

Chapter 45

Exploring Consumer Empowerment in Consumption Communities Based in Social Media

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ABSTRACT

In spite of the keen interest in empowerment, few authors have applied the concept to the characteristics of the Internet. This paper approaches it within consumption communities based in social media and explores its effects on consumers' behaviors towards firms. A participant observation was carried out and has lasted one year and a half in two consumption communities based in Facebook. Additionally, distant in-depth interviews have been conducted. Results give evidence for the existence of consumer empowerment online and highlight its complex multidimensional structure. Four dimensions are identified: informational, technological, social, and psychological. Results also underline that empowered consumers assess firms and call to reward some and to boycott others (1); negotiate to get better offerings (2) and demand cooperation (3).

INTRODUCTION

During the last few years, consumers are turning more frequently to various types of social media to conduct their information search and make their purchase decisions. They spend high and rising time sharing and discussing information with others (Bonds-Raacke and Raacke, 2010;

Park *et al.*, 2009). Social media can include collaborative projects (Wikipedia); blogs; content communities (YouTube); virtual game worlds (World of Warcraft); microblogs (Twitter); virtual social worlds (Second Life) and social networking sites (Facebook).

Within marketing, consumers had been long-time viewed as passive subjects constrained to

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accept firms' offerings (Burns and Warren, 2009). No doubt, the dramatic growth of social media has altered the consumer's expectations and behaviors with breathtaking speed from information acquisition to post-purchase behavior (Thorsten *et al.*, 2013).

Facebook, the hallmark of social media, creates for instance favorable circumstances for task accomplishment through the development of a strong sense of personal efficacy. It allows people to gather in communities around common interests such as consumption. Groups or communities are considered as its main functional blocks (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011). In these dynamic rich communities, users do not merely consume information but they also create, share and give it meaning and sense (Zandt, 2010; Zwick *et al.*, 2008). The access to networks and information has brought people closer together to be more connected than ever (Hanna *et al.*, 2011). Users feel powerful. They can take independent voluntary actions in their own behalf and control their own choices (Wathieu *et al.*, 2002). This phenomenon of empowerment is not new. It has been treated widely in sociology and psychology fields (Ninacs, 2002; LeBossé, 1996; El Hess, 1984; Solomon, 1977). Actually, the rising of social media mainly consumption communities based in Facebook has handed it to the surface. Businesses and marketing research cannot afford to ignore it. Midha (2012) showed that it has positive effects on trust in an e-vendor website. Fuchs *et al.*, (2010) showed that empowered customers show strong demand for the product when they participate in its selection process. Khong *et al.* (2013) showed that consumer empowerment orientation has a positive association with trustworthiness and trust in social networks.

In spite of the keen interest in empowerment, few authors have applied the concept to the characteristics of the Internet. Most papers are theoretical embracing the concept without deepening it. This research attempts to fill in

this gap in literature. To our knowledge, it is the first that investigates consumer empowerment in social media. The objective is not only to check the existence of consumer empowerment but also to scrutinize the quality of such existence in consumption communities based in Facebook and most importantly to explore how empowered consumers behave towards firms.

To address these questions, this paper is structured in three sections. The first section presents consumption communities based in social media mainly in Facebook and continues with a literature review related to the concept of consumer empowerment. The second section describes the in-depth qualitative study in two rich consumption communities based in Facebook. Finally, results are presented and discussed followed by further research-agenda.

CONSUMPTION COMMUNITIES BASED IN SOCIAL MEDIA

In view of the high interest in social media, many terms are used to design them such as social software, computer mediated communication; digital media and web 2.0. Many definitions are assigned as well. Kaplan and Haenlein, (2010, p. 61) define them 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."

The emergence and growth of social media has brought significant business opportunities for both organizations and customers (Erdem & Cobanoglu, 2010; Kim & Hardin, 2010). On the side of business, social media provide organizations with access to valuable information about customer requirements, complaints and experiences (Trainor, 2012). Indeed, knowledge and information are created, developed and enriched overwhelmingly by users. Firms have also the opportunity to interact with users collaborate with

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