

Chapter 38

The Role of Online Social Interaction in the Recommendation of a Brand Community

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the growing role of consumer-brand communities in the online context and in particular brand communities in online strategy games. It explores the loyalty of community members toward the other members, as expressed by their willingness to recommend the online community externally. Using data collected from 384 gamers, this chapter suggests that the strength of the relationship with the game brand and the need to socialise are good predictors of brand community participation, as expressed by the brand community engagement and the brand community identification. Brand community participation ultimately leads to the brand community recommendation intention.

INTRODUCTION

In the last 15 years, it has been established that consumers willingly seek to interact with likeminded individuals around activities or objects that they are passionate about (Cova, 1997). They form communities focusing on a certain activity or object, which they enjoy interacting around (Koh & Kim, 2004). Communities focusing on a specific consumption activity or product, for instance coffee, are referred to as consumption communities, or communities of interest (e.g. Kozinets, 2002), whereas those centred on a specific brand, or company, are called brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

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The growth and popularity of consumer communities can be in part attributed to information technologies (Madupu & Cooley, 2010). The Internet is providing a means of communication that facilitates people to find and connect with likeminded individuals that can be located in various places around the globe (McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002). Internet mediated communications can take various forms including e-mail, chat, online video contact, forums or social media participation. Individuals demonstrate affective, cognitive and behavioural engagement both with the brand and with the other participating individuals in brand communities (Dessart, Veloutsou & Morgan-Thomas, 2015). Greater reach, synchronous communication and lack of geographical boundaries are only a few of the elements fostering peer-to-peer, brand-related communication (Thomsen, Straubhaar & Bolyard, 1998). Overall, the interactive and experiential nature of Internet mediated communications is core to sustaining many-to-many communication (Hoffman & Novak, 1996), which lies at the heart of online community literature (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997).

Online brand communities represent a specific type of communities. They are '*specialized, non-geographically bound communities based on a structured set of relations around admirers of a brand*' (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412), which are mediated by online technology (Porter, 2004). Online brand communities offer rich opportunities for interactions, facilitating the building, fostering, strengthening and maintenance of in-depth and lasting relationships which link consumers to a brand and with each other (Algesheimer, Dholakia & Herrmann, 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Matzler, Pichler, Füller & Mooradian, 2011). In these communities, brands can act as agents for development of relationships both with the brand itself, but also with other likeminded individuals (Cova, 1997; Veloutsou, 2009). Such communities have seen their popularity increase in the last few years and they bring value for individual members (Schau, Muniz & Arnould, 2009), for the group itself (Mathwick, Wiertz & de Ruyter, 2007) and for the focal brands (Schau et al., 2009). Brand benefits include consumer commitment and loyalty to the brand (Andersen, 2005; Algesheimer et al., 2005; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

The internal functioning of online brand communities has been the subject of much research in the last 10 years, as active members' participation is deemed important for the brand community's survival (Casaló, Flavián & Guinalú, 2008). Practically, interaction in online brand communities may take different forms, such as information and knowledge sharing (Wiertz & de Ruyter, 2007; Kalpana & Anandan, 2013), participation in various online activities (Hsu & Lu, 2007; Siitonen, 2007) and collective co-production (Schau et al., 2009). Such practices have been found to be driven by social and psychological need fulfilment. In the context of online brand communities, it is at least desired (Carlson, Suter & Brown, 2008; Madupu & Cooley, 2010), if not required (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004; Hsu & Lu, 2007; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Yee 2007), to relate to other individuals who are members of the group. Specifically, participants might join such communities to dispel their loneliness, meet like-minded others and receive companionship and social support (McKenna & Bargh, 1999).

Online brand community vitality and growth is crucial to its sustenance and longevity (Tsai & Men, 2013). Despite a clear understanding of the motivations to participate in online brand communities, as well as its internal engagement mechanisms, little is known about the ability of existing members to influence outsiders to join in. The role of existing members in fostering participation is a stringent issue because consumers always tend to trust peer advice over company prompting. Effects can thus be much greater. From a member point of view, promoting the community to non-members is an indicator of their loyalty toward the community and the brand (Koh & Kim, 2004). Members exhibit membership, display community engagement and actively invite new people to partake (Lin, 2010). So far, there is

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