituals and traditions* are symbolic ways of communication that perpetuate meanings and cultural norms of the community and transfer them to both members and those outside of the community. Rituals and traditions also help build and preserve community identity (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) and manifest themselves in a celebration of brand history, sharing interesting brand related stories, and using a specific jargon within the community (Casalo, Flavian, & Guinaliu, 2008; Casalo, Flavian, & Guinaliu, 2010). *Obligations to society* are a felt sense of duty and obligations to the community and its members. It assures survival of the community and motivates members to contribute to community practices such as brand use (Schau et al., 2009) in the sense

that when they realize a fellow member is asking for help they see themselves obligated to help.

The schema of a brand community portrayed by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) basically comprises a triad of customer-customer-brand relationships. We agree with McAlexander et al. (2002) that a mere emphasis on social relationships among consumers is "correct but not entirely complete" (p. 39) to recognize a brand community. Thereby, to uphold a brand community one should "weave through the fabric of community" (p. 39) and not only recognize the consumer-consumer relationships but also delve into consumer relationships with the brand, the product, and marketers to provide a more complete picture of dynamic brand community relationships.

Also, all activities that consumers and marketers accomplish within the context of brand communities, either online or offline, were categorized by Schau and his colleagues (2009) in an extensive, qualitative study. They identified 12 common practices, which, in turn, were organized into four thematic groups: social networking, impressions management, brand use, and community engagement (Schau et al., 2009). Since they examined nine brand communities and conducted a meta-analysis of 52 related articles, it appears that this typology covers almost all outcomes of such activities. We believe that to study a brand community, one should scrutinize the realization of these practices within the community.

Social networking practices "focus on creating, enhancing, and sustaining ties among brand community members." (p. 34). This group of practices includes welcoming, empathizing, and governing, which are all conducive to greeting new members, socializing them, articulating the norms of the community, and lending emotional or physical support to other members. *Impressions management* practices intend to create and maintain favorable impressions of the brand and the community in the external world; they include justifying and evangelizing. Examples of such practices include sharing good news or favorable information, encouraging others to use the brand or preach it, and rationalizing the amount of effort and time devoted to brand activities. *Community engagement* practices include staking, milestoning, badging, and documenting (Schau et al., 2009, p. 34). These activities enhance member engagement in the community and provide them with social capital. For instance, consumers symbolize and record their most outstanding experiences with the brand. Finally, *brand use* practices relate to optimal use of the brand. They include grooming, customizing, and commoditizing. Through these practices consumers and marketers interact to enhance better use of the brand.

In sum, these studies enhanced our knowledge of brand communities, their dynamic mechanisms, and potential benefits. However, similar to all aspects of human life, communities are evolving rapidly due to technological revolutions. This mandates researchers to scrutinize new forms of brand communities, the most recent of which are those established on social media platforms, in order to provide deeper and more practical understanding for academics and practitioners.

2.2. Brand communities based on social media

Social media is defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). The technological core enables consumers to have access to social media in many formats from blogs and microblogs to video sharing and networking sites (Harris, 2009). The concept of user generated content implies that people are not mere consumers of content, but they actively participate in creating, sharing, and consuming the contents.

"Groups" is stated as one of the main functional blocks of social media and is described as "the extent to which users can form