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Antecedences and Consequences of Customer Engagement in Online Brand Communities: Multi-National Perspective

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Abstract. This paper aims to look at the importance of online brand communities on the customer experience in terms of customer brand loyalty and information capital. Thus, the proposed conceptual model was based on the information exchange theory. The current model was also expanded by proposing for main factors (social trust, interactivity, hedonic motivation, and perceived involvement) as key drivers of customers' engagement with online brand communities. Two main consequences of customers' engagement were also proposed in the current study model, namely: information capital and brand loyalty. The empirical part of the current study will be conducted within two main countries: one developed (United Kingdom) and one developing (Jordan). This study will adopt online questionnaire survey to collect the required data. Structural equation modelling will be adopted as a statistical technique to test the current model and validate the main research hypotheses. This study will expand the theoretical understanding regarding very important phenomenon (online brand communities), which requests more exploration and examination. This is in light of the fact that, this phenomenon has not yet studied and examined over the Middle-East countries.

Keywords: Online brand communities, brand loyalty, and information capital

1 Introduction

Increasingly, organisations worldwide have been looking forward to benefiting from social networking and Web 2.0 revaluation to enhance and sustain their associations with their targeted customers [3]. Indeed, social networking revolutions allow customers to construct and shape their virtual communities especially these related to commercial brands. Online brand communities are one of the most common examples about these communities in which customers could interact with many customers who have a common interest toward the targeted brands. Conceptually, online brand community could be defined as “a network of relationships between consumers and the brand, product, fellow consumers, and the marketer” [27].

One of the main positive outcomes of such communities is increasing the level of customer engagement and involvement with their brands and service providers as discussed by [37]. In this regard, it is important mentioning that online communities that are constructed by customers based on their emotional attachment with the brands and away from the organisations are more crucial and effective in predicting the customers’ experience [28]. Online brand communities also help organisations to efficiently capture the required information from credible direct source (users and community members) [1, 13]. This is returned to the fact that such user generated information is a kind of main outcomes among interactions and conversions that take place in the community among the customers themselves [22]. Another reason supporting the importance of such digital communities and the quality of information generated is related to the fact that customers are fully free to join these platforms and provide their own contribution without any restrictions.

Members of online brand communities have increasingly effective role to be a value co-creator [12]. For example, customers are more able to provide their own assessment regarding new products, services, and ideas introduced by organisations, and therefore, helping organisations to have more comprehensive and accurate feedback and process of development adopted by brands [20]. By doing so, customers are more likely to feel their importance on the organisation side, and this will surely enrich their experience in terms of spreading word-of-mouth, satisfaction and loyalty [2, 11, 19]. Over the prior literature, several studies (i.e. [5]) that have supported the significance of online communities for marketing practices especially in terms of customer engagement, brand co-creation, and value co-creation.

However, there is still a necessity to capture an accurate and comprehensive view regarding the main antecedents of customers’ intention and engaging with online brand communities. Further, there is an important question regarding how could the antecedents and consequences of online brand communities engagement behave differently from culture to another?. Accordingly, this study aims firstly to see and validate the main drivers that motivate customers to join online brand communities. As well as, this study intends to see and discover the main consequences of customer joining online brand communities on the customer experience and organisation marketing performance.

2 Literature Review

By looking carefully at the main studies that have tested the related issues of online communities, it has been noticed that this area needs further research and examination as well as most studies examining online brand community largely consider the positive side of such virtual communities and how could enhance the customers brand engagement and perception [12]. However, there is a need to discover the dark side of these communities from both customers and organisational perspectives. In this respect, [12] argued online brand communities as double edged sword as it could evoke negative outcomes for both perspectives i.e. customers and organisation. For example, customers, who are not pleased about their experience with the organisation, could see such virtual community as a place to spread their negative experiences and revenge against the company [12]. Another example of the dark side of online communities could be pertained customer misbehaviour and dysfunctional customer behaviour as named by [9], which could be resulted from the customer's feeling of dissatisfied or injustice. According to [9], such kind of misbehaviour taking place over online communities may have a disastrous impact on the organisation and its reputation and brand image, which in turn, will negatively impact the staff satisfaction and organisational sales and financial performance [6, 26].

According to [16], online communities could come in several forms (i.e. social media platforms, forums, blogs, webinar, and wikis). This, in turn, allows those customers, who are active members over these communities, to share their own experience, attitude, knowledge about the targeted brands with large number of members [4, 15, 31, 34]. To put it differently, online brand communities provides people with new mechanisms to have more synchronous and simple communication, and accordingly, facilitating the process of information exchange [11]. Therefore, such social interactions and collaboration among community will surely sustain the community membership feeling among the users as stated by [12].

As discussed in the introduction part, marketing researchers have always been attempting to figure out the most influential drivers of customers' engagement in online brand communities. As well as, closer look at the prior literature in this regard leads to a need to propose a conceptual model that could be able to address these drivers and provide a comprehensive picture from the customers' perceptive. The impact of culture also requires further examination especially when the vast majority of prior studies have tested online brands communities over the highly developed countries where only a few studies have been explored in the developing countries' context [8]. Furthermore, consequences of customers' interacting over such communities call for more research in this area. Accordingly, proposing a conceptual model capturing the most important antecedences and consequences of customer engagement in online brand communities from multinational perspectives.

3 Proposed Conceptual Model

By reviewing the key literature pertaining to online brand communities, it has been noticed that there are several drivers that could motivate customers to engage with online communities. According to [24], a number of factors (i.e. information, self-discovery, social integration, social enhancement, and entertainment) were suggested to have a direct impact on the customers' engagement with such communities. Recent study proposed by [29] adopted social capital model, and proposed a number of dimensions (i.e. sharing language, shared vision, norm of reciprocity, and social trust) as key drivers of both aspects related to customers' engagement with online brand communities: individual network ties and individual sense of belonging. In their qualitative study, [5] categorised these drivers over three groups: brand related (i.e. brand identification, brand satisfaction, and brand trust); social aspects (i.e. OBC identification); and community value (i.e. information, networking, entertainment, and monetary incentives). Moreover, the impact of online community kind, which could be created either by customers or marketers has been tested by [21]. Aspects related to OBC such as membership identification, influence and relatedness, involvement, and shared emotional connection were considered by [18]. [38] have validated the role of interactivity and trust as key determinants of the individuals' experience and flow of online travel communities.

In the light of the above reviews, it could be noticed that drivers of customers' engagement with online brand communities could be allocated within social drivers, personal drivers, informational and social media drivers. Therefore, proposing a strong model will request considering the most important of these drivers. Some of these factors such as hedonic motivation (entertainment) [5], social trust [29], perceived involvement [18], and interactivity [38]. All of these factors will be considered as a key driver of customers' engagement with online brand communities. The nature of online brand community if it is user's generated or marketing generated will be tested as a moderator factor could shape the relationships between the main independent and dependent factors. In this regard, it is important to indicate that three main dimensions (cognitive, emotional, and behavioural) that will be considered to measure the customer' engagement were highly suggested by [5].

For the purpose of the current study which also attempts to look at the main consequences of customers' engagement with online brand communities, information exchange theory proposed by [33] and [35] was adopted to address these consequences. According to [32], information exchange pertains to the size and the nature of the information sent and shared among community members. This could be attributed to the fact online brand community enabled social media networks is a place where members are more able to play an effective role in creating and exchanging their own content [16]. Such process of information creating and sharing will lead online community members to develop their resources in terms of information capital [16, 39]. Practically, in the line with Lu and Yang (2011), information exchange (information capital) could be tested and categorised in two main dimensions quantity of information and quality of information. Customer brand loyalty will be also considered alongside with information capital as main

consequences of the customer engagement with online brand community. This could be returned to the fact that customers are more likely to have more social and emotional bonds with the brand that they are able to have an effective role in sharing their experience around it. As discussed above, online brand communities enable their members to have such role of creating and sharing their experience, and accordingly, having a strong emotional and social attachment with such brand. All factors considered and research hypotheses are presented in Figure 1. All proposed research hypotheses are presented below:

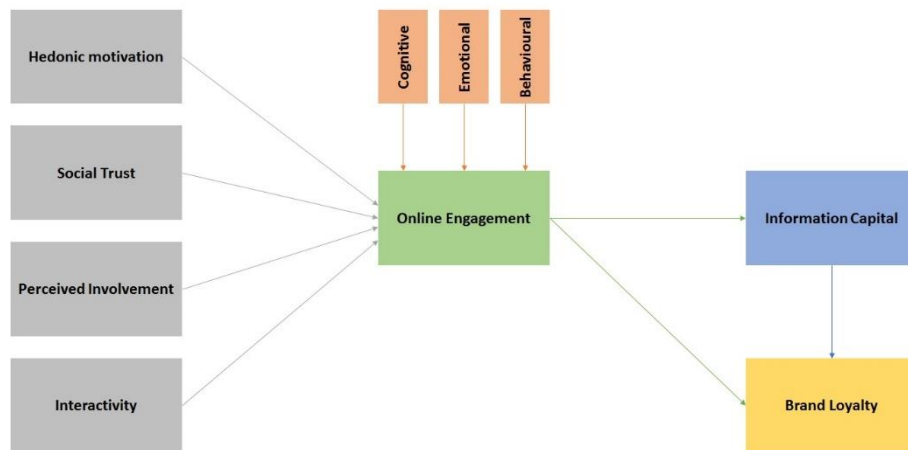


Figure 1. Conceptual Model - Adapted from [5, 18, 29, 32, 38]

H1: Hedonic motivation will positively influence customer engagement with online brand communities.

H2: Trust will positively influence customer engagement with online brand communities.

H3: perceived involvement will positively influence customer engagement with online brand communities.

H4: Interactivity will positively influence customer engagement with online brand communities.

H5: Customer engagement with online brand communities will positively influence information capital.

H6: Customer engagement with online brand communities will positively influence customer brand loyalty.

H7: Information capital will positively influence customer brand loyalty.

4 Proposed Research Methodology

The empirical part of the current study will be conducted in two main countries: Jordan and United Kingdom. In details, online questionnaire survey will be used to target the main participants in these selected countries [7]. The main constructs of the model will be tested based on scale items from their original studies. For example, information capital will tested using scale items extracted from [25]; items adapted

from [38] will be used to measure Interactivity; hedonic motivation will be measured using items extracted from [36]; dimensions of customer engagement will be tested based on items derived from [14]; social trust will be examined using items from [23]; [10] scale was considered to test both perceived involvement and brand loyalty. As reported in the conceptual model part, customer online engagement will be tested as a unidimensional constructs, and therefore, the main sub-dimensions: cognitive, behavioural, and emotional will be treated as first order factors while customer online engagement will be considered as a second order construct. For participants in Jordan, the questionnaire will be translated to Arabic language as it is the native language over this country while the English version will be used as is in the United Kingdom. It is also important to mention that cross cultural comparison study will be conducted between Jordan and the Western culture country selected. The data collected will be statistically tested using structural equation modelling by facilitating AMOS.

5 Research Contributions

This study will expand the theoretical understanding regarding very important phenomenon (online brand communities), which requests more exploration and examination. This phenomenon has not yet studied and examined over the Middle-East countries. Further, the vast majority of prior studies have tested such phenomenon over highly developed and Western countries. As these online communities could be predicted and shaped by the common culture and value system, there is always a need to see and discover the impact of cultural differences between developed countries (i.e. UK) and developing (i.e. Jordan) [8, 17]. Indeed, there is a quite a few studies that have addressed the issues of online community from different cultural aspects particularly between developed and developing countries. Therefore, a considerable contribution could be captured for this project for being the first attempt that will examine the related issues of online brand communities over two sittings: Jordan and one Western European country (i.e. UK). The current study model also provides a new mechanism (social trust, interactivity, hedonic motivation, and perceived involvement) that could shape the customers experiences over digital economy. This study will go further by considering the main consequences of customer engagement with online communities. The vast majority of prior studies have addressed traditional consequences like customer's satisfaction, loyalty, and word of mouth while the current study attempts to see other types of these consequences, which addressed in terms of information capital in the current study. Furthermore, based on empirical results which will be captured, this paper will provide practical guidelines that will help organisations and brands to manage their marketing activities over online communities. Accordingly, such project will not only help brands to guarantee positive outcomes via online communities but also brands will be capable enough to mitigate the negative and misbehaviours over such platforms.

6 Limitations and Future Research Directions

As the nature of the current study seems to be more conceptual theoretical paper, it is restricted to provide a deep understanding about the actual customer's behaviour and

perception. Accordingly, future study could provide a closer and accurate picture regarding this phenomenon. Such empirical study will also introduce a sufficient statistical evidence that will help in validating the current study model as well as to see which the most important and influential factors. This study has considered the information exchange theory as a theoretical foundation to propose the conceptual model; yet, the theoretical horizon could be expanded by examining other important models over the related area such as social capital theory and uses and gratification theory [30]. As discussed in the literature part, there are several mechanisms that could predict the customer's engagement with online brand communities. However, only four factors that have been conceptualised in the current model as drivers of the customer's engagement. Thus, future studies could look carefully at other factors that could cover different aspects of the consumers' motivations and drivers of joining online brand communities. Another limitation raised in the current study is ignoring the negative consequences (i.e. negative word of mouth, online customer revenge, and customer misbehaviour) of online communities. Hence, future studies are suggested to look at both kinds of positive and negative consequences of online brand communities.

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