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Extended Consumer-Brand Relationship Theory

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ABSTRACT

This study examines online communities for two top brands: Apple iPhone and Blackberry smart phones. A number of online brand communities (online forums) such as the iPhone business-affiliated website www.apple.com, iPhone consumers' website www.everythingicafe.com, and the Blackberry consumers' websites www.blackberry.com and www.crackberry.com were explored. This research extends the conceptual underpinnings of the existing consumer-brand relationship theory by incorporating the concept of sharing. This study offers insights for academia in the marketing and consumer behavior field as well as professionals in the high-technology industry.

INTRODUCTION

Few studies have been undertaken by consumer behavior scholars to extend the consumer-brand relationship concept. To date, concepts such as consumer-brand relationship theory (Fournier 1998) and a customer-centric model of brand community (McAlexander, Schouten and Konieg 2002) have been proposed and applied to understand consumer behavior of brand communities. Existing studies on brand communities have focused mainly on the consumer-brand relationship within a real-world brand community (Fournier 1998; McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig 2002) and a web-enhanced real-world brand community (Sung, Kim, Kwon and Moon 2010). This study aims to extend the consumer-brand relationship conceptual underpinning as well as to bring in the role of online brand communities that have not been explored to any extent in brand community research.

Sicilia and Palazon (2008) define virtual or online brand community as 'a group of individuals with common interests in a brand who communicate with each other electronically in a platform provided by the company which supports the brand" (p. 257). It is also possible that the consumers who support the brand provide this platform. Thus, for this study, an online brand community is defined as 'a community formed in cyberspace on the basis of attachment to commercial brands' (Sung, Kim, Kwon and Moon 2010, p. 432). These online brand communities can be consumer-initiated (created by consumers) and business-affiliated (created by businesses). This study examines smart phones online-communities of two top brands: Apple iPhone and Blackberry. The research questions are:-

- What does an 'online brand community' mean to consumers of high-technology brands

- How do consumers of high-technology brands create and strengthen their relationships within their online brand communities

RELATIONSHIP TO EXISTING RESEARCH AND LITERATURE

Traditional models of the consumer-brand relationship highlight only the customer and the brand. Consumer-brand relationship theory, however, proposed the four key elements: the affective, cognitive, behavioral and social elements underlying consumer behavior within the brand consumption context (Fournier 1998). Thus, the importance of exploring the meaning of relationships from a psycho-socio-cultural context is documented. Relationships have also been recognized as dynamic multiplex phenomena.

This understanding has been complemented by the brand community concept (Muniz and O'Guine 2001) which proposed three crucial elements; shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility relating to brand consumption behaviour. Thus, the importance of social and cultural elements was reiterated in their study. Following on that, the customer-centric model of brand community (McAlexander, Schouten and Konieg 2002) extended the understanding further by reflecting the complexity of brand communities. This extended framework encompasses not only consumers but also additional key players and their relationships. These relationships include those the customer has with other consumers, with the brand, with the product and with marketers (McAlexander, Schouten and Konieg 2002). Studies have applied these conceptual guidelines to understand consumers within their brand community context.

Traditionally, brand communities have been examined within the real world context. In today's marketplace, one needs to reflect also on the communities that exist in the online environment. Rheingold (1993) defines virtual or online community as 'a group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks' (Rheingold 1993, p. 6). Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002) also define a virtual community as 'mediated social spaces in the digital environment that allow groups to form and to be sustained primarily through ongoing communication processes" (p. 3). Scholars have also acknowledged that members of virtual or online communities also tend to form personal relationships (Rheingold 1993). Many studies have been conducted with this underlying assumption that online communities existed just for the purpose of task-oriented information sharing activities. Kozinets (2010), however, extended this understanding by proposing that all these exchanges overtime could lead to the characteristics of socially constructed environment. This environment could offer sense of identity and real social benefits to its community members.

Understanding the formation of personal relationships, specifically those between consumers are a crucial area for marketers. Academic studies have been conducted within the context of gift giving to understand sharing behavior and the formation of relationships between consumers. This sharing behavior of consumers also has been examined in the context of commodity exchange in the marketplace. Belk (2009) has extended and proposed sharing as a critical concept to understand consumer behavior in social and market settings. Dimensions of sharing

were outlined as possessiveness and attachment to possessions, independence and interdependence natures, and privacy. The level of possessiveness and attachment to possessions can have reverse relationship to the construct of sharing. Another dimension that can strongly oppose to sharing is non-generosity and that seems to exist in materialistic societies. Thus independence can be strongly related to less sharing tendencies. On the other hand cultures that exhibit interdependence nature seems to possess many sharing rituals. Privacy is also another element that can discourage sharing behavior.

It is also possible to extend this conceptual underpinning to the area of online communities. It has been widely accepted that online communities are the arenas for community members to share experiences, to exchange information, to seek for advise and help from each other and to support each other. One can easily observe these behaviors within online sites such as the YouTube, Facebook, Flicker, and Google environments. It also exists in the online brand communities or online consumers forums. A few academic studies have been conducted to understand this sharing concept in online environments. Giesler (2006) examined consumer gift giving within the context of Nepster. Similarly Hemetsberger (2006) studied online consumers to understand the meaning of sharing concepts within and beyond offline arenas. Within the context of online or offline brand community, sharing could offer collaborative ownership of the brand (David 2005). In a sense it is a sharing without loosing the ownership of the brand (Belk 2007). Thus, the intent of 'sharing in' is to extend the group of people enjoying the shared benefits of the brand (Belk 2007). It is to be seen as beyond the benefits of monetary gain.

The intent of this current study is to examine consumers of high-technology brands and to focus on online brand communities. Specifically, how consumers in these online brand communities connect to each other through their informational sharing behavior and social exchange behavior and how consumer behavior scholars and marketers can capitalize from these understandings are explored.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This study proposes to extend the conceptual understandings of consumer-brand relationship theory through a grounded approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The intent of utilizing the grounded approach is to construct conceptual understandings based upon the data collected from the field. In this sense the phenomenon explained would be grounded in the data and explanation would be derived from the data. For this study, the research context is the brand communities of Apple iPhone and Blackberry smart phone consumers in their online environments over a time frame of two years.

Phase one involved conducting netnography (Kozinets 2010) on online communities. This method is appropriate for this study as 'Netnography, or ethnography on the Internet, is a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of cultures and communities emerging through computer-mediated communications' (Kozinets 2002, p. 2). A number of related online brand communities (online forums) were explored. For this study, the iPhone business-affiliated website www.apple.com, the iPhone consumers' website www.everythingicafe.com, and the Blackberry consumers' websites

www.blackberry.com and www.crackberry.com were chosen because of the extensive nature of consumers' postings as well as their public setting. These postings can be explored and downloaded by any person, as no password is required to access these forums.

After exploring extensively, relevant data from these consumers' forums were compiled into a total of 80 data sets, that is, on average of 20 data sets for each forums or websites. Researchers' observations, nature of the community (such as the organization of discussion forums, the number of active members, the number of postings, and the benefits that are offered in those postings) and relevant conceptual underpinnings (such as concepts of brand community, consumer-brand relationship and sharing) were applied as guidelines in selecting the raw data as chosen data sets. These data sets comprised of consumers' postings regarding information about brand, product, consumers, and competitors, as well as social exchange among themselves. Examples of downloaded data threads are; 'does anyone know how to get into iPhone 4', 'iPhone in London', 'iPhone camera comparison', 'iPhone 4 bluetooth issues', 'I love Apple', 'blackberry world parties', 'BB world 2012', 'why wasn't my OS update?', 'customer-made themes corner', 'Will BB keepup?' and 'new blackberry'. Netnographic research criteria including coherence, rigour, literacy, groundedness, innovation, resonance, verisimilitude, and reflexivity praxis as proposed by Kozinets (2010) were followed. For example, the criteria 'coherence' was met by having researchers' interpretations based upon a united pattern and not restricted by any internal contradictions. However, the intermix criterion (Kozinets 2010) was not fulfilled in this study. For example, other modes of social interaction such as members' offline experiences were not included in this study.

In phase two, content analysis was conducted on these data sets. Natural conversations (postings of product-brand-related information and social exchange) from these forums were examined. Conceptual guidelines as well as data driven guidelines were applied in searching for consistent patterns and themes. For example, discussions relating to competing brands were found to be rich in discussion threads and thus these were initially coded under one specific category 'competing brands' and similarities and differences within this category between websites were examined. The constant comparative approach (Miles and Huberman 1984) was applied over time to the data sets. NVivo (version 9) qualitative data analysis software was used, as it is suitable for analyzing rich text-based and multimedia information where a deep level of analysis is required.

FINDINGS

This section presented findings or inductive categories derived from the data. In brief, this study found various sharing and relationship building behaviors by smart phone consumers within the context of online brand communities. These findings are categorized as within-brand sharing and relationship building behavior (such as postings relating to emotional and informational sharing behavior of a particular brand) and beyond-brand sharing and relationship building behavior (such as postings relating to competitors, postings of loyal consumers of competing brands). Some illustrations are offered here.

Within-Brand Sharing and Relationship Building Behavior

Within-brand sharing and relationship building behavior is found to be two dimensional in nature. Community members used emotional language and emoticons in expressing their positive feelings under various contexts. This can be in an informal way to connect to each other socially. It can also be within the context of information sharing and offering appreciation of having one's problem solved.

This study found that members of iPhone online-communities and Blackberry online-communities participate in a subjective, emotion-laden supportive environment. Examples of words expressing this can be simple; 'brilliant!', 'this helped a lot!' 'Hey, someone misses me!!!! Hehehe'. Many emoticons were used in expressing their emotions such as 'I agree! 😐'. Postings also included positive comments towards the brand. Examples are 'Apple the best', 'many of us are happy with Apple', 'for me personally BB is better', 'I am crack berry addict' and 'my perfect device would be a Blackberry phone.'

Some postings are much more comprehensive in nature.

> "Apple cares about its reputation much like any respectable person in life. They also deeply care about the consumer and how they're perceived making them go the extra mile to maintain what Apple is all about. Its a consumer company that in touch with us consumers. Other companies can't even come close to this."

> "I deal with lots of text daily – emails. I like to copy and paste lost of data around on the device. I drop it a lot, but it holds up fine. I would hate charging the battery during the day. I do not use a lot of media on a phone, and what media I do use I find the Bb handles just fine."

There are also many postings that relate to building social rapport. An example below indicated brand community members connecting to each other as friends on a first name basis as well as revealing their personal preferences within the context of morning rituals.

> "Morning Chris and Sharunda. Man, I used to be a big coffee guy. Now I have may be one cup of decaf around every two weeks – usually when I take my daughter to Starbucks to feed her 'Blueberry Scone addiction'."

> I drink water and pomegranate green tea now. And honestly I feel great in the mornings – up early taking kiddo to school, taking enormous dog on a long walk – don't really miss caffeine at all."

These positive sharing and relationship building behaviors come in many different forms and contexts, from totally personal to a mixture of personal and brand consumption contexts. One example is a discussion thread, 'blackberry world parties' and comprised of postings relating to an event 'blackberry world' and its participants interactions. Another example is a discussion thread titled 'Clean chat CB BBM group' where informal conversations among consumers are posted.

In addition to this positive sharing and relationship building behavior in a societal context, it was found that both brand members of iPhone and Blackberry smart phone online-communities were engaged in a very informative and a very supportive way. Many requests for information and help were responded in a very thorough and timely manner and appreciative responses were posted as well. The following example from an iPhone brand community illustrates this.

> "Wow. So here's what I've done thanks to all the cool people on the board: 1) setup the toggles I liked and put them into a folder (thanks Mindi) 2) put the folder in the dock so it's always there (thanks Bennyboy) 3) put "System manager for memory …") into the folder. (Which was free, thanks RoofMonkey)"

> "I now have a folder that let me toogle, view my memory and app usage, and kill all tasks (using "System …") thanks Willsrx"

> "This place rocks."

Many similar postings of this nature were found across all online brand communities examined in this study. Community members were found to help each other as well as show appreciation in an informal way – communicate on a first names basis, which indicates a close-knit community.

Beyond-Brand Sharing and Relationship Building Behavior

Of course it must be acknowledged that much beyond-brand content (such as postings relating to competitors, postings by loyal consumers of competing brands) existed within these brand loyal online communities. These can be received by other members in a manner reflective of the spectrum from totally supportive to totally confrontational. One of those contexts is extracted from the iPhone brand community online postings as an illustration.

In this context, member TH55 posted a question implying negativity towards the brand. Other members responded to this question, initially, in friendly manners. However, TH55 was persistent that his question has not been addressed. One of the member 'Hawk' thus responded this time in a negative way.

> "He wants proof that it's not him but the phone. What I have been pointing out is that there are multiple ways to cause the issues he describes, and if you are not paying attention, then it will seem like the phone randomly capitalized a letter out of nowhere. Not if he had a video that shows the problem, and shows his fingers typing, then we would have a better idea of what is going on. Someone would need to be right over his shoulder with the video camera."

Other responses to TH55 followed:

"I'm getting the feeling that no answer will suffice? What is the ideal answer for you th55?" (Rugaby)

"Sucks … I go out of my way to help you and this is how you answer?" (Bennyboy)

"Why even bother dude? WHY even bother??? 😨" (RoofMonkey)

Even in this confrontational context, one can perceive that there still exists the spirit of community. Many community members joined together to reiterate the unacceptable behavior (postings) of TH55 and to support those who had tried to address the questions posed by TH55.

Similar contexts also existed in Blackberry online communities. One example can be seen below. In this instance, Xandermac, a radical member of the community posted 'the open letter to Rim management'. It is apparent that he has strong feelings but also that he is not just attacking the community with non-constructional criticism. He goes the extra mile to support his claims about the failure of the Blackberry Company. Many responded agreeing with this open letter.

BB-bandit responded:-

"Sounds like a company in a death spiral. Good time to buy RIM stock...😆"

"Honestly, sad to see a company with so much promise go by the wayside. Sounds like developers won't be building many apps for RIM. As I said before the next few quarters are going to be very bad for RIM as they release more and more underwhelming handsets. Apple will ring the death knell for RIM in the coming months. 😞"

Takeo responded:-

"btw...one of the things Apple (Steve Jobs) always connected to success: The working place and atmosphere. Pixar has like total freedom for employees to design their working place. Apple has a dedicated campus with everything to make life convenient - and a place where everyone meets in the middle of the building...Sounds like RIM is not even going to need to fire people - they're going to run... to Apple, Microsoft or Google..."
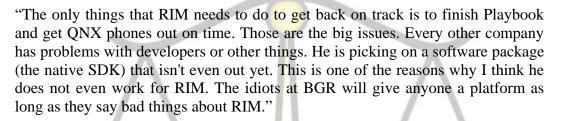
Many also defended RIM.

Lawguyman responded:-

"RIM's big mistake was not reacting swiftly enough to iPhone. RIM made a lot of other great decisions and had great earnings up until like two quarters ago. QNX is a good move, even if it should have been done earlier. This guy needs to spend less time writing letters to BGR and more time writing code. What a tool."

Siausin posted:-

> "I agree the points made by the employee..but hindsight is a wonderful thing. also, i think all the doom and gloom scenario is over exaggerating. Rim is hurt, but it is not in bad shape. it recognized its issues and is addressing them."

Shortscores posted:-

> "Almost sounds like the author of that letter was one of the folks who were already fired."

Lawguyman defended again:-

> "The only things that RIM needs to do to get back on track is to finish Playbook and get QNX phones out on time. Those are the big issues. Every other company has problems with developers or other things. He is picking on a software package (the native SDK) that isn't even out yet. This is one of the reasons why I think he does not even work for RIM. The idiots at BGR will give anyone a platform as long as they say bad things about RIM."

The above postings illustrate the complexity of sharing and relationships building behavior with highlights on the impact of and connectivity to competing brands. These postings contain sharing of positive as well as negative connotations. It is also interesting to note that by having similar negative connotations, these brand community members share their passion of defending their brand and members of their own community.

DISCUSSIONS

This study examined two online communities of iPhone consumers and two online communities of Blackberry smart phone consumers. Findings indicated that sharing in numerous ways ultimately strengthens the dialogue and bonding between members of these communities. Findings also indicated the impact of competing brands. In a simplistic manner, this study indicates that sharing and relationship building behavior can occur within-brand environment (focus on one brand) and beyond-brand environment (encompassing competing brands).

Evidence from the within-brand environment, indicates that brand loyal consumers can share relevant information, advice, and challenging issues relating to one specific brand. Within iPhone online communities, a lot of postings relevant to various iPhone products, product features, and brand related issues became elements for sharing among brand loyal consumers. These postings are not just information sharing but also indicate critical thinking such as debating the implications of product features and product trends. Similar cultural manifestations exist in Blackberry smart phone online communities as well. These indicate the foundation for building a strong consciousness of kind and make members feel proud of their brand (Muniz and O'Guin 2001). In addition, social dialogue exists which strengthens social connections within

these online brand communities or online consumer forums. These types of postings show members having fun with the idea of being an active brand loyal member, a distinctive attribute that separates the true members from the phonies. These findings are also indication of similarities between online and offline brand communities. Specifically, these findings in some ways replicate the findings from the study of brand communities of McAlexander, Schouton and Konieg (2002). Evidence from this study offers the connectivity between consumers, consumers and the brand, consumers and the product and consumers with marketers as in real-world brand communities.

This study also extends the sharing concept (Belk 2009) with evidence found from the four online brand communities. Characteristics of sharing such as personal, love, caring, and exchange were found to be abundant in these online brand communities. In addition, this study found that sharing and relationship building can occur not only within but also beyond the brand supportive environment. It is particularly interesting to find evidence of elements beyond those such as utilitarian and possessive dimensions as proposed by Belk (2009).

This study found that competitors also play a key role in terms of building relationships in brand communities. Interestingly, this study found that online brand communities are open to all smart phone consumers in the sense that anyone can join and participate in the sharing activities of its members. Evidence showed current brand loyal consumers, past brand loyal consumers as well as consumers who are not at all receptive to a particular brand all share information and social activities in these online communities. Evidence also suggests having critical and opposing views seem to strengthen the relationship of brand loyal consumers. Specifically, different types of sharing whether positive in nature (supportive of the brand) or negative in nature (against the brand) seem to strengthen the connectivity of the members of a particular online brand community. These types of postings also provoked many discussions from the members regarding freedom of expression and the integrity of a consumer based forum. It is recognized that socially responsible postings indicate the integrity of online communities.

Thus, consumers' experiences captured through this research study extends the existing consumer-brand relationship theory by incorporating not only existing multiple dimensions such as relationships with other consumers, with the product, with marketers, but also additional dimension of relationships with competing brands. The relevancy of the concept of sharing has also been incorporated in this study.

This study also offers insights for professionals in the high-technology industry. From the managerial perspective, information from these forums could help companies to access the desires of their consumers with the possibility to respond with upgrades on their future models. Also by understanding how consumers form relationship in these online brand communities, marketers can develop strategies to connect and to build long-term relationship with its own loyal consumers. Postings in these forums include past brand loyal consumers as well as consumers who are not at all receptive to a particular brand and thus offer some insights to all consumers in this smart phone marketplace.

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