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Elizabeth Whalen
University of Houston

John T. Bowen
University of Houston

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Engaging the Customer: The Impacts of Online Travel Community Engagement on Brand Identification and Behavioral Intentions

Introduction

Unlike other forms of communication about products and brands, consumption based communities influence their members, and potentially non-members, in deeper and more powerful ways than surface communications. Past research has shown that reference groups have more influence on the buyer decision process than do pieces of information out of range of this group of trusted advisors. A community expands that reference group to include the power of membership, belonging, size, similarity, and identification. The history of brand community research unequivocally demonstrates the impact these communities have on decision making behaviors including purchase intentions, repurchase intentions, word of mouth intentions, (Hur, Ahn, & Kim, 2011; Chan et al., 2014; Raies, Muhlbacher, & Gavard-Perret, 2015; Mahrous & Abdelmaaboud, 2016; Cheung, Lee, & Jin, 2011), cross over buying (Kim, Choi, Qualls, & Han, 2008), brand attachment, brand commitment, brand identification (Zhang, Zhou, Su, & Zhou, 2012; Zhang, Zhou, Su, & Zhou, 2013), brand trust, brand satisfaction (Lee & Jeong, 2014), brand loyalty (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Madupu & Cooley, 2010; Matzler, Pichler, Fuller, Mooradian, 2011; Laroche, Habibbi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012; Marzocchi, Morandin, & Bergami, 2013; Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2015), brand use (customizing, grooming, commoditizing) (Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009), and brand equity (Wirtz et al., 2013).

Despite the understanding of the high levels of influence online communities exert on consumer decision making, the means for understanding the inner workings of communities and sustaining them long term remains complex and uncertain. Online consumption communities provide opportunities for social engagements targeting conversations about products and services in which individuals' actions within the community have the potential to influence consumer behavior (Zaglia, 2013). These communities offer an outlet for generating peer to peer trust, building relationships, giving and receiving recommendations and word of mouth behaviors, and sharing information and experiences (Sloan, Bodey, & Gyrd-Jones, 2015; Teichmann, Stokburger-Sauer, Plank, & Strobl, 2015). According to extant research, these groups effect decision making processes, however they remain an enigma (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013) and require further investigation (Germonprez & Hovorka, 2013; Weijo, Hietanen, & Mattila, 2014) because their potential has not yet been fully realized (Kovoura, 2014).

Understanding the impact of online communities on the hospitality and tourism industry is a crucial area that is still not fully understood. As travel and tourism destinations are highly complex and require travelers to plan thoroughly in order to best enjoy their travels and hopefully minimize travel risks, consumers are turning to alternative sources of information due to availability and preference for online mediums. For example, families from around the world travel to Orlando, Florida every year in increasing numbers (Dineen, 2016). The complexity of necessary decisions and choices, even if a family is only visiting Disney World, includes selecting a hotel from one of over 400 locations in Orlando (VisitOrlando, 2017) and 25 resorts on Disney property alone; the option to make restaurant reservations 180 days out at over 100 different eating options in 4 theme parks, 2 water parks, a main shopping and entertainment center, and the numerous resorts; entertainment options beyond the parks including boating, horseback riding, golfing, and miniature

golf; FastPass selections up to 60 days out for a multitude of attractions throughout the parks; as well as many other planning options like transportation, dining plans, vacation packages, etc. The complexity of an Orlando vacation lends itself to a wide variety of online communities for the purposes of sharing information, not only for new users, but also Disney veterans who visit Orlando frequently. This complexity has also created fan groups who discuss different plans, tips, tricks, and experiences for not only giving and taking information, but also for sharing mutual love of Orlando vacations. The influence and impact of travel and hospitality communities is increasing as online communities gain relevance as valuable planning and communication tools for both utilitarian and hedonic purposes.

Part of the story of understanding consumption communities is understanding how individuals choose to engage and interact to the point of membership for lengthened periods of time. Community engagement and co-creation are integral elements of long-lasting, healthy brand communities and, ultimately, increased brand equity and loyalty (Dessart et al., 2015). Fiedler and Sarstedt (2014) cite network theory to suggest that online communities require significant numbers of active members who generate content and recruit new members in order to have long-term success. In fact, Madupu and Cooley (2010) claim that active member participation is the most important quality of brand communities. While Lee, Reid, and Kim (2012) comment that most communities fail to grow to their full potential due the lack of participation since most visitors lurk rather than contribute content or engage in the community in more active ways. This research evaluates manners of member engagement within a community by examining how frequently individuals attend the community, how recent their engagement occurred, the length of overall membership, and the level and manner of activity within the community. The theories that will be used as the foundation for this research include brand identification, theory of planned behavior, theory of belongingness, the RFM analysis, and co-creation of value. This research will also investigate the characteristics that lead to strong behavioral intentions towards both the community and the brand by comparing levels of commitment and identification to the types of community engagement.

Literature Review

Researchers have long recognized the impact of brand communities on member perceptions and actions (Matzler, Pichler, Fuller, & Mooradian, 2011). Brand community members influence not only other community members, but also other consumers through their communication efforts (Matzner et al., 2011). Personal branding through product consumption and self-advertisement, such as wearing logo-d t-shirts or driving specific cars, are indicative of these kinds of branding communities. Interactions have changed, however, through online platforms. The use of online mediums for brand engagement gives consumers increased influential power over the brand identity due to the ability for consumers to directly connect and communicate with other consumers globally (Sloan et al., 2015). The act of personal identification is no longer a physical attribute understood by those in close proximity, but instead a virtual representation across wide spans of space that communicate potentially deeper attributes and understandings of self and preference. Those that seek out information may find the community and the individuals represented within, not through the visual and oral acknowledgement of traditional brand communities, but through the interactive exchange of communication and search in online realms.

Like off line communities, online communities are complex societies with rules, social norms, governance, and membership. Within these communities, members develop collaborative work, discuss attitudes, practices, behaviors, and judgement, actively exchange knowledge (Germonprez & Hovorka, 2013), and co-create value both between consumer-to-consumer and consumer-to-organization relationships (Brodie et al., 2013). As online communities evolve, they often mix consumer culture with more personal artifacts resulting in complexities that are important to understand and investigate. Defining online consumption communities solely by the topic, brand, or destination of interest limits the understanding of these complex societies and lacks insight into the diversity within these groups (Weijo et al., 2014). There are many different kinds of online communities that impact consumer decision making practices, and most research has focused solely on brand based communities. As hospitality and tourism purchases are complex conglomerations of service products, the representative communities will also characterize a more comprehensive community, meaning that brand communities are only a small part of the hospitality and tourism industry's consumption process.

The lack of sufficient empirical knowledge may be a result of the inherently difficult task of understanding these complex systems. Germonprez and Hovorka (2013) assert that these communities are not "socio-technical artifacts", but instead are societies co-created by "content-contributing" and "content-consuming" members that are characterized by "evolutionary, member-designed trajectories" (p. 526). They further explain that with the complexity of these systems, challenges in research are recognized due to the "intertwining and cocreation of the supporting system with the member-designed practices, norms and values that foster belonging, friendships, debate, and understanding" (Germonprez & Hovorka, 2013, p. 526). In order to fully comprehend the impact of online communities on decision making processes, researchers must first understand the structure, formation, and continuation of the online community itself. Creative and immersive research methodologies along with deep understanding of community functions will result in an understanding of the richer impacts that community membership provides and the influences of individual and group interactions within online communities on consumer decisions.

Despite the recognition of these important cultural units, researchers have only started to understand these complex societies. De Valck, van Bruggen, and Wierenga (2009) investigated the impacts of social media on consumer decision making and found that online communities play a large role in decision making, yet they explain that there is still not enough empirical evidence to draw concrete conclusions, a sentiment mirrored by Janzik and Raasch (2011) and Heinonen (2011). They further stress the importance of understanding online communities as an opportunity for marketers, managers, and researchers. Other marketing researchers have also started to investigate these communities as sources of consumer information (Bilgihan et al., 2016; Brodie et al., 2013; Camiciottoli, Ranfagni, & Guercini, 2014; Heinonen, 2011; Janzik & Raasch, 2011; Kavoura, 2014; Noble, Noble, & Adjei, 2012; Weijo, Hietanen, & Mattila, 2014; Xun & Reynolds, 2010; Zaglia, 2013), but the results are not yet conclusive, and there is little understanding of these communities from the perspective of experience based services and products like those of the hospitality and tourism industry.

Methodology

Current definitions of engagement remain inconsistent. While some definitions focus on the psychological process, other definitions focus on the behavioral components. Furthermore, the dimensions for measuring engagement remain variable, especially given the more common practice of theory building through conceptualization rather than empirical testing (Dessart, Veloutsou, & Morgan-Thomas, 2015). For example, Chan et al. (2014) defined customer engagement as the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral presence in online interactions within the community. They further express the belief that engagement goes beyond attitude and is attached to member role perceptions and performance. Through time, members may feel emotionally obligated to the community and are more likely to become engaged cognitively, emotionally, and physically (Chan et al., 2014). The multi-dimensionality of customer engagement is discussed, yet not tested within the model which focuses on antecedents and consequences and leaves engagement untouched. While Dessart et al. (2015) found that the most commonly used and accepted conceptualization of engagement included a three-dimensional definition including cognitive, affective, and behavioral commitment to an active relationship with the object, brand, or community after reviewing 33 engagement based papers, both conceptually and empirically based. Due to the lack of consistency in the measurement of engagement, the first step of this research will be to create a scale to measure the dimensions of engagement.

Once the engagement scale is developed and tested, it will be used to evaluate current and past online community engagement through question priming, although it is understood that there will be common method bias due to the lack of longitudinal nature of the study. In addition to questions of engagement with the community, individuals will be given survey items to measure brand identification, community commitment, and brand intentions in order to assess the degree of community engagement's impact on the outcome variables of identification, commitment, and intentions.

As a representation of a dual purpose (hedonic and utilitarian) travel based community with longevity and a diverse impact on travelers to the Orlando area, the DIS will be used for the sample. Members will be asked to participate by answering a survey provided through the forums as allowed by the organization owners. The data will be analyzed using regression and mediation analysis. The expected results will show relationships between dimensions of engagement and behavioral intentions not only towards the online community, but also towards hospitality and tourism products and experiences. Additionally, brand identification will be measured in order to determine if increased online community engagement leads to greater levels of identification with the brand.

Theoretically, this research provides a foundation for measuring engagement by creating a comprehensive engagement scale for future measurements. It will also examine the interaction between engagement and brand identification as a possible antecedent to behavioral intentions, both in continued community interaction and future purchase intentions. The practical implications allow hospitality and tourism organizations to better engage with potential community members in order to increase brand loyalty and advocacy, intentions to purchase, word of mouth behaviors, relationship marketing, and to expand brand culture, destination image, and knowledge through member engagement.

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