

FACEBOOK, TUENTI, TWITTER...: TIME TO MOVE FORWARD WITH VIRTUAL BRAND COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

As consumers become increasingly “connected”, opportunities for interpersonal influence increase. There exists ample theoretical support for the idea that people are influenced by others’ opinions. Referrals and recommendations influence consumer behavior such as the choice of which brand to purchase. Therefore, marketers are increasingly interested in making use of the Internet to promote their brands. However, many firms have jumped into the virtual world without understanding how virtual communities work and how to use them successfully. The aim of this research is to better understand what determines why consumers share brand-related information, and more interestingly, what motivations drive consumers’ intentions to contribute to the diffusion of brand communities. Two variables, the intention of becoming a member of the brand community and the intention of retransmitting the community to each individual’s social network are assessed. In this study we propose that the motivations to promote the community are dependent on the type of relationship (strong vs. weak) between the referral of the communication and the consumer who receives the brand-related information through his/her own social network.

KEYWORDS

Brand community, virtual community, tie strength, motivations

1. Introduction

As consumers become increasingly “connected”, opportunities for interpersonal influence increase (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008; Godes and Mayzlin, 2009; Goldenberg et al., 2001; Gómez et al. 2009; Stephen and Lehman, 2009). On the Internet consumers may share opinions about several topics of interest, but they may also share information about new products, brands, or companies. There exists ample theoretical support for the idea that people are influenced by others’ opinions (Banerjee, 1993). Referrals and recommendations influence consumer behavior such as the choice of which brand to purchase (e.g., Brown and Reingen 1987). Therefore, marketers are increasingly interested in making use of this medium to promote their brands (Keller and Berry, 2003; Pentina et al., 2008).

Virtual communities are an important medium that facilitates the interaction among consumers and the exchange of knowledge (Wiertz and De Ruyter, 2007). However, many firms have jumped into the virtual world to promote their brands without understanding how virtual communities work and how to use them successfully (Spaulding, 2010). Most research has focused on the value these communities have for consumers rather than on how companies can use them to create strong brands (Dholakia et al., 2004; Mazzarol et al., 2007). Both researchers and practitioners need to better understand what determines why consumers share brand-related information, and more interestingly, what motivations drive consumers’ intentions to contribute to the diffusion of brand communities (Goldenberg et al., 2001; Stephen and Lehman, 2009). In summary, more research is needed on the underlying process of this communication process.

In order to fill this gap in the literature the aim of this research is to evaluate what determines the individual intention of promoting a brand community. Two variables, the intention of becoming a member of the brand community and the intention of retransmitting the community to each individual’s social network are assessed. In this study we propose that the motivations to promote the community are dependent on the type of relationship (strong vs. weak) between the referral of the communication and the consumer who receive the brand-related information through his/her own social network.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. From virtual communities to virtual brand communities.

A virtual community is a specialized, geographically dispersed community based on a structured and dynamic network of relationships among participants sharing a common focus (Dholakia et al., 2004). Most known virtual communities have been created for social purposes (such as Facebook.com and Twitter.com) and they are referred to as online social networks. When the virtual community is explicitly structured around a brand we can talk of a virtual brand community, which according to the previous definition can be conceptualized as a group of individuals with common interests in a brand who communicate each other electronically (Sicilia and Palazón, 2008). Due to the success of virtual communities, especially those social-related, companies realized a new opportunity to develop brand communities (Thompson and Shina, 2008; Xu et al., 2008).

Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) envision a brand community as a customer-customer-brand triad formed by two types of relationships, those established between the brand and the customers, and those that emerge between community members. Brand communities can be hosted internally (i.e. embedded on a firm’s website) or externally (i.e. via link to a separate site), but regardless of whether it is hosted internally or externally, the firm/brand identifies itself using its name and/or logos on the community’s homepage (Porter and Donthu, 2008). Since opportunities for establishing relationships among members are more likely among the existing online social networks (Vilponnen et al., 2006), brands are looking for their own place within these networks. Many companies are therefore using online social networks to build brand communities, such as creating a Facebook profile where consumers can interact and share their opinions about the brand. Traditionally, only brands that operated in niche markets and required consumers to make major investments in time or money (i.e. Mercedes, Harley Davidson, etc) had a noticeable brand community. However, with the appearance of the Internet brand community management might be also an option for brands mainly offering convenience products (Cova and Pace, 2006; McWilliam, 2000). In addition, some of these communities form very

important new elite that can effectively position the brand. This is elite that marketers cannot ignore; instead marketers should make every effort to create relationship equity within this environment (Sawhney and Zabin, 2002).

For these communities to be successful, companies need people who recommend others about the existence or interest in the brand. In the offline context, WOM has been extensively studied as a means to promote products or brands (Brown and Reingen, 1987; Herr et al. 1991; Liu, 2006; Wangenheim and Bayón, 2004). Nowadays, online relationships complement face-to-face relationships (Chatterjee, 2001; Vilpponen et al., 2006), and indeed most of these relationships are also translated into the virtual world. Therefore, companies need consumers to engage in electronic WOM about brands in order to stimulate brand knowledge (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008; Godes and Mayzlin, 2004; Godes and Mayzlin, 2009).

WOM can be classified into two types, “initial transmission” and “retransmission” (Stephen and Lehman, 2009). Initial transmitters are more likely to be opinion leaders as they are more innovative than their followers (Xu et al., 2008). In this paper we focus on the decision of becoming fan of the brand community and the latter retransmission of this community to other people as we are exploring what motivations drive consumers’ intentions to promote the community. Although Stephen and Lehman (2009) assume that consumers are selective transmitters of WOM, in real online social networks such as Facebook, when an individual become a member of a community the information about his/her membership is usually transmitted to all the individual’s personal network. Therefore, we are dealing with retransmission of the brand community to other people without considering it might be a selective process.

2.2. Motivations for joining a virtual brand community

A community can be also viewed as a subculture or reference group. As such, it can exert different kinds of influence (see Bearden and Etzel, 1982) which, in turn may lead to different motivations to join the community. We are interested in studying which are the motivations of recipients to first become members of the brand community and to second transmit the information about the community to other people. Our main focus is having a deeper understanding about the underlying processes that drive consumer promotion of the brand community.

People who participate in virtual communities are motivated to do so for different reasons (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006). Several researchers affirm that the uses and gratifications paradigm may be very useful in understanding why consumers participate in virtual communities (de Valck and Dambrin, 2007; Dholakia et al., 2004). According to this theory, media help consumers in satisfying their social and psychological needs (Katz et al., 1973). The gratification of individual motives and needs in a virtual community will depend on the perceived value of being a member (Dholakia et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2003; Mathwick, 2006). Recently, Pentina et al. (2008) have identified several motivations for joining a virtual community, named: social integration, entertainment, informational (purposive), status enhancement, and transactional. Based on the previous studies and focusing on brands instead of on more general virtual communities, we have established four main motivations for becoming a member of a virtual brand community:

1. Purposive motivations (e.g. advice, information, and expertise). According to the literature, a consumer may become member of a brand community to obtain a purposive value, which is defined as “the value derived from accomplished some pre-determined instrumental purpose” (Dholakia et al., 2004). Of special interest from a marketing perspective is the sharing resources process. Virtual communities enable individuals to give and receive information on topics they may be interested in. Mathwick (2006) has demonstrated that web site traffic and brand loyalty are primarily a function of the informational value created through virtual interaction. Among these purposive motivations we include those related to the interest or involvement in the product itself, that is, individuals may become members of a brand community if they are very interested in that product category.

2. Social motivations (e.g. friendship, social support, meeting like-minded people). In virtual communities, we may find people with similar problems and experiences. Being member of a virtual community implies a social activity between groups of people interacting online, which delivers the consumer value of interpersonal connectivity (Dholakia et al. 2004; Mathwick, 2006). Then, the

affiliation with a brand community may represent a social benefit to a consumer for reasons of identification and social integration (McWilliam, 2000).

3. *Status enhancement motivations (e.g. self-esteem, social status, social enhancement)*. These motivations refer to the value that a participant derives from gaining acceptance and approval of other members. Consumers can derive social enhancement value in virtual communities when they obtain social status within the community (Dholakia et al., 2004). This motivation is also socially oriented, though it differs from social motivation in that it is self-oriented instead of group-oriented.

4. *Entertainment motivations (e.g. relax, enjoyment, pass away the time)*. Entertainment stems from fun and relaxation through playing or otherwise interacting with others (Dholakia et al., 2004). These experiences may include flow state (Shoham, 2004; Sicilia et al., 2005), as it is very likely that consumers enjoy, show a high interest and involvement with other people, and feel a sense of time distortion during their common interaction.

2.3. *The role of tie strength in driving motivations to promote virtual brand communities*

On the basis of the above, it appears logical to propose that there might be some individual or situational factors increasing or decreasing the importance of these motivations for becoming members of a virtual brand community. Individuals will receive information about the brand community through WOM communication. Research has widely established that WOM's impact depends on who is talking to whom (Brown and Reingen, 1987; De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008; Godes and Mayzlin, 2004). Therefore, the strength-of-ties literature may be useful in determining the motivations for promoting a virtual brand community. This literature is primarily concerned with the nature of the relational bond between two social actors, as well as the effect of this bond on their information sharing activities (Rindfleisch and Moorman, 2001).

Tie strength refers to the intensity of the social relation between consumers (Brown and Reingen, 1987). It is a combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy, and the reciprocal services that characterize a tie (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1361). Therefore, WOM communication could be closer and stronger communications that are within individual's own personal group (strong ties) and weaker and less personal communications that an individual makes with a wide set of other acquaintances and colleagues (weak ties).

In this paper we propose that the tie strength between the referral and the individual will determine what motivations explain the intention of becoming a member of the virtual brand community. Several researchers have studied the different roles played by weak and strong social ties in WOM (Brown and Reingen, 1987; Duhan et al., 1997). In Brown and Reingen (1987)'s study, weak ties displayed an important bridging function, allowing information to travel from one distinct subgroup of referral actors to another subgroup in the broader social system. The significance of weak ties lies in their potential to unlock and expose interpersonal networks to external influences, thus spreading information throughout society (Goldenberg et al., 2001; Rodgers, 1995). On the contrary, the impact of strong ties resides in their potential to be activated and perceived as influential in consumers' decisions (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008). Bansal and Voyer (2000) observed that when ties are strong the information will have more influence on the purchase decision. The different roles played by weak and strong ties explain why information moves quickly within communities but slowly across them (Godes and Mayzlin, 2004).

When the WOM communication arises between strong ties social motivations will be more salient to become a member of the virtual brand community. Due to the closer relationship with the referral, the recipient desires to integrate and to identify with the social group will be the main drivers for joining the community. Social commitment between the two parts can also lead the receiver to become a member in order to obtain the approval of the referral. Finally, integration in the virtual brand community may enhance the feeling that the referral is accepting such a behavior and the individual can even obtain a social status.

On the contrary, when the WOM communication arises between weak ties, the motivations to join the brand community are less related with the social aspects derived from the relation and the social status that could be obtained. Purposive and entertainment motivations will be instead more important in this

case to become members of the community. The interest in the product category will be also an important determinant for joining the community, as individuals can share information about a topic of interest within the virtual brand community. If social motivations are absent, need for entertainment may also appear as an important driver for joining the brand community. On the basis of the above discussion we propose that:

H1: Motivations for becoming a member of a virtual brand community depend on the relationship between the individual and the referral.

H1a: When information about the virtual brand community stems from a strong tie intention to become a member of the community is dominated by social and status enhancement motivations.

H1b: When information about the virtual brand community stems from a weak tie intention to become a member of the community is dominated by purposive and entertainment motivations.

Current members of the virtual brand community can pass on information about the community to other people through a new WOM process (we refer here to the retransmission of the community). Since the effort in sending the information about the community to multiple contacts is similar to the effort in sending the information to just one recipient (Vilpponen et al., 2006), we focus on the intention of retransmitting the virtual brand community to other people through each individual's social network. Traditional research on WOM has established several motivations for engaging in positive WOM behavior. Factors such as altruism, product involvement, self-enhancement reasons, and advice seeking reasons have been identified (Sundaram et al., 1998). These motivations can serve us as a starting point for understanding the motivations for engaging in the promotion of the brand in the virtual environment. The study of Henning Thureau et al. (2004), developed in an online context, adds social benefits to the previous motives. In addition, social motivations are particularly relevant in the virtual environment because others can see and judge our opinions and ideas (Xu et al., 2008).

Various social benefits (e.g., attention from others, strengthening friendship, and feeling that one's opinions have been "heard") can be fulfilled by transmitting the brand community to other people. Therefore, individuals may contribute to the promotion in an attempt to build social capital (and reputation) by hoping that one's opinions will spread more widely through the social network (Stephen and Lehman, 2009). These social motivations will be particularly salient when information about the brand stems from a strong tie since strong-tie sources are perceived as more credible than weak-tie sources (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008; Rindfleisch and Moorman, 2001). In other words, strong ties are more likely to reduce the perceived risks of the information they are sending; hence, retransmitting the information about the brand should be less risky and mainly dominated by social motivations. On the contrary, generally speaking, weak-ties are perceived as less credible and trustworthy (Levin and Cross, 2004), therefore, individuals' intentions of retransmitting the information about the brand community throughout the online social network should be driven by other factors, such as purposive and entertainment motivations. Based on this discussion, we hypothesize that:

H2: Motivations for retransmitting the virtual brand community to other people depend on the relationship between the individual and the referral.

H2a: When information about the virtual brand community stems from a strong tie intention to retransmitting the community to other people is dominated by social and status enhancement motivations.

H2b: When information about the virtual brand community stems from a weak tie intention to retransmitting the community to other people is dominated by purposive and entertainment motivations.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample and design

Sample was composed of heavy users of at least one online social network. Most participants were involved in two communities (Facebook and Tuenti). Facebook is the social network most used

worldwide while Tuenti is the most popular among the Spanish population (where the experiment took place). 157 individuals participated in the study in exchange for a free lunch at the cafeteria.

We employed a single factor within-subject experimental design in which the way the individual is aware of the brand community was varied. Participants discovered the brand community through another member in their social network with whom they have either a strong tie (i.e., frequent interactions between the individuals), or a weak tie (i.e., infrequent interaction between the individuals). Participants were Facebook and/or Tuenti users who were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions.

3.2. Procedure and measurement

Small sessions of seven participants on average were run in a tightly controlled laboratory setting. Participants were firstly asked about which online social networks they belonged to (Facebook, Tuenti, Twiter, and so on) and which was their preferred one (or most used). Next, they were presented a scenario in which they were told about the Apple community for the new iPhone 4G either by a strong tie or by a weak tie. We used this product category because is very interesting for the young population. A pre-test showed that this type of product was very demanded by the target.

Then, participants were requested to answer the rest of the questionnaire considering they were in such a situation. Intention of becoming a member of the brand community was assessed using a traditional intention measure (very likely/unlikely, very easy/uneasy). Once individuals answered this question, they were instructed to indicate the reasons that would lead them to join the brand community. Most motivations items for the four categories were based on Pentina et al. (2008). Social interaction motivation was assessed using 5 items from social research reflecting people's needs to join groups. It included needs to receive and give emotional support, to meet like-minded people, to meet friends and to socialize. Entertainment included 4 items (to be entertained, to relax, to play, and to pass the time away when bored). Purposive dimension was composed of 4 items related to the desire to learn, solve problems, make better decisions, and be informed. Status enhancement included 3 items (to impress people, to feel important and to get someone to do something for me). We also considered the interest in the product category as a possible motivation for contributing to the community. It was measured using D'Astous and Landreville (2003)'s scale. Following these motivational items, individuals were asked about their intention to recommend this community to their online contacts. The questions regarding to what extent they would recommend the community (very likely/unlikely, very easy/uneasy) were based on Luna and Perachio (2005).

Several variables were measured at the end of the questionnaire in order to control for possible influence in the experiment. In order to assess whether the individual is more or less susceptible to others' influence, we used both the normative and informative dimensions of the scale developed by Bearden et al. (1989). Then, we assessed to what extent individuals were used to read other's comments and opinions on the Internet before taking decisions (Park et al., 2007). Internet experience was assessed through the number of hours per week subjects used the Internet (Novak et al. 2000). Similarly, individuals also indicated how many hours per week they were connected to their preferred social network. Finally, individuals indicated their genre and age and the mobile brand they were using at that moment.

4. Results

More men (51%) than women (49%) took part in the study. On average they spent 16,73 hours weekly surfing the Internet and had a mean of 179 contacts in their preferred social network.

Regression analyses were performed to test the proposed hypotheses. We included social, entertainment, purposive and status enhancement motivations in explaining the intention of becoming a member as well as in the intention of retransmitting the brand community. A major focus of these hypotheses is twofold: (1) to document to what extent these motivations are important for becoming a member and for retransmitting the information; and (2) to test whether their influence depend on tie strength. Table 1 shows the regression results. When the information is provided by a strong tie the following pattern of results emerges. Product-related motivations ($\beta=0.507$, $p= 0.000$) and status enhancement motivations ($\beta=0.271$, $p= 0.028$) were found to have a significant positive impact on the

intention of becoming a member. Therefore, H1a is partially supported, as we did not find a significant effect for social motivations. When a weak tie sends the information, only product-related motivations explains the intention of becoming a member. Again, H1b is partially supported because the effect for entertainment motivations is not significant.

Finally, results show that both social-related motivations and product-related motivations predict the intention of retransmitting the community to other people. When a weak tie provides the information about the brand the intention of retransmitting is explained by the same motivations than when a strong tie provides the information. Regarding H2a we found that social motivations explain the intention of retransmitting the community but status enhancement motivations do not exert a significant influence. Therefore, we found partial support for H2a. Finally, with respect to H2b we found that product-related motivations have a significant positive effect in the intention of retransmitting the information, but entertainment motivations do not have a significant effect. Therefore, H2b is partially supported.

Table 1. Regression analyses

	Intention of becoming a fan						Intention of retransmitting					
	Strong tie (H1a)			Weak tie (H1b)			Strong tie (H2a)			Weak tie (H2b)		
	β	t	Sig.	β	t	Sig.	β	t	Sig.	β	t	Sig.
Constant	1.592	2.630	0.010	0.564	1.135	0.260	0.709	1.399	0.166	0.946	2.126	0.037
Social	-0.016	-0.129	0.897	0.137	1.102	0.274	0.330	2.721	0.008*	0.427	3.799	0.000*
Entertainment	-0.194	-1.562	0.123	-0.050	-0.423	0.673	0.113	0.920	0.361	-0.048	-0.442	0.660
Purposive												
- Information-related	-0.093	-0.901	0.371	0.137	1.173	0.245	0.039	0.379	0.706	0.099	0.932	0.354
- Product-related	0.507	4.676	0.000*	0.298	2.344	0.022*	0.312	2.905	0.005*	0.256	2.225	0.029*
Status enhancement	0.271	2.239	0.028*	0.070	0.554	0.581	-0.016	-1.133	0.895	0.070	0.616	0.540

Currently, we are developing further analyses in order to know whether the influences of strong ties in driving motivations is higher than the influence of weak ties. We are also conducting a CFA analysis to estimate the measurement model. This analysis will allow us to assess the reliability and validity of the constructs, although Cronbach alphas have showed optimal values.

5. Discussion

As recent research states, brand managers should be able to create and manage brand communities in online social networks (Godes and Mayzlin, 2009; Porter and Donthu, 2008; Spaulding, 2010). Most companies will have a community manager in the short term. Therefore, results obtained here have important implications for them. The community manager should understand that motivations to promote the brand community depend on the way information comes to the individual. When the information comes from a strong tie, status enhancement motivations prevail, while when the information comes from a weak tie this motivation does not have any influence on the intention of becoming a member of the brand community. Social and purposive motivations dominate in the intention of retransmitting the community to other people regardless of the information source. In addition, it should be noted that product-related motivations explain the intention of promoting the community across conditions. Given these results, managers are encouraged to promote WOM campaigns for developing and promoting brand communities (Godes and Mayzlin, 2009). Thus, managers should use referral rewards programs, in which customers are compensated for spreading the word about the brand community to their strong ties. These communities may be of some use in identifying lead users. Furthermore, community managers should develop marketing actions in order to enhance entertainment and information-related motivations. Nowadays these motivations are not spreading the intention of promoting the community. However, entertainment has proven as one of the main motivations to be present in social networks (Mathwick and Rigdon, 2004).

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