SOCIAL NETWORKINGS

Abstract

Social Networking describes the phenomena found in, participatory and self-expressive Web sites—such as YouTube, MySpace, Facebook—where members/participants expose, discuss, reveal, and expound on their personal lives, activities, hopes, dreams, and even fantasies for others to see and marvel upon.

Online communities represent a growing class of marketplace communities where participants can provide and exchange information on products, services, or common interests.

Brands are, or have been, the commercial enterprises’ approach to building social networks. They have created brand cohorts through logos, colours, and clever icons.

All of these “brands,” and the imagery and mystics behind them, have really been nothing more than attempts by the marketer to create a social network that was accepted and that engaged people to purchase or continued to purchase products or services.

Companies are increasingly using online communities to create value for the firm and their customers. Ensuring that brand activity is relevant to a social network’s core audience is crucial for advertisers wanting to tap into niche communities.

In this project we develop a framework that explores the process of how a firm’s online community enhances consumers’ brand commitment.

Key Words: Brand Commitment; Online Communities; Online Communities Commitment; Social Networking;

INTRODUCTION

The present study explores the role of online communities and the effect on brand commitment. We know from previous research that “[a] strong brand community can lead to a socially embedded and entrenched loyalty, brand commitment” (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001).

Consumers participate in three distinct types of communities that are relevant to researchers and marketers: consumption communities, brand communities, and marketplace communities. Consumption communities (Boorstin 1974) are traditional, transaction-focused communities (i.e. buying cooperatives), which are bounded by physical space and time, focusing primarily on consumption-related exchange activities. Brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002) organise around increased communication among users of a particular brand/product (e.g. Harley motorcycle clubs).
In the current study, we focus on a third type of marketplace community, social networks that form around a common interest or product category we refer to as online communities (Williams and Cothrell 2000).

In contrast to both consumption and brand communities, online communities are not limited to mere business transactions and are often used to provide an avenue for social interaction and information exchange for their members (Hagel and Armstrong 1997). In addition, such communities are not restricted by geographic, temporal or physical boundaries, allowing participants to communicate at any time no matter their location. What makes online communities even more unique is the commitment among members of the community that develops through the information exchanged, and the influence exhibited by community members on the attitudes and behaviour of each other (Williams and Cothrell 2000).

Online communities have been referred to as “social communities” where community members communicate with each other, agree upon shared norms and values (Rheingold 1993), and develop on-going relationships (Watson 1997).

This shared interest increases members' willingness to share information, creating what community researchers refer to as a “consciousness of kind.” The ability to communicate with one or many members of the community at any time, and the repetitive sharing of similar beliefs, leads to consistent attitudes and behaviours across community members (Brauer, Judd, and Gliner 1995).

One direct outcome of the social interaction and communication among community members is the development of a common language, the establishment of community structure and status relationships, and the development of commitment to members of the community.

Commitment is a necessary condition for developing on-going long-term relationships (Berry and Parasumaran 1991; Cook and Emerson 1978; Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande 1992; Morgan and Hunt 1994). According to Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande (1992), commitment is defined as the “enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship”. Similarly, Berry and Parasuraman (1991) contend that relationships are built on the foundation of “mutual commitment”. Thus for an online community to exist, there needs to be commitment to that online community from its members.

Online communities exhibit stronger social ties and greater mutually beneficial relationships than both brand and consumption communities. These interpersonal ties influence members to commit to community goals (Walther 1996) and expected norms of behaviour.
Tie strength is "a multidimensional construct that represents the strength of the dyadic interpersonal relationships in the context of social networks" (Money, Gilly, & Graham, 1998, p.79) and includes closeness, intimacy, support, and association (Frenzen & Davis, 1990). The strength of the tie may range from strong to weak depending on the number and types of resources they exchange, the frequency of exchanges, and the intimacy of the exchanges between them (Marsden & Campbell, 1984).

Strong ties are characterized by "(a) a sense that the relationship is intimate and special, with a voluntary investment in the tie and a desire for companionship with the partner; (b) an interest in frequent interactions in multiple contexts; and (c) a sense of mutuality of the relationship, with the partner's needs known and supported" (Walker, Wasserman, & Wellman, 1994, p.57).

Evidence suggests that a strong tie between a dyad is perceived by dyad members to have a positive influence on their decision making (Leonard-Barton, 1985).

Related to, but conceptually distinct from, tie strength is the construct of homophily (Brown & Reingen, 1987). Homophily explains group composition in terms of the similarity of members' characteristics: the extent to which pairs of individuals are similar in terms of certain attributes, such as age, gender, education, or lifestyle (Rogers, 1983).

Homophily limits people's social worlds in a way that has powerful implications for the information they receive, the attitudes they form, and the interactions they experience (McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1987).

The similarity of individuals predisposes them toward a greater level of interpersonal attraction, trust, and understanding than would be expected among dissimilar individuals (Ruef, Aldrich, & Carter, 2003).

Thus, individuals tend to affiliate with others who share similar interests or who are in a similar situation (Schacter, 1959). The stronger the social tie connecting two individuals, the more similar they tend to be (McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1987; Granovetter, 1973). Tie strength, therefore, increases with homophily.

However, prior research suggest that homophily of an interpersonal relationship, as based on an evaluation of individual characteristics, is not particularly relevant in an online context. Rather, the findings suggest that it is notions of shared group interests and group mind-set, evaluated at the level of the Web site itself, which drive online homophily.

Moving to the concept of tie strength, empirical studies suggest that the idea of individual-to-individual social ties is less relevant in an online environment than an offline one.
The findings above consistently suggest that Web sites are perceived by Web users as actors in their own right in online social networks. Specifically, in the online context, individuals seemed to more commonly interact with Web sites and information, rather than with actual individuals.

According to social identification theory, individuals who are committed to an organisation will commit themselves to actions that support the organisation (Dutton and Dukerich 1991). When an individual feels commitment to an organisation such as online communities, they become vested in the successes and failures of the organisation (Ashforth and Mael 1989). This suggests that individuals who are committed to an online community are more likely to develop positive attitude and behaviour toward the products and brands favoured by the community.

We know from previous research that in brand communities participants: 1) share their experiences with a brand, 2) create shared meanings of the brand and 3) develop a sense of "what is right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate" (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, p.424). Further Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) contend that brand communities exhibit stronger commitment than most general types of communities. Similarly, when online community members receive favourable information about products from reliable sources and are connected with others who share a common interest in a network relationship, the individual is more likely to view the product positively (Brown and Reingen 1987).

Based on the premise of social influence we believe online community commitment can influence brand commitment.

The objective of the current study is to empirically explore the role of online communities and answer the following research questions:

1) What factors influence a participant's commitment to an online community?

2) Does participation in online communities influence a member's commitment behaviour towards a related product/brand?

In the next section, we first discuss online communities as a special case of marketplace communities. We then explore the relationship between commitment to online communities and both commitment to a target brand.

REFERENCES


