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Abstract

Although research into consumer participation in online brand communities has grown in recent years, still little is known about how membership in a Facebook brand community is related to brand loyalty. This study tests the direct and indirect effects of brand community engagement, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) intention, and community promotion behavior on attitudinal loyalty, repurchase intention, and positive word-of-mouth. Partial least squares modeling is used to test the conceptual model on data from a survey of 1,936 Facebook brand community members. The results support most of the hypotheses and show that whereas brand community engagement and eWOM intention are strongly associated with all the aspects of brand loyalty, community promotion behavior only affects word-of-mouth. The results also reveal that user activity in the Facebook brand community has no effect on positive word-of-mouth.

Keywords: Brand Community Engagement, Electronic Word-of-mouth, Community Promotion, Brand Loyalty

1 Introduction

The social nature of the Web, built as it is on user-generated content, has revolutionized the online interface (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), empowering consumers to interact with brands and with one another in content creation activities. This situation has led to traditional marketing activities being considered less effective than they once were

(Trusov et al., 2009), forcing companies to change their communication practices and branding, so they reflect a more participatory approach. Research on brand communities has concentrated on identifying specific attributes of communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2000) and brand community engagement (Algesheimer et al., 2005), exploring relationships among brand use, brand communities, and social networks (Schau et al., 2009). Previous studies have shown a positive link between online brand community participation and customer loyalty (Casaló et al., 2007; Gummerus et al., 2012). Brand community membership predicts individuals' behavior within and outside the community (Algesheimer et al., 2005) and indicates and stimulates their buying intentions (Cheung & Lee, 2012).

The importance of how customers spread positive messages about a company and its products to others has been widely recognized and linked to company profits and revenues (Kumar et al., 2007). The content of a peer message is perceived as more meaningful and relevant (Mazzarol et al., 2007), as well as more trustworthy (Brown et a., 2007; Martin & Clark, 1996), when the sender is not connected to the brand. However, further research is needed on the causal linkages between the conversational elements within consumer networks— such as WOM—and performance outcomes (Adjei et al., 2010). The European Communication Monitor (2012) highlighted the importance of online brand communities and emphasized the need to increase competence in the use of this medium for marketing activities. Prior studies have also been limited to the use of college student samples (Chu & Kim, 2011) and have examined brand communities in a single-brand context (Marzocchi et al., 2013), measured behavioral intention to share WOM rather than actual WOM behavior (Yeh & Choi, 2011), and examined eWOM as a unidimensional construct, although evidence suggests that more than one aspect of eWOM should be considered (Koh & Kim, 2004; Yeh & Choi, 2011). In sum, there are still notable gaps in our understanding of how consumers' engagement in online brand communities such as Facebook brand communities is manifested in different forms of eWOM and brand loyalty.

In Finland, the source of the empirical data for this study, close to 90% of people aged 18–24 and half of the Finnish adult population have user profiles on Facebook (Statistics Finland, 2013). Moreover, this platform's global, active user base has exceeded one billion (Tech Crunch, 2013). Therefore, an examination of online brand communities, especially Facebook brand communities, is currently relevant and concerns almost every company wanting to build stronger online relationships with their customers and prospects.

This study aims to address the limitations in existing research and attempts to contribute to current knowledge in several respects. First, we build and empirically test a comprehensive, conceptual model that explains how brand loyalty is formed and strengthened through the components of users' online brand community engagement, eWOM intention, and community promotion behavior. Second, we contribute to prior research by testing the effects of brand community engagement on eWOM intention, community promotion behavior, and brand loyalty. Finally, we examine the direct and indirect effects of eWOM intention and community promotion behavior on three aspects of brand loyalty: attitudinal loyalty, repurchase intention, and WOM. This information will help companies to understand better the value of a Facebook brand community for brand loyalty, specifically WOM.

Brand community engagement refers to a set of practices that reinforces members' escalating engagement with the brand community (Schau et al., 2009). Hur et al. (2011, p. 1196) define brand community as a "group of people who possess a particular brand or who have a strong interest in a brand, and who are active both online and offline." We examine eWOM with two distinctive constructs; one deals with eWOM intention and the other with promotion behavior in an online brand community (Brown et al., 2005). Previous studies have shown that information-sharing intention and behavior outside the community is the most relevant type of eWOM in the social media context (Chu & Kim, 2011; Yeh & Choi, 2011). Therefore, eWOM intention in this study relates to the intention to share information outside the community (Chu & Kim, 2011; Yeh & Choi, 2011). Community promotion behavior involves the activity of promoting the brand community outside the Facebook brand community (Koh & Kim, 2004). On this basis, we define eWOM as the intention to share and pass on brand-related information outside the Facebook community (Hur et al., 2011; Yeh & Choi, 2011), and community promotion behavior as positive WOM behaviors generated by community members (Koh & Kim, 2004). Manifestations of brand loyalty are not restricted to any communication context, thus making a distinction between online and general behavior. Our conceptualization of brand loyalty includes three aspects: attitudinal loyalty, repurchase intention, and general WOM (de Matos & Rossi, 2008).

In the following section, we briefly describe the study framework and subsequently develop hypotheses on how brand community engagement, eWOM intention, community promotion behavior, attitudinal loyalty, and repurchase intention drive general WOM. This is followed by a description of the methods and measures used to test the framework. We present the results in the penultimate section and close with a discussion of the findings, addressing their theoretical, managerial, and further research implications.

2 Effects of Online Brand Community on Brand Loyalty

Brand community engagement and social networking behavior are complex and closely intertwined constructs that collectively create value for a company and its customers (Schau et al., 2009). Brand owner-led communities enable companies to commit to closer and more collaborative relationships with customers and gain a better understanding of their behavior (Laroche et al., 2012). Online brand communities are considered effective platforms for both brand owners and customers (Adjei et al., 2010) that enhance the development of loyal customer relationships (Casaló et al., 2007). Brand communities act as a means of customer involvement in the marketing dialogue with brands and customer interaction with one another (Andersen, 2005). These interactions have been found to positively affect customers' brand perception (Marzocchi et al., 2013) and brand loyalty (Gummerus et al., 2012; Hollebeek, 2011; Matzler et al., 2008), for example, in terms of purchasing and WOM behavior (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Hur et al., 2011). Customers' engagement with—and behavior within—online brand communities varies significantly among different contexts and with a customer's state of mind (Brodie et al., 2013).

2.1 Research Hypotheses

This study's conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1. The model suggests that brand community engagement is directly associated with eWOM intention and community promotion behavior, which in turn are hypothesized as antecedents of attitudinal loyalty, repurchase intention, and general WOM.
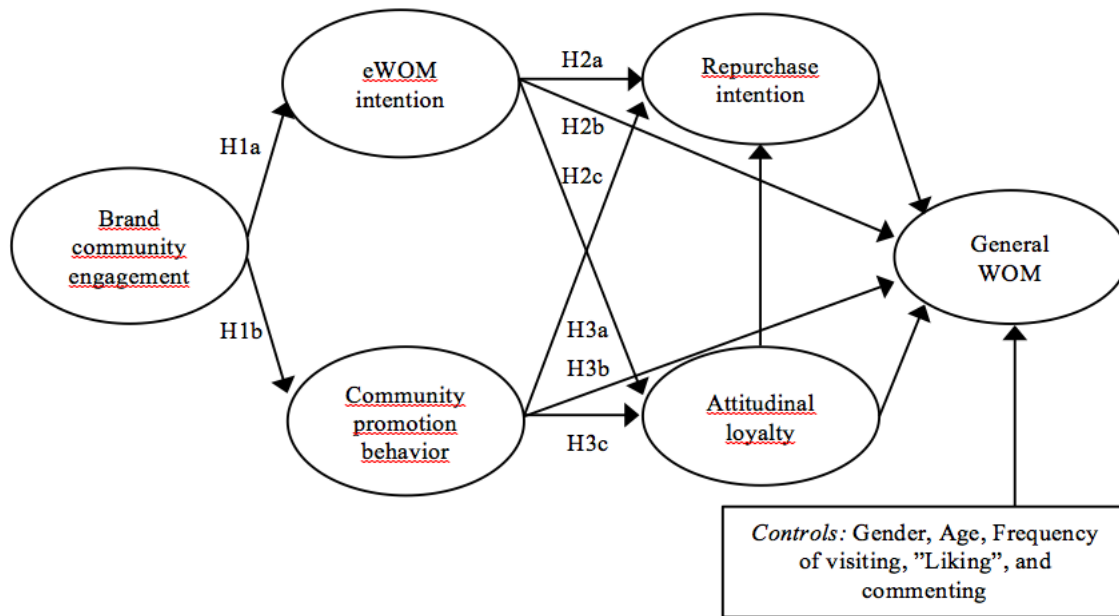

Figure 1: Conceptual model and hypotheses

Brand community engagement positively relates to more intense social networking behavior by customers (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Schau et al., 2009). The loyalty that customers feel toward a brand may be enhanced by encouraging them to interact within the brand community, thus fostering identification with the brand community and the brand itself (Casaló et al., 2007; Holland & Baker, 2001). Brodie et al. (2013) found that consumers' engagement is most often triggered by their information needs. They further showed that consumers co-create value in these relational exchange processes, which affect brand satisfaction, loyalty, and commitment. Gummerus et al. (2012) indicated that consumers' engagement with and participation in online brand communities positively affect their satisfaction and loyalty toward the brand. This positive association between brand community engagement and brand loyalty is supported by several studies (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Hollebeek, 2011; Matzler et al., 2008).

Brand community engagement increases the members' WOM activities, as they are more prone to interact with one another (Mathwick et al., 2008; Wasko & Faraj, 2005). For example, Lee et al. (2012) showed evidence of a positive effect of brand community engagement on eWOM intentions. As stated, brand community members' community promotion behavior is related to eWOM behavior directed outside the online community (Yeh & Choi, 2011). Therefore, the pattern of behavior in the case of community engagement and community promotion is expected to be similar to that of community engagement and eWOM intention. Prior studies support this argument by showing that consumers' online brand community engagement is an antecedent of community promotion behavior and that they are positively associated (Algesheimer et

al., 2005). Thus, the more an individual feels a sense of belonging to a brand community and the more motivated he or she is to participate in it, the more likely he or she will promote it to individuals outside the community. Against this backdrop, we postulate that brand community engagement has a positive, indirect relationship with brand loyalty:

H1a–c: Brand community engagement is positively associated with eWOM intention (H1a), community promotion behavior (H1b), and brand loyalty (H1c).

Prior research has suggested a positive association between membership in an online brand community and brand loyalty (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Loyalty is considered a key mediator in company success and sustainable development, and it is positively connected to the intention to spread positive WOM (Casaló et al., 2007). Prior research has offered several antecedents of WOM, including brand community engagement, satisfaction, commitment (Brown et al., 2005; Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2011), brand value (Gruen et al., 2006), writing intensity (Casaló et al., 2007), and loyalty (Chu & Kim, 2011; Hur et al., 2011). Additionally, Casaló et al. (2008) stated that commitment precedes the formation of brand loyalty, leading to positive WOM communication. The aforementioned evidence points out that brand loyalty is the outcome of brand community engagement, eWOM intention, and community promotion behavior. Therefore, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H2a–c: Electronic WOM is positively associated with attitudinal loyalty (H2a), repurchase intention (H2b), and general WOM (H2c).

H3a–c: Community promotion is positively associated with attitudinal loyalty (H3a), repurchase intention (H3b), and general WOM (H3c).

We control the model for gender, age, and user activity, which have been associated with the outcome variable (WOM) of our study (for gender, see e.g., Garbarino & Strahilevitz, 2004; for user activity, see e.g., Casaló et al., 2008).

3 Methodology

To test our hypotheses, an online questionnaire was developed to collect data from social media users. Data were collected in February 2013 from users who were customers of a Finnish firm that offers prestigious home décor and kitchen products. During the two-week data collection period, the survey was accessed 3,580 times, and 1,936 responses were gathered, producing an effective response rate of 54.1%. No nonresponse bias was detected. In line with the general population of home décor online communities, our sample was female dominated (93.6%). In terms of the respondents' ages, the sample was well-balanced, as all age groups were represented to some extent. A majority of the respondents had been members of the Facebook community for a year or more (61.5%). The items used in this study and their origins can be found in the Appendix. All the scales measuring the model constructs were operationalized with multi-item reflective scales.

4 Results

All measures were subjected to confirmatory factor analysis using partial least squares (PLS) structural equation modeling (SEM) and SmartPLS (Ringle et al., 2005). PLS-

SEM has lately become a key research method in marketing, information systems and strategic management, mostly due to its advantages to the more popular covariance-based SEM (Hair et al., 2014, p. xii). In this study the reasons for using PLS-SEM are the complex model with many indicators and model relationships, and the primary objective of modeling relationships between target constructs (Hair et al., 2014, p. 14-26). Convergent and discriminant validity was achieved (see Table 1). The common method bias was tested with a common method factor in SmartPLS. The results showed the average method-based variance to be low (0.006), compared to the average variance explained by the indicators (0.679), indicating that the common method bias was not a concern in our dataset.

	AVE	CR[a]	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
BCE[b] (1)	0.548	0.829	**0.740**										
eWOM[c] (2)	0.746	0.898	0.575	**0.864**									
CPB[d] (3)	0.854	0.946	0.624	0.625	**0.924**								
ATTL[e] (4)	0.686	0.897	0.324	0.356	0.242	**0.828**							
RI[f] (5)	0.671	0.891	0.329	0.380	0.246	0.701	**0.819**						
GWOM[g] (6)	0.692	0.870	0.409	0.550	0.417	0.625	0.636	**0.832**					
FV[h] (7)	n/a[k]	n/a	0.019	0.005	-0.012	-0.016	0.000	0.000	**n/a**				
FL[i] (8)	n/a	n/a	-0.003	-0.020	-0.029	0.015	0.010	0.014	0.455	**n/a**			
FC[j] (9)	n/a	n/a	-0.019	-0.030	-0.021	-0.020	-0.015	-0.020	0.556	0.566	**n/a**		
Gender (10)	n/a	n/a	0.049	-0.007	0.036	0.024	-0.016	-0.032	0.012	0.012	-0.029	**n/a**	
Age (11)	n/a	n/a	0.061	0.046	0.190	-0.112	-0.091	-0.045	-0.015	-0.031	0.001	-0.032	**n/a**
Mean	-	-	2.63	2.64	1.81	3.59	3.90	3.52	2.31	3.03	1.79	n/a	n/a
SD	-	-	1.06	1.20	0.98	1.02	0.95	1.13	1.27	1.01	0.90	n/a	n/a

Table 1: Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Reliabilities, Construct Correlations, Square Root of AVE (on the diagonal), Means, and Standard Deviations (SD)

[a] CR – Composite reliability
[b] BCE – Brand community engagement
[c] eWOM – Electronic word-of-mouth intention
[d] CPB – Community promotion behavior
[e] ATTL – Attitudinal loyalty to the brand
[f] RI – Repurchase intention
[g] GWOM – General word-of-mouth
[h] FV – Frequency of visiting
[i] FL – Frequency of "liking"
[j] FC – Frequency of commenting
[k] n/a – Not applicable (construct measured using a single indicator; composite reliability and AVE could not be computed)

To test our hypotheses, we first examined the direct effects, followed by the analysis of the mediation test, including an assessment of indirect and total effects. In assessing the direct paths, a path weighting scheme with a maximum iteration set to 300 and an abort criterion set to 1.0E-5 was employed. The significance of the paths was assessed using bootstrapping with 5,000 re-samples (Hair et al., 2013, p. 132). The results of the PLS estimation for the direct effects are presented in Table 2.

	β	f^2	q^2
H1a: Brand community engagement → eWOM intention	0.574***	n/a	n/a
H1b: Brand community engagement → Community promotion behavior	0.624***	n/a	n/a
H2a: eWOM intention → Attitudinal loyalty	0.337***	0.079	0.052
H2b: eWOM intention → Repurchase intention	0.150***	0.027	0.012
H2c: eWOM intention → General WOM	0.262***	0.079	0.041
H3a: Community promotion behavior → Attitudinal loyalty	0.032 (ns)	0.001	0.001
H3b: Community promotion behavior → Repurchase intention	-0.007 (ns)	0.000	0.000
H3c: Community promotion behavior → General WOM	0.115***	0.018	0.010
Attitudinal loyalty → Repurchase intention	0.656***	0.779	0.378
Attitudinal loyalty → General WOM	0.289***	0.097	0.049
Repurchase intention → General WOM	0.301***	0.099	0.050

6

Gender → General WOM	-0.038***	0.005	0.002
Age → General WOM	-0.020 (ns)	0.002	0.000
Frequency of visiting → General WOM	0.004 (ns)	0.000	0.000
Frequency of "liking" → General WOM	0.023 (ns)	0.002	0.001
Frequency of commenting → General WOM	-0.016 (ns)	0.000	0.000
		R^2	Q^2
eWOM intention		0.330	0.245
Community promotion behavior		0.390	0.331
Attitudinal loyalty		0.128	0.087
Repurchase intention		0.520	0.344
General WOM		0.567	0.390

Table 2: Direct Effects Model

*** $p < 0.01$
ns - not significant
n/a - not applicable

Brand community engagement has strong positive associations with eWOM intention and community promotion behavior, providing support for H1a and H1b. With respect to H2a–c, all the relationships are supported by the data. Our findings do not support the positive association between community promotion behavior and attitudinal loyalty (H3a) or that between community promotion behavior and repurchase intention (H3b). Community promotion behavior is only positively related to general WOM (H3c). Furthermore, the model confirms the positive paths between attitudinal loyalty and repurchase intention, attitudinal loyalty and general WOM, and that between repurchase intention and general WOM. Of the control variables, only gender has a positive association with general WOM. This finding implies that women are slightly more willing to provide positive WOM about the brand. The results of the total effects confirm H1c by showing that brand community engagement has a significant positive association with brand loyalty (Table 3) and has the strongest effect on general WOM.

	Attitudinal loyalty	Repurchase intention	General WOM
H1c: Brand community engagement	0.213***	0.222***	0.350***
eWOM intention	0.337***	0.371***	0.471***
Community promotion behavior	0.032 (ns)	0.014 (ns)	0.128***
Attitudinal loyalty	-	0.656***, [a]	0.487***

Table 3: Total Effects

*** $p < 0.01$
ns - not significant
[a] Same as the direct effect

The indirect effects and mediation were assessed by calculating the significance of the indirect effects, which was done by bootstrapping the sampling distribution (5,000 bootstrap samples, no sign changes) and calculating the variance accounted for (VAF) value. The results show that the effects of eWOM intention on general WOM are partially (VAF = 0.444) mediated by attitudinal loyalty and repurchase intention. In this equation, attitudinal loyalty is a slightly stronger mediator. Moreover, the effects of community promotion behavior on general WOM are not mediated by attitudinal loyalty or repurchase intention. Thus, we can conclude that the relationship between community promotion behavior and general WOM is more direct than indirect. Finally, we find that the effects of attitudinal loyalty on general WOM are partially (VAF = 0.406) mediated by repurchase intention.

5   Conclusion

This is among the first studies to investigate how online brand community engagement, eWOM intention, and community promotion behavior within a Facebook brand community affect consumers' attitudinal loyalty to the brand, repurchase intention, and positive WOM behavior about the brand. Our findings make an important contribution to the discussion of the consumer online brand community from a WOM perspective, giving rise to several implications for online brand community management.

We extended the prior literature by offering a theoretically grounded, conceptual model and testing it empirically with a large sample of online community members. Our key empirical findings shed light on the relationship between a Facebook brand community and purchasing behavior in four respects: a) brand community engagement has a significant direct effect on eWOM intention and community promotion behavior, and a significant indirect effect on the three aspects of brand loyalty; b) eWOM intention explains a considerable volume of all the outcome constructs, and it has the strongest effect on general WOM; c) community promotion behavior only affects general WOM; and d) attitudinal loyalty exhibits strong associations with repurchase intention and general WOM, and its effect on WOM is partially mediated by repurchase intention.

The positive relationships between brand community engagement and eWOM, and between community promotion behavior and brand loyalty are consistent with prior research results (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Casaló et al., 2007; Schau et al., 2009). Our findings add to the existing knowledge of brand loyalty, especially WOM, by showing that eWOM intention is closely linked to all types of brand loyalty and acts as the most relevant type of WOM in the social media context (Chu & Kim, 2011; Yeh & Choi, 2011), outweighing the importance of community promotion behavior in driving brand loyalty.

The findings of the current research offer two managerial implications for those building and maintaining an online brand community, especially in the Facebook context. First, our results confirm a positive relationship between a Facebook brand community membership and brand loyalty. Managers should be aware that eWOM intention is the main driver of building brand loyalty, followed by brand community engagement. An online brand community on Facebook can thus be a valuable asset for companies aiming to have their community members spread positive news online about their brands and products. Second, we advise managers to create strategies that foster participation and interaction in the brand community. Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) also suggested that loyalty and commitment to a brand might be enhanced by encouraging community members to interact with one another, since it also reinforces identification with and a sense of belonging to the community. This approach typically requires companies to generate discussion around their brands and products by creating interesting and relevant content for the audience and by interacting with the latter (e.g., by asking questions, collecting ideas and feedback, having people vote on products, and answering customer queries).

We have identified three main limitations of the current study. First, the empirical data come from the members of just one Facebook brand community, and participation was voluntary, resulting in a convenience sample and thus limiting the generalizability of the results. Future research should therefore be conducted in other communities, possibly outside of Facebook. Second, given the short history of Facebook and its brand

communities, perhaps membership in these kinds of communities is not always a sign of interest in the brand or loyalty. Since our research did not inquire about the motives for participating in the community in great detail, one promising future research area would be an examination of what motivates Facebook brand community membership. Finally, as with any single survey study, the impact of the common method variance cannot be completely ruled out without collecting data from various sources or applying a longitudinal study design. In order to fully validate the causality of the relationships, an experimental design would be necessary.

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Appendix

Constructs and items	Factor Loadings
Brand community engagement[a]	
In general, I'm very motivated to participate actively in the virtual community activities.	0.765
I feel a sense of belonging in this brand community.	0.776
I will exchange information and opinions with the members of this brand community.	0.757
I will collect information through this brand community.	0.657
Electronic word-of-mouth intention[b]	
I would recommend Organization X's Facebook community to other people.	0.876
I would pass on information I get from the Organization X's Facebook community to other websites.	0.827
I would pass on information about Organization X I get from the Facebook community to other people who are not Facebook community members.	0.886
Community promotion behavior[c]	
I invite my close acquaintances to join our Facebook community.	0.894
I often talk to people about benefits of Facebook community.	0.939
I often introduce my peers or friends to Facebook community.	0.939
Attitudinal loyalty to the brand[d]	
I consider myself to be loyal to the Iittala brand.	0.895
I am willing to pay more for Iittala products.	0.801
I am committed to this brand.	0.836
I would be willing to pay a higher price for this brand over other brands.	0.775
Repurchase intention[e]	
I will buy Organization X's products the next time I buy tableware or decorative items.	0.822
I intend to keep purchasing Organization X's products.	0.808
I intend to buy Organization X's products in the near future.	0.844
I would actively search for this brand in order to buy it.	0.803
General word-of-mouth[f]	
I often tell others about Organization X.	0.868
I recommend Organization X's products to others.	0.898
I would recommend Organization X to other potential users other than the brand community members.	0.719
Frequency of visiting[g]	
How often do you visit the community?	n/a
Frequency of "liking" [g]	
How often do you 'like' the content of the community?	n/a
Frequency of commenting[g]	
How often do you write comments?	n/a

Table 4 Measurement scales

Scale sources:
[a] Brand community engagement – Hur et al. (2011)
[b] Electronic word-of-mouth intention – Koh and Kim (2004)
[c] Community promotion behavior – Chu & Kim (2011) and Yeh & Choi (2011)
[d] Attitudinal loyalty to the brand – adapted from Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001) and Laroche et al. (2012)
[e] Repurchase intention – Algesheimer et al. (2005) and Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001)
[f] General word-of-mouth – Hur et al. (2011)
[g] Frequency of visiting, Frequency of "liking", Frequency of commenting – Gummerus et al. (2012)
n/a – not applicable