

Online Brand Communities: There Is More Than Oneway to Drive Consumers' Online Brand Identity and Interactivity

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Abstract In 2012, brand communication strategies shifted as expenditures on Internet advertising in the US exceeded those spent on print for the first time. These trends point to the importance of brands using online brand communities (OBC) to build consumer-brand connections. However, despite the insights derived from prior OBC literature, there is minimal research investigating consumer-brand connections in an OBC. Though this stream of literature is helpful in explaining general motives for brand community engagement, it neglects to include research related to the power of branding. Consequently, when the context is shifted from general motives of engagement to brand-related predictors that influence consumer engagement, there is marginal research.

Keywords Online Brand Community • Online Brand Identity • Interactivity • BESC

Introduction

In 2012, brand communication strategies shifted as expenditures on Internet advertising in the US exceeded those spent on print for the first time. These trends point to the importance of brands using online brand communities (OBC) to build consumer-brand connections. However, despite the insights derived from prior OBC literature, there is minimal research investigating consumer-brand connections in an OBC. Though this stream of literature is helpful in explaining general motives for brand community engagement, it neglects to include research related to the power of branding. Consequently, when the context is shifted from general

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motives of engagement to brand-related predictors that influence consumer engagement, there is marginal research.

The aims in the present research are threefold. First, building upon Zhou et al. (2012) and Dholakia and colleagues work in the OBC literature, we develop a model that accounts for individual differences for consumer-brand connections in an OBC. We consider self-motives and brand engagement in self-concept (BESC) (Sprott et al. 2009) as key predictors to OBC identification and interactivity. Further, the consumer behavior literature is drawn upon to include such brand related constructs as susceptibility of normative influence (SNI) (Bearden et al. 1989), consumer innovativeness (CI) (Buamgartner and Steenkamp 1996) and opinion leadership (OL) (Huffaker 2010) to develop our theoretical model. Second, we present a marketing based theoretical model to conceptualize the larger role of OBCs by examining the role of self-motives and consumer-brand engagement in an OBC. Finally, we consider the implications of our framework and the impact on the consumer-brand relationship in OBCs and marketing practice in general.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

It is generally agreed that consumers use brands to reinforce and express their individual self-concepts (Fournier 1998). Based on this premise this research uses, Dholakia et al.'s (2004) framework to explore consumer motives. Specifically we explore self-discovery (intrinsic desire to learn about oneself), maintaining interpersonal connectivity (to obtain many psychological benefits), and social enhancement (perceived value and increased social status attributed to social acceptance by a group). In the context of this research, identifying with an OBC often has emotional significance (Tajfel 1978) and provides internal benefits. From a social identity perspective, brand community identification implies a sense of emotional connection with the group and is characterized by attachment or affective commitment (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002). When motivated to engage in OBCs, consumers' social identities are likely to incorporate in-group loyalty and exhibit citizenship behaviors (Bergami and Bagozzi 2000). This helps explain why motivations enhance social identity within an OBC. Consequently, consumers' internal motivations may vary (i.e., social enhancement, interpersonal interconnectivity, or self-discovery), but the net effect is similar in terms of desiring identification with particular OBCs. This suggests the following hypothesis:

H1: *Strong internal motivations will positively predict higher levels of OBC identification.*

Brand engagement in self-concept (BESC) is a consumer's general propensity to incorporate important brands in the self-concept (Sprott et al. 2009). In a brand community context, the role of consumer self-concept is highlighted in several qualitative studies. One for example, McAlexander et al. (2002) found that participation in the *Jeep Brandfest* event heightened brand engagement and integration of

the *Jeep* brand with self-concept. These results imply that, as consumers engage with a set of brands, their self-concept will 'extend' to the brand and identify more closely with other brand users. Consequently, given the growing significance of online branding and brand communities, a probable outcome is that BESC leads to a stronger OBC identity. This suggests the following hypothesis:

H2: *BESC will positively predict higher levels of OBC identification.*

BESC is likely to be influenced by several individual difference factors that also play important roles in a consumer's OBC identity. For this reason, BESC is modeled as a central mediator within the proposed model. One such antecedent of BESC is susceptibility of normative influence (SNI) (Bearden et al. 1989). SNI is an individuals need to seek information and enhance their image with significant others though buying and using brands. Consumers who are high SNI are likely to have strong interest in the potential value of OBCs to their identity. Consequently, BESC is expected to mediate the relationship to SNIs and OBC identification. This suggests the following hypothesis:

H3: *The effect of SNI on OBC identification will be mediated by BESC.*

It is also proposed that BESC will mediate consumer innovativeness (CI). CI represents the extent to which consumers are open to new ideas and are driven to make decisions autonomously (Baumgartner and Steenkamp 1996). Research indicates that high CI consumers are motivated to seek out various forms of OBCs (e.g., user generated content, blogs, discussion boards) during the pre-purchase stage of product consumption (Kim and Eastin 2011). It is therefore expected that high CI consumers will seek out and identify with self-important brands, regardless of other external communication influences. Consequently, BESC is expected to mediate the relationship to CIs and OBC identification. This suggests the following hypothesis:

H4: *The effect of CI on OBC identification will be mediated by BESC.*

Finally, in terms of mediation, it is proposed that BESC will mediate opinion leaders (OLs). OL's have the ability to drive and influence a dialog within a community (Huffaker 2010). As OLs' interaction levels increase across various mediums, they derive pleasure by influencing group members and communicating brand information to opinion seekers. This reinforces OLs' desire to share more about the brands they consume and strengthens their positions as leaders in the brand community. Thus, we expect OLs to have relatively high levels of BESC. Consequently, BESC is expected to mediate the relationship to OLs and OBC identification. This suggests the following hypothesis:

H5: *The effect of OL on OBC identification will be mediated by BESC.*

Additionally, self-motives for OBC identification and interaction are likely to be influenced by individual difference factors. In particular, SNI and BESC should play important roles as antecedents to self-motives. Consumers participate in OBCs, in part, to exchange product experiences and to seek information about brands (Wu and Fang 2010). Consequently, it is expected that consumers who are high in SNI

and BESC will be self-motivated to identify and interact with OBCs. This suggests the following hypotheses:

H6a: *The effect of SNI on OBC identification and OBC interaction will be mediated by self-motives.*

H6b: *The effect of BESC on OBC identification and OBC will be mediated by self-motives.*

The model proposes that OBC identity and self-motives impact levels of OBC interactivity. OBC interactivity refers to reciprocal activities such as information exchange or group meetings (Kahn and McDonough III 1997), which result in higher levels of brand community interactivity. It is expected that as group identity strengthens, community interactivity should increase (Algesheimer et al. 2004; Dholakia et al. 2004). Finally, given past research pointing to the role of self-motives on BC engagement, stronger self-motives should influence levels of OBC interactivity, not just through OBC identification, but also directly. This suggests the following hypotheses:

H7: *Consumers with high OBC identity will be positively related to OBC interactivity.*

H8: *Consumers with strong self-motives to will be positively related to OBC interactivity.*

Research Methods

Data collection was done using a reputable online survey firm, which produced a national panel sample of young to middle age adults (N=215). The sample's mean age was 35 (SD=9.10). Sixty-percent of the respondents were female and the median income was \$55,000. Further the following questionnaire items were asked; BESC was measured using Sprott et al.'s (2009) 8-item scale. The self-motive scale was adapted from Dholakia et al. (2004) for the following constructs: self-discovery, maintaining interpersonal interconnectivity and social enhancement. SNI was measured using the 9-items from the normative dimension of Bearden et al.'s (1989) 12-item scale. OL was measured using Gnambs and Batinic's (2011) 9-item scale while CI was assessed using Baumgartner and Steenkamp's (1996) 10-item scale. OBC identification was adapted from Algesheimer et al.'s (2005) 5-item community identification scale and OBC interactivity was adapted from Wu and Fang's (2010) 6-item scale.

Results and Discussion

The dimensionality, reliability and convergent and discriminant validity of the scales were examined using a CFA procedure (AMOS 18). Following the guidelines of Steenkamp et al. (1999) led to the deletion of several scale items. The removal of

these items did not alter the latent construct measured as correlations between the initial scales and revised scales ranged from .98 to .86. Consequently, a seven-factor measurement model was tested using CFA. The fit indices suggested that the measurement model exhibited strong fit. Although the χ^2 fit statistic was significant [$\chi^2(168)=215.59, p<.05$], given well-known inflation problems due to large sample size and model complexity, other fit indicators were examined and all of these were acceptable (CFI=.99; TLI=.99; RMSEA=.04; SRMR=.04). All of the composite reliabilities exceeded .70, indicating internal consistency. All constructs demonstrated convergent validity as their AVE scores were .50 or greater and all squared correlations were less than the smallest AVE scores, suggesting each of the constructs exhibited discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker 1981).

The proposed model was estimated and direct hypothesized paths were explored. The results found that [$\lambda^2[177]=229.90, p<.005$] was significant and all other goodness of fit indices were acceptable (e.g., TLI=.98; CFI=.99; SMSR=.05; RMSEA=.04). All but one hypothesis were supported. As proposed in H1, consumers with stronger self-motives were found to have more positive OBC identities ($\beta=.61; p<.001$). BESC positively predicted higher levels of OBC identification as proposed in H2 ($\beta=.17; p<.01$). Next, the two antecedents of OBC interactivity were explored. As predicted, both high OBC identification (H7) and stronger self-motives (H8) led to higher levels of OBC interaction ($\beta=.71; p<.001; \beta=.24; p<.001$, respectively).

The mediation effects of H3–H6b were explored using the recommendations of Zhao et al. (2010). The direct path SNI → BESC was significant ($\beta=.42; p<.001$), however when tested for the mediation effect, H3 was not supported. The result found a direct-only nonmediation (SNI → OBC ID, $\beta=.46; p<.001$). The direct path CI → BESC was significant ($\beta=.21; p<.01$), as well as the mediation, thus H4 was supported. The results found that the mediation is an indirect-only mediation (CI → OBC ID, $\beta=.15; N.S.$). The direct path OL → BESC was significant ($\beta=.24; p<.001$), as well as the mediation, thus H5 was supported. The results found that the mediation is complementary mediation (OL → OBC ID, $\beta=.37; p<.001$). Next, the mediation effect of self-motives on SNI and BESC was explored. The direct path SNI → self-motives (H6a) was significant ($\beta=.51; p<.001$), as well as the mediation, thus H6a was supported. The results found that the mediation is complementary mediation (SNI → self-motives, $\beta=.46; p<.001$). The direct path SNI → self-motives was significant ($\beta=.27; p<.01$), as well as the mediation, thus H6b was supported. The results found that the mediation is complementary mediation (BESC → self-motives, $\beta=.40; p<.001$).

Conclusion and Implications for Theory and Practice

Through studying several brand-related antecedents of OBC identity and interactivity, and making and elaborating on the distinction between self-motives and specific brand-related motives, our broad objective of conceptualizing a typology that explains the larger role of OBC community members in a nomological net was

achieved. Further, exploring the proposed model using a representative western sample achieved our secondary goal. The debate we put forward is that prior literature explored OBCs using motives as the primary means for exploring OBC identity and interactivity. Further, when brand-related variables were explored, research investigated them as outcomes. In this research, we studied and elaborated on four brand-related antecedents and mediators (BESC, SNI, OL, and CI), found quantitative support and differing roles for BESC as a mediator.

In addition to these findings, this study advances managerial practice in two main ways. First, the proposed model offers marketing managers good news regarding how to enhance the interactivity of their OBCs. As we enter the era of one-to-one marketing and big data, the role of OBCs and who participates in them will become more relevant to provide effective strategic solutions, useful metrics, and greater brand value. Second, marketing managers can use co-creation of OBCs as a marketing tactic to strengthen the community's brand identification. By developing strategies that build community cohesiveness, learning, sharing, and socializing through co-developing, marketing managers will generate higher levels of OBC participation (Zaglia 2013).

References

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