Antecedents and consequences of the quality of e-customer-to-customer interactions in B2B brand communities

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ABSTRACT

The opportunities that interactions in business-to-business (B2B) brand communities offer companies as well as brand community members have already been recognized by B2B firms, but are still an underexplored field of B2B academic marketing research. To provide a first step in analyzing B2B brand communities, we develop a conceptual framework of the quality of customer-to-customer (C2C) interactions in B2B brand communities by drawing on several theories and concepts (e.g., social exchange theory, uses and gratifications approach and value-in-the-experience). Based on an online survey (n = 330) spanning three virtual B2B brand communities in the IT-sector, we test our framework using structural equation modeling. Our results reveal that brand trust has a positive impact on brand community trust. Brand community trust leads to an increase in the quality of C2C interactions in B2B brand communities. Furthermore, we demonstrate that the quality of C2C interactions in B2B brand communities has a positive impact on functional, experiential, and symbolic brand community benefits, which, in turn, foster brand loyalty.

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1. Introduction

Human interactions are a crucial aspect of relationship marketing. In recent years, the Internet has emerged as one of the leading tools to enable and facilitate interactions between large numbers of people all over the world. This development has been accompanied and supported by a change in customer behavior. Customers no longer make all their decisions in isolation from each other. Instead, their decisions are steadily becoming more embedded in a social context, as they are often formed through connections to a brand community of like-minded others (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). According to the widely accepted definition in the literature (Füller, Matzler, & Hoppe, 2008; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002) developed by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 412), a brand community is a "(…) a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. It is specialized because at its center is a branded good or service." This phenomenon is also relevant in the business-to-business (B2B) context, where several people are involved in the decision-making process and firms operate in a complex network of several different actors (Andersen, 2005; Mäläskä, Saraniemi, & Tähtinen, 2011).

B2B brand communities offer great opportunities for bringing all of these people together to interact flexibly and swiftly with one another, and foster customer profitability, brand loyalty, and economic success. B2B brand communities are able to meet the demands of customers in providing them with brand-related information through their interactions with other experienced customers (Andersen, 2005). As revealed in a Forrester research study, 91% of B2B decision makers[1] participate in social media, and 69% already successfully use social technologies for cultivating long-term business exchanges in Europe and North America (Ramos & Young, 2009). In the United Kingdom, over a quarter of small and medium B2B firms have already integrated social networks in their current businesses (Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011).

More and more B2B firms therefore recognize that they need new solutions to address the difficulties encountered in building up long-term relationships and in reviving dissipating brand loyalty (McDowell Mudambi, Doyle, & Wong, 1997; Webster, 2002). These strategic problems are especially important due to high customer integration, the essential need for information, explanations, and the multi-personal, long-lasting international relationships in B2B markets (Mudambi, 2002; Webster & Wind, 1972; Wouters, 2004). The high degree of dependency, information asymmetry, and uncertainty that exist in B2B relationships (Buvik & Reve, 2001) make trustworthy, credible, and critical interaction partners indispensable to the firm and to the customers (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). For customers, such trustworthy interaction partners could be other customers of the firm, because they address the concerns of other customers in a less formal manner and do not pursue the provider-dependent, commercial interests that the firm pursues (Bansal & Voyer, 2000). Thus, B2B firms and customers are increasingly recognizing and exploiting the potential of interactions between two

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[1] The research-base consists of 1217 North American and European technology decision-makers at firms with 100 or more employees (Ramos & Young, 2009).

customers or between a group of customers (C2C) in B2B brand communities to generate value. These customers[2] are professionals who work for the brand around which the community is built. If the interactions in B2B brand communities are confirmed to satisfy the requirements of the interaction partners for high-quality online interactions, then they clearly present valuable opportunities for the company (increased brand loyalty) as well as for the customers who participate in the B2B brand community (increased functional, experiential, and symbolic benefits).

However, this promising prospect of high-quality interactions between customers, has received almost no attention in the field of B2B marketing research because to date, research has focused only on B2B buyer–seller interaction relationships. Initial steps have been taken by research on B2B (brand) communities. For example, Andersen (2005), in his qualitative study, examines B2B brand communities as an instrument for relationship building and emphasizes the importance of B2B brand communities in providing a platform for customer-to-supplier as well as customer-to-customer interactions. However, a definition of a B2B brand community and its characteristics, a quantitative approach to this topic, and a theoretically-based interaction-oriented perspective with a focus on the quality aspect of interactions in B2B brand communities has, so far, not been carried out. This still "underexplored field of B2B marketing" (Andersen, 2005, p. 296) needs to be addressed in further research. Andersen (2005) proposes that further research should analyze the factors that influence community building as well as the professional and private outcomes that members can gain through participating in a B2B brand community.

Our study responds to these calls for research by asking how high-quality C2C interactions operate in online B2B brand communities. To pursue this question, we take an individual brand community member perspective and develop and empirically test a conceptual model using quantitative statistical methods. Due to the growing importance and use of the internet for social interactions with a business purpose (Bauer, Grether, & Leach, 2002; Boyd & Spekman, 2004; Kandampully, 2003), we focus our attention on online B2B brand communities.

This paper adopts a trust-based perspective by drawing on social exchange theory and the concept of social consensus to identify the role of trust as being crucial for high-quality online interaction relationships. This leads us to hypothesize a positive effect of brand trust and brand community trust on the quality of C2C interactions in B2B brand communities. Furthermore, we possess a positive impact of brand trust on brand community trust. To underpin the quality-based perspective, we draw on social exchange theory, the idea of a collaborative competence, and the resource-based view. According to social exchange theory, an interaction relationship is valuable when it is beneficial to all the parties involved. To capture this aspect, we take a value-based perspective. In this respect, we argue that, in line with the fact that people turn actively towards media in order to satisfy specific needs (uses and gratification approach), high-quality C2C-interactions in B2B brand communities lead to specific benefits for the interaction partners. Furthermore, we draw on the concept of value-in-social-context and value-in-the-experience to explain this relationship, which posit that interactions are embedded in a broad social system and that value is experienced through the gaining of benefits. We classified the brand community benefits in three categories: functional, experiential, and symbolic benefits. In turn, these benefits are expected to influence brand loyalty positively.

The paper is structured as followed: First, we give a short overview of the concept of brand communities. Based on the findings of this literature review, we develop a definition of the quality of C2C interactions, of a B2B brand community, as well as of the quality of C2C interactions in B2B brand communities. Following this, we develop our conceptual framework based on the mentioned theories and concepts. Next, we use structural equation modeling to test our proposed model. We

conclude with a summary of empirical findings, managerial implications and limitations, and suggestions for further research.

2. Literature review

2.1. B2C brand communities

The concept of a brand community stems from the sociological notion of what constitutes an early community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Such a community consists of socially networked groups of individuals with mutual interests, who inhabit a common area in order to cope with everyday tasks (Hillery, 1955; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Rapid technological advances today have altered the original concept of community to the extent that it is no longer tied to a geographical location or time, but can, instead, exist as a gathering of diverse people whose communal communication is facilitated by electronic media, and is independent of a physical setting and specified time (Granitz & Ward, 1996; Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

In 2001, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) applied this community phenomenon to brands and thereby introduced the fundamental theoretical debate on brand communities. A brand community is defined as "(…) a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. It is specialized because at its center is a branded good or service" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412). Brand communities are characterized by three constituent components: consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Consciousness of kind refers to the fact that brand community members are, in a sense, related to the brand: however, more important and even stronger than this relationship is their feeling of connectedness towards each other. Rituals and traditions are social processes which serve to reproduce and preserve the meanings, history and culture of the brand community. The moral obligation and responsibility that brand community members possess are expressed in their willingness to support other brand community members regarding brand-related issues.

The second fundamental study conducted by McAlexander et al. (2002) on brand communities is based on the findings of Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), but goes a step further in that brand communities are viewed as more customer-centric, consisting of a more complex and dynamic network of relationships. Customers cultivate relationships to the brand, the product, the firm and fellow customers. These relationships are characterized by trustful mutuality. Members help each other in sharing their individual and collective experiences, and trust the brand, the product, other customers, and the firm.

Other research studies are devoted to innovation and value creation processes in brand communities (Füller et al., 2008; Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009), while other studies deal with interactions within brand communities (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007). These studies focus on a discussion of different relationship structures and effect relationships as well as the extent of interactions.

2.2. B2B brand communities

We have found two studies that deal with the topic of communities in the B2B field, but which do not center their argumentation on a brand. Snow, Fjeldstad, Lettl, and Miles (2011) state that B2B communities serve as a platform for exchanging technical and brand-related knowledge, ideas, information, experiences, and solutions between important business partners. Dholakia, Blazevic, Wiertz, and Algesheimer (2009) reveal that by being part of a community, members can receive functional and social benefits.

So far, according to our knowledge, only one study exists that explicitly addresses the topic of brand communities in the B2B context. In a conceptual model, Andersen (2005) investigates web-enhanced brand community activities in connection with relationship building,

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[2] When we talk about customers, we are referring to industrial customers, not to end-customers. The term C2C stands for customer-to-customer, meaning different contacts between industrial customers.