

STRUCTURED ABSTRACT
THE CENTRAL AND SUFFICIENT ROLE OF IDENTIFICATION IN BRAND COMMUNITIES

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INTRODUCTION

Consumers often join groups of likeminded individuals interested in the same brand (Veloutsou, 1999). In these real or virtual groups, they engage with each other about the brand, or directly with the brand (Dessart et al., 2015), and these groups may be initiated by the brands themselves or by consumers (Bagozzi et al., 2004). When affiliation to these groups is conscious and voluntary, they are called brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). The expansion of the Internet and social media has greatly facilitated the creation and prosperity of these communities, since individuals are not constrained by geographical or time barriers, and have high information transparency and multi-party communications (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008).

Although a vast amount of brand community studies focuses on understanding instances and development of active community participation, much less focus has been placed so far on investigating passive forms of brand community belonging, such as brand community identification (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006). Studies tend to measure the success of a brand community in terms of members' participation behaviors, co-creation or User-Generated Content (e.g. Brodie et al., 2013; Gensler et al., 2013). However, recent research also shows that a vast majority of community members are passive, that is, that they never, or almost never interact on the group (Nonnecke and Preece, 2000). These findings suggest the need to pay closer attention to non-behavioral manifestations of community membership, such as brand community identification.

Brand community identification represents the notion of a collective identity and sense of we-ness, which is central to brand community formation (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Brand community identification is the conscious acceptance and knowledge that individuals belong to a brand community in a way that is emotionally significant and voluntary for these individuals (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Algesheimer et al., 2005). A psychological sense of brand community is present in a group of brand admirers who perceive a sense of community with other brand admirers, yet do not hold membership or engage in social interactions (Carlson et al., 2008).

RESEARCH FOCUS

So far, the role of brand community identification has received a fragmented treatment in the literature. Research shows that the degree of identification of individuals with a brand community can vary, depending on the characteristics

of the brand, the community and the individual consumer (Ellemers et al., 1999; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; Matzler et al. 2011). In terms of outcomes, community participation and identification can produce brand-related benefits, such as word of mouth, brand trust, brand identification, brand attachment, purchase intentions and brand commitment (Kim et al., 2008; Matzler et al. 2011; Zhou et al. 2012; Zhang et al., 2013). The specific role of brand community identification in generating positive brand outcomes is however unclear, as well as what motivates people to develop identification to a brand community (Carlson et al., 2008).

The Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) seems an appropriate framework to understand the development of brand community identification, particularly in social media environments. The UGT is used to understanding why and how people actively seek out, choose and use specific media to satisfy specific needs. The UGT argues that individuals are getting actively engaged with the media may be used to enhance knowledge, for relaxation, to increase social interactions or companionship, or to escape from reality (McQuail, 2010), with audiences exhibiting varying kinds and degrees of activity (Levy and Windahl, 1985). Media use is motivated by needs and goals defined by audience members themselves, and active participation in the communication process may influence in various positive or negative ways the gratifications and effects associated with exposure (Levy and Windahl, 1985).

The UGT has been adapted to brand community and online community research in multiple instances to understand active participation (e.g. Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo, 2004; Raacke and Bonds-Raacke, 2008;). The UGT being a common frame of assessment of the value of a brand community for active participation on new media (Park, Kee and Valenzuela, 2009; Calder and Malthouse, 2013; Marzocchi et al., 2013), it is considered here as a reason for the development of brand community identification on social media.

The paper aims to understand if different types of perceived community value lead to sufficient levels of brand community identification to generate tangible brand benefits in the form of brand loyalty. Are inactive community members the useless free riders that we think? Do they develop other, more subtle forms of belonging like identification that can still be useful for brands? If this is the case, which motivational benefits drive identification in a brand community?

Past research based on gratification theory and examining the participation of young consumers on Facebook groups suggests that the main reasons to participate in such a group is socializing, entertainment, self-seeking and information (Park et al., 2009). Additionally, social media are rich contexts for the development of consumer-brand relationships (Peters et al., 2013) and play an important role in modern brand management. In this context, and integrating brand community identification in a network of motivational drivers and relational outcomes, the research hypotheses are as follows:

H1: Information value positively influences human value in social media online brand communities

- H2: Information value positively influences brand community identification
H3: Human value positively influences brand community identification
H4: Brand community identification positively influences (a) behavioral and (b) attitudinal brand loyalty.
H5: Attitudinal brand loyalty positively influences behavioral brand loyalty

METHODOLOGY

This study examines brand communities on social media, and in particular Facebook. Facebook is a platform where brand communities are embedded (Zaglia, 2012) and the preferred platform for consumers to engage with brands (Headstream, 2015).

This paper reports the results of two studies, aiming to investigate the research question. The first study is exploratory and qualitative. It aimed to help in the understanding of value and identification of community members in practice and the manner that brand community members experience them when participating in the community. In total 22 members of online brand communities embedded on Facebook, with various backgrounds, were interviewed with an interview guide. The interviewees were asked to report their experiences and the practices followed on a Facebook brand page of their choice. The interviews stopped when no more new information was revealed.

In the quantitative stage the measures were using 7-point Likert scales (1=Completely disagree – 7=Completely agree) and were adapted from the literature. Information value was adapted from Oleksen and Grossbart (1998), interpersonal interconnectivity, entertainment, self-discovery and social enhancement from Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo (2004), brand community identification from Algesheimer et al. (2005), behavioral loyalty from Odin et al. (2001) and attitudinal loyalty from El-Manstrly and Harrison (2013). The questionnaire was posted on SurveyMonkey and the link was posted to preselected online brand communities embedded on Facebook. A total of 448 questionnaires were fully completed, with respondents with various profiles, as one would expect from Facebook users.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the qualitative phase it became apparent that individuals feel that they get value from the brand community that is different from the motives that made them join the community. The informants appreciate that the value of joining the community often comes when they are actually members of the community. They also suggested that they feel that they often get different value from joining and experiencing the brand community, which correspond to the broad theoretical categories of information and human value. A number of respondents admitted that they often unfollow the updates of some of the pages they have joined if they do not see value in the day to day interaction with a brand page. What most informants highlighted was that information value is very important in the page membership. Participants highlighted that they will continue their

involvement with a brand community page if they feel that what they learn from there is of some value. They also appreciated that interpersonal interconnectivity, self-discovery, entertainment and social enhancement were aspects that were providing them with value in their engagement with a brand page. The qualitative study provided support and refinement to the theory and the research hypotheses were then tested using structural equation modelling with AMOS.

The measurement model exhibited strong reliability figures, with alphas above 0.87, as well as high inter-items correlations for each variable. A confirmatory factor analysis was then computed on the measurement model, which achieved good fit, with a chi square = 737.28 (df :213), CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.07. The structural model analysis was then run, exhibiting similar fit values, with a chi square = 771.23 (df :213), CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.07. The analysis of the regression estimates show that informational value significantly and positively impacts human value (composed of interpersonal interconnectivity, entertainment, self-discovery and social enhancement), in support of H1, but has no direct impact on brand community identification, failing to support H2. Human value is a strong predictor of brand community identification, supporting H3. The role of informational value on brand community identification is thus mediated by human value. Brand community identification positively influences behavioral and attitudinal brand loyalty, showing support to H4, and, as expected, behavioral loyalty is significantly impacted by attitudinal loyalty, in support of H5.

These findings evidence the central role of brand community identification in brand community functioning: it constitutes a significant driver of attitudinal and behavioral loyalty, in the absence of community participation behaviors. This not only supports the importance of a psychological and cognitive form of belonging to a community, but also interestingly shows that it is not necessary to actively participate in the community to be a valuable contributor to brand relationships, in contrast to existing studies on identification, which include community participation as a natural outcome of identification (e.g. Carlson et al., 2008; Füller et al., 2008). Additionally, the results evidence the ability of the UGT in explaining brand community identification, nuancing the human and informational aspects of motivational drivers in their effect on identification.

References

Available upon request