Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

Executive summary of “Antecedents of brand love in online network-based communities. A social identity perspective”

This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of the article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present.

The emergence of Web 2.0 technologies has facilitated the explosion of online networks and communities. Social media platforms enable geographically-dispersed individuals to connect and create associations based on shared interests and knowledge.

From a marketing viewpoint, particularly significant is the development of such connections based on a brand. The proliferation of brand pages on platforms like Facebook and Twitter is testimony to this phenomenon. Different degrees of consumer engagement occur within online brand communities. Consumers are able to engage in discussions about the brand, exchange information and make purchases.

Research has identified various types of engagement. Social media's growing influence means that consumer engagement is seen as especially important. It is labeled in this context as “social consumer engagement” and can incorporate “cognitive, affective and behavioral” dimensions. The literature notes the role of different experiences a consumer enjoys in online interactive settings and the term “experiential engagement” has been used by some scholars. Personal engagement and social-interactive engagement are identified as its two components, with the latter referring to the consumer's various online experiences and interactions with other users. According to some analysts, people gain considerable value from participating in community activities. The social functions of a network are thus regarded as key to generating such value.

Online brand communities provide users with an opportunity of satisfying their desire to belong to a group. Interplay and the sharing of brand-related experiences and other practices play a major role in this while also helping individuals to define themselves. Social identity is important and membership of a brand community signals an association with a “category label” that will often subsequently be incorporated within their concept of self. This signals to others the specific groups and brands an individual wants to be identified with.

Previous work has explored group identification as a “state of being” as opposed to considering how social identity can constantly evolve. It would therefore be particular interesting for marketers and brand managers to determine ways in which they can influence the formation of social identity.

Of equal importance to them is the ability of online brand communities to impact on the creation of affective relationships between consumers and brands. The critical nature of building these strong emotional bonds is widely recognized in the research community. Brands that help to shape consumer identity are capable of generating stronger emotional reactions, various analysts claim. Evidence shows positive influence on such as trust, brand loyalty, brand performance and consumer willingness to pay higher prices.

Researchers have identified different classifications of relationships that vary in their intensity. Brand love is becoming regarded as an especially powerful expression of positivity towards a brand. This recently developed construct reflects levels of positivity and passion which exceed the likes of brand attachment. Similar influence on such as loyalty, word-of-mouth (WOM) and resistance to unfavorable brand information are reported. It is agreed that brand love shows that the brand has been incorporated within an individual’s self-perception. Research conducted within an offline setting found that identification with the brand and “sense of community” serve as key drivers of brand love. Indicating brand love is encouraged in online brand communities and facilitated by mechanisms which include the Facebook “Like” button.

The present study aims to fill a void by investigating how social-interactive engagement and social identity impact on brand love within online network-base communities. Specific forms of social-interactive engagement in Facebook communities are thus considered. It is speculated that situations where participation and interaction within a community strengthens consumer sense of social identity will help to enhance brand love.

Vernuccio et al. investigate these issues in an online survey of consumers located via the Facebook fan pages of 20 leading brands. The platform was chosen because of its position as most preferred social network for connecting with brands online. Respondents were provided with instructions on how to complete the questionnaire, which also requested demographic information alongside a section asking participants to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with various statements regarding different online social experiences people might have within a network-based brand community. Responses indicating subjects’ emotional feelings towards the brand featured on the particular fan page they accessed were used to measure brand love.

Analysis confirmed that, in online network-based communities:

- social identity is more positively influenced when social-interactive engagement is stronger;
- stronger social identity is positively associated with brand love; and
- the connection between social-interactive engagement and brand love is mediated by social identity.
Demographic variables age and gender were found to be insignificant. Length of time that members spent on the fan page had some impact depending on the duration.

On this evidence, the authors conclude that users benefit considerably from engaging in online brand communities in terms of the various social experiences enjoyed. This prompts individuals to reach beyond their sense of self and build an identity based on their involvement with the social group. Since their social identity also incorporates the “emotional significance” of group membership, it provides some understanding of the “psychological consequences of social-interactive engagement”.

Prior studies have noted that emotional connections to a brand are often based on the brand’s role in facilitating self-expression or enhancing self-esteem. It is proven here that “social identity motives” can also drive consumers to love a brand.

Another important finding is that these emotions can be strengthened when social-interactive engagement results in the consumer increasing his or her social identification with the brand. Managers are thus advised to find ways of facilitating different social experiences that can enhance the quality of engagement. One suggestion is to devise various initiatives which encourage interaction, provide opportunities for feedback and benefit from other community members. Games, content sharing, quizzes and polls are among the possibilities. Brand managers are also reminded to exploit the array of options provided by social media channels to facilitate higher engagement levels.

The importance of motivating people to share their experiences about the brand is pointed out by Vernuccio et al. They suggest segmenting and targeting fan page users appropriately based on their varying degrees of social identity. Differentiation by cognitive or emotional engagement is also mooted as a possibility.

In future, researchers could explore other social media platforms and consider factors such as size of the user’s network and strength of social ties. Another option is to investigate the effect of unfavorable brand emotions. Additional factors which reflect personal engagement and “distinct online social experiences” might also be examined. The authors suggest investigating the significance of individual consumer traits and greater analysis of how the relationships identified here impact on different aspects of brand performance.

To read the full article, enter 10.1108/JPBM-12-2014-0772 into your search engine.

(A précis of the article “Antecedents of brand love in online network-based communities. A social identity perspective”. Supplied by Marketing Consultants for Emerald.)