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Understanding Online Brand Communities: Netnographic Study of Apple iPhone Consumers

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ABSTRACT

This study extends the concept of brand communities. The netnography approach has been applied to two online brand communities, both central to Apple iPhone consumers. This study reveals two cultural manifestations with their own passions and communal norms not detected by previous research. This study, thus, enriches the conceptual understanding of brand communities. It also offers contribution toward understanding consumers of high technology brands, an area where few studies have been conducted to date.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars have proposed that there are distinct differences between traditional real-world communities and online or virtual-world communities (Barney 2004; Lin 2007; Turkle 1995; Wellman and Gulia 1999). Most research to date on online communities has focused on the communication aspect. These studies have explored the reasons or motivations in regard to the context of the customer-to-customer exchange, customer knowledge contribution and peer-to-peer problem solving (Wiertz and Ruyter 2007; Nambisan and Baron 2007; Gruen, Osmonbekov, and Czaplewski 2007). In addition, the influences of community members within these contexts have been explored (Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann 2005; de Valck, van Bruggen and Wierenga 2009; Thompson and Sinha 2008; Mathwich, Wiertz and Ruyter 2008; Hung and Li 2007). However, culture manifestations of these online communities, specifically from the consumers perspective has yet to be studied.

Rheingold (1993) noted culture manifestations of online communities as “how members exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk” (p.3). Thus, realities of online communities have been proposed as everyday realities for many people’s social, personal and professional lives. For this study, the core objective is understanding of the various cultural manifestations of these communities.

Furthermore, little is known about the consumers' relationship to the brand within online brand communities. Most research to date has a strong focus on real-world brand communities, which are defined as 'a specialized, non geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand' (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, p. 412). Brand communities have been recognized as playing a crucial role for marketers (McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig 2002; Muniz and Schau 2005; Sung, Kim, Kwon and Moon 2010). To date studies on brand communities have utilized various sociological conceptual underpinnings such as relationship marketing (Anderson 2005), social practices (Schau, Muniz and Arnould 2009), social relationships (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001), and consumer-brand relationships (Fournier 1998).

This study hopes to add new insights beyond these conceptual understandings, specifically, in

- How culture meanings (cultural manifestations) are expressed within these online brand communities, and
- How consumers exhibit brand loyalty or brand relationship within these online brand communities.

Finally, from an innovation diffusion perspective, many studies have been conducted to understand the consumers of high-technology products. In the field of consumer research, few studies have focused on these high-technology consumers (Mick and Fournier 1998; Kozinets 2008). Thus, this study examines consumers of the Apple iPhone brand, specifically, two online brand communities of this brand. It has been well documented that Apple's initial product, the Mac computer, has resulted in a consumer group fiercely loyal to this brand (Belk and Tumbat 2005) thus Apple iPhone consumers offer the possibility of a strong brand context for this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To date many scholars have proposed distinct differences between online communities and traditional offline based communities. First, online communities have no physical location constraint (Lin 2007); second, they are volitional rather than arbitrary (Wellman and Gulia 1999); third, they are less hierarchical and discriminatory (Barney 2004) and fourth, there are few barriers to accessing the community in any form that members may wish to adopt (Turtle 1995; Barney 2004). There are also scholars who have distinguished the online community as part of the real world community or a form of real world community (Kozinets 2010). They posit that people online are not virtual. These are real communities populated with real people. (Kozinets 2010). They offer "real languages, real meanings, real causes and real cultures" (Kozinets 2010, p. 15).

Most research to date on online communities focuses on the online communication aspect, however, some research on online communities also examines the consumer aspect, that is, the social networking behavior. One of the most commonly applied concepts in this aspect is the Social Capital Theory (Bourdieu 1985). It is widely applied in the study of social relations and social groups as it explains the basic logic of the social relations. Mathwisch, Wiertz and Ruyter (2007) adopted social capital theory as the foundation of their work and offered the rationale that

it could guide researchers to capture relevant community phenomenon effectively. Hung and Li (2007) also proposed that online communication is to be recognized as communication that develops social capital. This conceptual understanding offers an explanation of why networks can be found between individuals or social units. What an individual gets from the network, which is the source of social capital, is encouragement to share his or her knowledge, and as a result, this creates new intellectual capital (Hung and Li 2007). In other words, the individual's knowledge contribution has an impact on other's knowledge contribution in electronic networks (Wasko and Faraj 2005). This is the essence of the Social Capital Theory, that is, how social relations create value for consumers (Mathwich, Wiertz and Ruyter 2007).

Though there has been much investigation done on the role of online communities, little has been studied of online brand communities. Thus there is a need to examine in what ways online brand communities are different or similar to real world brand communities. For this study, online brand community represents "a community formed in cyberspace on the basis of attachment to commercial brands" (Sung, Kim, Kwon and Moon 2010, p. 432).

Within the real world context, extensive research has been conducted on brand communities. One important concept relevant to this study is the customer-centric community model proposed by McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002). Their study offered four relationships consumers may have with a brand community—product, brand, organization, and other consumers—and provides an effective means to understand the key elements of brand communities. Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2008) also conducted their study from this aspect and noted that consumers join the brand community with different purposes, which, in turn, determine their distances from or relationships with the brand. By distinguishing their motives for joining the community, different relationships they have with the community can be found. Consumers who want to get quality reassurance are identified as having the customer-company relationship in the community. Consumers who want to express their high involvement with the branded products are identified as having the customer-product relationship. In addition, consumers who aim to purchase the same products as others are identified as having the customer-customer relationship. Finally, consumers who want to enjoy the brand's symbolic meaning are identified as having the customer-brand relationship (Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder 2008).

These key conceptual underpinnings arising from studies examining online communities and real-world brand communities are adopted as focal conceptual guidelines for this study. Also this study attempts to understand online brand community from the consumer cultural aspect beyond these conceptual understandings. There is still a need to offer more relevant theoretical frameworks especially acknowledging that life style or online cultural manifestations also plays a key role in marketing goods, especially high technology goods, to consumers (Higgins and Shanklin 1992).

One can go still further and delve into specifics of online brand communities and explore the nature of different categories such as commercial and non-commercial (Leimeister, Sidiras and Krcmar 2004). Commercial communities are established by businesses and have also been known as market-generated or business initiated online brand communities (Jang, Olfman, Ko,

Koh and Kim 2008). Non-commercial communities usually portray consumers' power and can be defined as "operated or founded by consumers or a third-party for information exchange or relationship establishment" (Leimeister, Sidiras and Krcmar 2004, p. 398). These communities are also called consumer-generated or consumer-initiated brand communities (Sung, Kim, Kwon and Moon 2010; Jang, Olfman, Ko, Koh and Kim 2008).

This study hopes to offer additional insights through netnographic study to understand different types of online brand communities in terms of their culture meanings or culture manifestations and their relationship with the brand.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used netnography research methodology. "Netnography, or ethnography on the Internet, is a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of culture and communities emerging through computer-mediated communications." (Kozinets 2002, p. 2)

For this study, initial curiosity lay in the field of how consumers' culture manifests in different online sites. With these research curiosities in mind, extensive literature reviews were conducted. This helped to further refine research objectives and questions. With iPhone users as the chosen consumers, the next step was to locate a research site and thus online social sites that are central to iPhone. For this study, two online Apple iPhone brand communities: the business-affiliated online site (<http://www.apple.com/iphone/>) and the consumer-initiated online site (<http://www.everythingicafe.com/forum/>) were selected based on their large consumer data base and extensive postings. The first site is operated by "administrators" (Apple.com employees). The second site is a non-business affiliated site and at the time of this study, this website's online discussion board had 111,241 registered members. Natural conversations occurring on the two websites were explored for an extended duration.

The iPhone business-affiliated website is a typical case of a marketers or business developed online community. There are three main categories in the 'iPhone discussion' board: Using iPhone; iPhone Hardware; and iPhone in the Enterprise. Under each category, there are several specific topics (sub-categories). For example, under the category of iPhone Hardware, there are four sub-categories: iPhone 3GS; iPhone 3G; Original iPhone; and Bluetooth headset.

"Everythingicafe" is one of the consumer-initiated websites with a large data base (online postings) for iPhone users. Dynamic interactive postings are found on this site. There are ten main categories on the site. They are Apple iPhone; Apple Store; Apple iPhone software; Apple iPhone accessories; Modifications, desktop software; Connectivity; Wireless carrier; Everythingicafe; and Everything iPhone. Each of these main categories also have several sub-categories with extensive dialogue or postings.

The next challenge was in selecting relevant postings and compiling data sets for further analysis. In selecting the raw data to include, relevancy of the content was assessed based on elements such as the research objectives, research questions, researchers' observations,

understanding of the community and conceptual guidelines relevant for this study. This step was essential as the information available online is very broad in nature and there exists numerous paths that one can take.

Six data folders (see Table 1) encompassing twelve data sets were compiled and used for further analysis. Each folder contains a data set from the consumer-initiated site and a data set from the business-affiliated site. Both text and visual content were downloaded. Within these data sets, the longest duration of discussion threads was for two years and seven months and the highest number of responses to a single posting was found to be 1,072 responses.

Table 1
Data Folders

Data folders	Nature of content
Data folder one	Website structure and functions
Data folder two	iPhone application related postings
Data folder three	iPhone problem solving related postings
Data folder four	Brand and product related subjective postings
Data folder five	Postings relating to purchase intention of iPhone
Data folder six	Postings relating to brand loyalty (iPhone addictions)

Data analysis was conducted utilizing pattern matching approach and hermeneutic interpretations (Kozinets 2010). Ten criteria such as coherence, rigour, literacy and groundedness relevant to evaluate the netnographic research (Kozinets 2010) were applied.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Our findings suggest there are two different cultural manifestations in terms of online consumers in the business-affiliated community compared to the consumer-initiated community. First, participants of the consumer-initiated site added postings that are more emotionally charged in nature than participants of the business-affiliated site. (See Table 2).

Table 2
Sample Postings: The Product and the Level of Subjectivity

Online Sites/ Themes	Consumer-initiated site (Themes: Emotionally charged)	Business-affiliated site (Themes: Objective)
Emotionally charged vs. objective natural conversations (extracted from online postings relating to the product iPhone 3GS and iPhone	<p>“I’d say that I’m REALLY happy with the Iphone and have yet to become bored with it. I use it every day and still love it to death” (Source: ID Shh)</p> <p>“I get extremely nervous when my phone is not within arm’s reach” (Source: ID Pss)</p> <p>“I’m the same way. If I forget to take my iPhone with me to the store or whatever, I feel nervous for some reason.</p>	<p>“its very nice phone + palm top, loved the applications” (Source: ID Yuu)</p> <p>“the battery last to the night, it’s okey by me.” (Source: ID Sll)</p>

4)	<p>Incomplete. Weird, huh” (Source: ID Hoo)</p> <p>“I’m also addicted to that beautiful gadget/mobile piece!” “the iPhone has become an indispensable tool for me as well.” (Source: ID Vss)</p>	
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Frequently, they tend to portray strong emotions toward the brand based on their subjective perceptions. Emotionally charged terms such as “in a heart beat,” “love you to death,” and “silly” were found often in their postings. In contrast to this, objective and factual opinions about the brand and product were found on the business-affiliated site.

Secondly, the consumer-initiated site revealed participants have a personal level of engagement with the products. Examples can also be seen through postings where participants shared numerous photos taken by iPhone cameras where some of the photos contain intimate information of their personal lives. In contrast, participants on the business-affiliated site positioned themselves more as just customers or users of iPhone. These participants expressed high expectations of the iPhone camera and believe that responsibility for the product solely lies on iPhone manufacturers. Table 3 show some examples of findings.

Table 3
Sample Postings: Specific Product Attributes and the Engagement Style

Online Sites/ Themes	Consumer-initiated site (Personalized style)	Business-affiliated site (Technical style)
Personalized vs. technical oriented engagement styles (extracted from online postings relating to the topic ‘using the iPhone camera’)	<p>“damn that picture looks so good. such attention to detail its just incredible how nice the new iphone is!” (Source: ID Raa)</p> <p>“it seems the optics are better with not only the focusing, but the white balance, brightness, contrast, saturation, etc. are improved.” (Source: ID Zrr)</p> <p>“That, my friend, is an incredible shot! Looks like the new camera is a winner” (Source: ID Dcc).</p>	<p>“Apple - please give us a few manual override presets we can activate with a single touch when needed, or better still an exposure slide, it would increase the usefulness of the camera”. (Source: ID Maa)</p> <p>“Hurry up, Apple, let's fix this nonsense” (Source: ID Drr)</p>

Thirdly, in terms of relationship to brand, on the consumer-initiated site, participants showed strong support for and dedication towards the Apple iPhone. No strong evidence was found on the business-affiliated site. On the consumer-initiated site, postings illustrating strong emotional connections to the product and the brand are also found. For example, one participant stated that “I would definitely buy again in a heartbeat.” They also showed a strong bias against iPhone haters. One participant said “people just look for an excuse to hate something or someone,” which clearly classified iPhone haters’ behaviour as an irrational dislike. This reveals the

community member’s attitude that the stance of iPhone haters was unreasonable. In contrast, the evidence of strong connectivity with the brand is hardly found on the business-affiliated site. Table 4 show some examples of findings.

Table 4
Sample Postings: Relationships to the Brand

Online Sites/ Themes	Consumer-initiated site (Strong link to the brand)	Business-affiliated site
Strong support vs. non-existence of relationship to the brand related postings (illustrations are extracted from online postings relating to attachment of iPhones and rebuttal against iPhone haters)	<p>“I would buy it again for sure. I’ll probably end up buying [iPhone] . . . whatever comes down the pipe later on in life.” (Source: ID Woo)</p> <p>“if they (iPhone haters) stepped back and looked at all of this objectively, they would see that its popularity is justified.” (Source: ID Euu)</p>	

In brief, these findings offer additional insights through understanding different types of online brand communities in terms of their differences in portraying online culture meanings or cultural manifestations and their relationship with the high-technology brand.

DISCUSSIONS

Even though it may seem a simple marketing concept, building online brand communities that resonate with loyal customers has important implications in marketing. The findings indicated that different manifestations of sources of social capital, learning processes and behavioral outcomes (Hung and Li 2007; Wasko and Faraj 2005; Wiertz and Ruyter 2007) are in existence. In brief, our findings lead to two crucial themes, a powerful relationship among community members and the relative benefits of communities.

First, our findings suggest distinct differences in the relationships among community members and their relationship to the Apple iPhone in the consumer-initiated online brand community compared to the business-affiliated online community. The community members on the consumer-initiated brand community expressed their sympathy and trust of other members, closely sharing their experience and enthusiasm for the iPhone or Apple brand. The value of social capital creation (Hung and Li 2007) is strong in this site. Emotional commitments (Schau et al. 2009; Fournier 1998) and brand symbolic meanings (McAlexander et al. 2002; Ouwensloot and Odekerken-Schroder 2008) were strongly manifested in the consumer-initiated site. In addition to this, members of the iPhone brand community feel a strong sense of expressing their personality by embracing iPhone. Members of the iPhone consumer-initiated brand community have become part of that community because of their desire to be identified as part of the global “cool” segment that is in tune with the latest in technology and fashion. Consumer to consumer relationships and consumer to brand relationships seem to be stronger for this community

(Ouwensloot and Odekerken-Schroder 2008). Thus, our finding has important implications for market segmentation for company success. Companies should pay close attention to build communities around their brands that are in line with the market segments that it wants to target.

Secondly, our findings indicate that relative benefit or outcomes of the consumer-initiated community were different from those of the business-affiliated site. Brand passion (Fuller, Matzler, and Hoppe 2008), brand loyalties (Aaker 1991) and the nature of religiosity (Muniz and Schau 2005) relevant to the Apple community exist at some level on the consumer-initiated site. By contrast, the business-affiliated site focuses on helping consumers share their experience about the product features and suggest improvements. This indicates the strong relationship between consumers and the company as well as consumers and the product (Ouwensloot and Odekerken-Schroder 2008) which leads to creating a unique culture where community members offer companies like Apple real time feedback about the product. Thus, online communities have important implications for marketing managers in all phases of value creation including product design, pricing, places of availability, and phases of promotion. This type of dynamic environment would allow consumers to experience the product and the brand in a memorable manner as they take part in the value creation process. Thus, sites such as these support marketers in reaching consumers in a cost-effective way and work on the innovative aspect of the product. Another important implication for marketing managers as our findings suggests is that brands must “Create a need for collaboration among consumers”.

In conclusion, the evidence suggests the existence of different relationship intensities and distinctive cultural manifestations in these two online communities as identified by Leimeister, Sidiras and Kremer (2004). Thus, this study offers insights into the different forms of consumers’ online culture and enriches the conceptual understanding of brand communities. It reiterates the need to further understand different forms of online communities. Findings contribute towards understanding consumers of high technology brands, the area where few studies have been conducted to date (Mick and Fournier 1998; Kozinets 2008). Online communities are not only appropriate research contexts for scholars in analyzing consumer behaviour in exchange of information and peer-to-peer problem solving, but also for its importance of commercial potential, thus considerable attentions from marketing management professionals are also crucial.

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