ONLINE BRAND COMMUNITIES IN SOCIAL COMMERCE: IDENTIFYING FACTORS AFFECTING CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Social commerce is defined as a new wave of e-commerce in which traditional e-commerce is mediated by social media and social networking services in order to promote online transactions and shopping-related information exchanges. One of the main application of social commerce is 'online brand communities'. Although utilization of social media in order to advance customer brand engagement has proliferated significantly in recent years, most of the companies do not meet the expected level of engagement of their customers. Overall, the key factors that could explain customer engagement are not yet thoroughly identified. Therefore, the current study develops a conceptual customer engagement model that aims to explain customer engagement in online brand communities. Customer engagement in brand social media is related to interactions and communications with the brand and other customers. In this study, the antecedents and outcomes of customer engagement dimensions will be investigated. As different dimensions of engagement can be influenced by factors from different aspects, it is important to cover as many categories as possible. Therefore, the model includes various factor categories including social, brand related, self-oriented and content related factors drawn from relevant literature. The research instrument was designed, and a pilot study was conducted with 75 participants to assure content validity and to test reliability. The paper contributes to understanding the factors influencing each dimension of customer engagement to brand communities.

KEYWORDS

Customer Engagement, Brand Communities, Engagement Dimensions, Brand Loyalty

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of social media has changed the way that the customers and companies communicate. Relations based on one way information flow have given their place to more participatory and interactive communication. This structure has strengthened the customer's position in the communication and gave them a more active role in influencing the company (Brodie et al., 2011). Social media is an effective tool for the companies in understanding their customers and their expectations, communicating with their customers, presenting their identity, products or services, receiving feedback from their customers to enhance their performance (Guesalaga, 2016). Therefore, companies should invest time and money to social networks in order to establish engagement with customers (de Castro, 2017).

Consumer engagement has become a popular research area after it was specified as a key research priority for future research. Brodie et al. (2011) defined consumer engagement as a psychological state that occurs through customer experiences having cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. However, there is a lack of consensus on its definition, conceptual domain and dimensionality. Customer engagement is ahead of similar concepts participation and involvement by requiring an active interactive relationship with the engaged object (Marbach et al., 2016). Although customer engagement can occur in brand generated platforms such as brand social media channels, a great deal of engagement take place on consumer generated platforms governed by individuals such as Facebook groups. With the emergence of online technologies, online brand communities have been started to serve as an additional channel for the organization to communicate with and receive feedback from customers (Chan et al., 2014).

In the literature, several studies aimed to find the significant factors affecting customer engagement in brand communities (Jayasingh and Venkatesh, 2015; Carlson et al., 2017; Guo et al., 2017). They focused on various factor types including social factors such as tie strength, trust, social identity, trust and reciprocity (Chahal et al., 2017; Kang et al., 2016; Carlson et al. 2017; Tsai et al., 2017; Bohari, 2016), content based factors such as perceived usefulness and perceived enjoyment (Guo et al., 2017; Carlson et al, 2017; Dessart et al., 2015; Chahal et al., 2017), brand related factors such as satisfaction ore brand image (Dessart et al., 2015; Carlson et al., 2017) and customer related factors such as self image enhancement and altruism (Simon et al., 2016; Jahn et al., 2012; Luarn et al., 2016; Marbach et al., 2016). Heinonen (2017) focused on the effect customer based factors on behavioral, emotional and cognitive dimensions of customer engagement. Kuzgun and Josiassen (2016) investigated the relationship between different engagement dimensions and revealed the effect of cognitive dimension on emotional dimension and emotional dimension on behavioral dimension.

In order to provide strategic guidelines to companies for increasing customer engagement and developing communication strategies, it is important to determine the factors that the customers value the most for interacting with the brand and other community members. Although customer engagement is defined as a multi-dimensional concept including cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions, there is no comprehensive study investigating which factor influences which engagement dimension. The relationship between engagement dimensions has been investigated in a small number of studies; however, the mediating effect of these dimensions between the factors and other dimensions has not been examined. Loyalty has emerged as a consequence of customer engagement in a various studies, but the relationship between loyalty dimensions and engagement dimensions has not been investigated. The purpose of this study is to identify the factors that affect cognitive, emotional and behavioral engagement of customers in brand related social media. Also, relationships between customer engagement dimensions and loyalty dimensions will be investigated.

2. CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The aim of this research is to determine the factors influencing the cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions of customer engagement in online brand communities. Therefore, proposed model should include the factors representing social, brand related, self-oriented and content based factors in order to gain a wider perspective and increase explanation power of the model. The conceptual model, *Customer Engagement Evaluation Model (CEEM) in Online Brand Communities*, is given in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The proposed Customer Engagement Evaluation Model (CEEM) in online brand communities

2.1 Customer Engagement

In terms of dimensionality several authors suggested that customer engagement includes cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions (Brodie et al., 2011). Although many other studies used different concepts to represent the dimensionality, those dimensions correspond to the generic cognitive, emotional and behavioral nature of engagement. Cognitive engagement represents the processing, concentration and interest in an object (de Castro, 2017) and refers to being immersed in the content of the brand social platform. Emotional engagement is expected to occur through recurrent feeling of these emotional responses after certain time of satisfying cognitive immersion in brand social networks (Kuzgun et al., 2016) and refers to consumer' level of excitement, interest, pleasure and happiness derived from engaging in brand related content and interactions with brand community and its members. Behavioral engagement refers to the willingness to devote time and effort to the brand social platform. This level of engagement is considered as the strongest engagement level. Kuzgun et al. (2016) found that cognitive engagement has a direct effect on emotional engagement and emotional engagement has a direct effect on behavioral engagement in virtual brand communities.

2.2 Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is defined as “a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future” (Oliver, 1997, p. 392). Oliver (1997) specified dimensions of loyalty as cognitive, affective, conation and active loyalty. Cognitive loyalty is based on the beliefs of customers that the brand is preferable to its alternatives. Those beliefs may result from prior knowledge of or experiences with the brand. After these cumulative satisfying experiences, positive attitude toward the firm has developed which brings the customer into affective loyalty phase. Affective loyalty reflects deeper level of commitment than cognitive level. Conative loyalty refers to intention of repurchase influenced by repeated positive affect toward the brand. Various studies on engagement propose loyalty as a consequence of customer engagement (Dessart et al., 2015; de Castro, 2017; Harrigan et al., 2017).

2.3 Antecedents of Customer Engagement

Various social factors have been proposed as drivers of customer engagement (Simon et al., 2016; de Castro, 2017; Luarn et al., 2016; Carlson et al., 2017; Chahal et al., 2017; Huang et al., 2013). Also, Jahn et al. (2012) suggested that one most prominent needs of customers is related to content-oriented area which is based on functional and hedonic values. As one of the main objects of customer engagement is brands, factors such as the perception of the customers about the brand and perception that the brand meet their expectations will affect the level of engagement. Jahn et al. (2012) stated that customer engagement is driven by particular needs of individuals such as achieving status or need for diversion. Therefore, we include social, content based, brand related and self-oriented factors in our model as antecedents of customer engagement.

2.3.1 Social Interaction Ties

With its interactive nature, social media supports two-way communication between customers and brands as well as between customers and customers. Social interaction ties refer to the intensity of interaction and closeness of relationships between community members in a social network. Chang et al. (2011) stated that the strong connections and direct ties between community members increase the intensity and sustainability of knowledge exchange in virtual communities. Various studies depicted that tie-strength and social interaction influence customer engagement on social networks (Chahal et al., 2017; Luarn et al., 2016; Jahn et al., 2012).

2.3.2 Trust

Since social media are interactive channels, the users not only follow what the brand is saying, but also joining in conversation with the brands and other community members. The communication in virtual communities exists between a customer and other unfamiliar community members or the brand. Community trust refers to relying on the honesty, reliability and trustworthiness of other community members and it is a crucial factor for interactions in brand-related social media (Kang et al., 2016). Trust has been offered as an antecedent of customer engagement in various studies (Chahal et al., 2017; Youssef et al., 2018).

2.3.3 Social Identification

Identification refers to customer's sense of emotional belongingness and shared representation of his/her self with a social group (Simon et al., 2016). Customers who feel sense of belongingness to a brand community and feel them as important and valuable part of the community tend to engage in community activities and maintain committed relationships with the community (Chiu et al., 2006). Also, customers identify more with the brands matching their self-image and use social media to present their self-image by expressing their belongingness to the community. Identification with the brand and the community deepen community engagement by enhancing group and oriented attitudes and motivation to exchange knowledge and also deepen customer brand relationships (Simon et al., 2016). Prior studies on customer engagement revealed social identity to be significant predictor of brand social media engagement (Chahal et al., 2017; Simon et al., 2016).

2.3.4 Reciprocity

Community members expect reciprocity to balance their investments and gains from the community (Mathwick et al., 2007). Their expected future returns could be exchanges in-kind or alternate form of aid. Previous studies indicated that norm of reciprocity is a significant driver of information exchange and knowledge sharing behaviors in online environments (Bohari, 2016; Chiu et al., 2006).

2.3.5 Perceived Usefulness

Perceived usefulness is defined as "the extent to which an individual believes that using an information system will enhance their productivity" (Davis, 1989). Accessing quality content promotes customers to follow brand social media more closely and feel involved (Guo et al., 2017). It will not be possible to ensure the sustainability of continued use and engagement in brand social media activities unless the customer perceive the usefulness of brand social media. Perceived usefulness has been found as an important factor affecting customer engagement to social media (Chahal et al., 2017; de Castro, 2017). Reitz (2012) hypothesized that perceived information quality positively influence all customer engagement dimensions.

2.3.6 Perceived Enjoyment

Perceived enjoyment is defined as "an intrinsic motivation that emphasizes the usage process and reflects the pleasure and enjoyment associated with the using a system" (Praveena and Thomas, 2014, p.25). Calder and Malthouse (2005) stated that customers engage in online activities regarding not only utility or quality of the content but also hedonic or emotional factors such as interestingness and enjoyment of the content. Various studies demonstrated the effect of enjoyment on customer engagement in brand related social media (Guo et al., 2017; Chahal et al., 2017; Tsai et al., 2017; Yesiloglu, 2018). Reitz (2012) and Huang et al. (2017) investigated the effect of enjoyment on dimensions of customer engagement and both studies revealed that perceived enjoyment positively predicted all engagement dimensions.

2.3.7 Remuneration

Remuneration refers to expectations of customers in gaining rewards and economic incentives (Yesiloglu, 2018). Companies suggest large amounts stimuli including rewards, promotions, discounts, and coupons to increase the motivation of their customers to encourage engagement in their social media (Guo et al., 2017). Earlier studies concluded that economic benefits drive customers to maintain relationships with the brand and engage in brand related social networks (Guo et al., 2017; Yesiloglu, 2018; de Castro, 2017; Hussain et al., 2018). Chan et al. (2014) stated that the customers will feel obliged to devote themselves and the level of engagement will increase when they perceive rewards from the brand community. Dessart et al. (2015) indicated that benefits from participating in brand community including explicit monetary incentives enhance affect, cognition and behaviors of the community members.

2.3.8 Perceived Brand Image

Brand image refers to subjective perceptions of a customer about a particular brand (Nandan, 2005). Customers combine impressions about the brand that they received from various sources to form a perceived brand personality. When a brand has strong image, it will increase the attractiveness of the brand and willingness of customers to associate with the brand to gain social prestige. Previous works suggested that high reputation and prestige companies are likely to cause higher levels of customer engagement (Goldsmith et al., 2012; Andonova, 2016).

2.3.9 Brand Satisfaction

Tse and Wilton (1988) defined brand satisfaction as “the consumer’s response to the evaluation of the perceived discrepancy between prior expectations and the actual performance of the product as perceived after its consumption” (p. 204), and it is a key factor for the stability of customer-brand relationships (Ling and Pedersen, 2006). Satisfaction arises when customers perceive that the benefits provided by the company exceed customers’ expectations (Carlson et al., 2017). It is considered as a key factor affecting customer engagement behaviors in previous studies (Carlson et al., 2017; Dessart et al., 2015). When the customers are satisfied with the brand and its products or services will be likely to engage in brand related social media.

2.3.10 Self-Image Enhancement

Social enhancement is defined as the perceived value of being recognized or approved by other members of the social network on account of one’s contributions to and relationships with the brand (Dholakia et al., 2004). By engaging in community activities, customer can present their self-concept, create perception about themselves, and gain recognition and reputation from others and those induce a strong motivation to customers for community participation (Simon et al., 2016). Previous studies shown the effect of self-image enhancement value on customer engagement to brand fan pages (Simon et al., 2016; Jahn et al., 2012).

2.3.11 Altruism

Altruism refers to concerning for others without expecting compensation (Luarn et al., 2016). Through social networks, customers can reach a large number of people and share their brand related knowledge and experiences to help them in reaching the necessary information or in making purchasing decisions. In prior studies, it was found that altruism enhances customer engagement behavior such as sharing their knowledge or brand generated content with others that they concern, writing reviews or creating brand related posts or eWOM (Luarn et al., 2016; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2003). Marbach et al. (2016) proposed that altruism is positively related to cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimension of engagement.

2.4 Instrument Development and Pilot Study

To develop the instrument, the conceptual definitions of each construct of the model were defined. To measure the constructs in the model, an item pool was generated using the established measures from prior literature and minor modifications were made to the items to fit them to the context of customer engagement.

Table 1. Brief of Questions of the Survey Instrument

Construct	Sample Question	Reference
Brand Satisfaction	Brand [X] has lived up to my expectations.	Solem (2015)
Brand Image	Brand [X] is reliable.	Chahal et al. (2017)
Trust	I feel safe in my postings with the [X] brand community.	Chahal et al. (2017)
Altruism	I feel good when I can help answer other community members’ questions.	Casas et al. (2016)
Reciprocity	I believe that members in the [X] brand community would help me if I need.	Chiu et al. (2006)
Perceived Enjoyment	The content of the [X] brand community is exciting.	Carlson et al. (2017)
Perceived Usefulness	The content of the [X] brand community is useful for me.	Jahn et al. (2012)
Remuneration	I follow [X] brand community because of incentives I receive.	Guo et al. (2017)
Self-Image Enhancement	I follow [X] brand community because I can present others who I am.	Jahn et al. (2012)
Social Interaction Ties	I know some members in the [X] brand community on a personal level.	Chiu et al. (2006)
Social Identity	The [X] brand community’s identity is reflection of my self-image.	Chahal et al. (2017)
Cognitive Engagement	Time flies when I am interacting with the [X] brand community.	Huang et al. (2013)
Emotional Engagement	I pay a lot of attention to anything about the [X] brand community.	Huang et al. (2013)
Behavioral Engagement	I devote lots of energy to the [X] brand community.	Huang et al. (2013)
Cognitive Loyalty	Overall quality of brand [X] is the best.	Yuksel et al. (2010)
Affective Loyalty	I like brand [X] more than other brand.	Yuksel et al. (2010)
Conative Loyalty	I consider brand [X] to be my first choice.	Yuksel et al. (2010)

In order to ensure content validity, expert review procedure was conducted with three experts from scale development domain. They evaluate the survey items according to their conformance of the related construct definition. Also they assisted in making corrections on the wording and semantic structure of the questionnaire. The final survey items have been selected from the item pool considering their representativeness of the construct's conceptual definition. As a result, the item pool including 63 items was formed. Then, in order to test the instrument in terms of reliability and construct validity, a pilot study was conducted. The brief of questions of the instrument including one sample for each construct is given in Table 1.

2.4.1 Demographics of the Participants

The questionnaire reached 141 participants but only 75 of them stated that they follow a brand community (53.2%). 57% of the respondents are female and 43% are male. Most of the participants (73.3%) were between 20-39 years. Over 89% of the respondents had bachelors or upper degrees. 76% of the respondents were employed and 12% of them were students. 40% of the respondents use social media between 30 minutes-1 hour a day and 33.3 use it 1 to 3 hours a day. 26.7% of the respondents spent more than 3 hours a day using social media. The most widely used social media platform is Instagram. 90% of the respondents use the brand community for consuming type behaviors such as reading product reviews or product ratings, viewing the dialogues of other customers, 37% of them use it for contributing type behaviors such as rating products or brands, commenting on brand related content and media and only 20% of them use it for creating type behaviors such as publishing brand related content or making recommendations. 75% of the participants that perform contributing or creating type behaviors in their brand community are also found to be engaged in the brand community. 67% of the participants that use social media more than 1 hour a day and 89% of the participants in unemployed or retired occupation status are engaged in the brand community that they join.

2.4.2 Reliability Analysis

Since the pilot study was conducted in smaller scale, not all the reliability and validity measures would be applicable. Reliability analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics v25. The Cronbach's Alpha values were examined. In terms of reliability analysis, Cronbach's alpha loadings would be above .70 (Hair, 1998) and all the constructs of our model fulfill the condition. Total reliability was found as 0.974. The Cronbach's Alpha values for each construct (ranged between 0.724 and 0.967) are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha values of constructs

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Construct	Cronbach's Alpha
Brand Satisfaction	0.967	Altruism	0.963	Social Interaction Ties	0.936
Perceived Brand Image	0.914	Reciprocity	0.724	Social Identity	0.888
Cognitive Loyalty	0.881	Perceived Enjoyment	0.916	Cognitive Engagement	0.967
Affective Loyalty	0.866	Perceived Usefulness	0.949	Emotional Engagement	0.909
Conative Loyalty	0.890	Remuneration	0.899	Behavioral Engagement	0.941
Trust	0.880	Self-Image Enhancement	0.929		

Also, Cronbach Alpha if item deleted, item total correlation and inter item correlation values were analyzed. As a result, all the items were decided to be included into the questionnaire since all the constructs have Cronbach Alpha value greater than 0.7. Also, according to the Cronbach Alpha if item deleted values, there is no significant change in construct based Cronbach Alpha values when any item deleted from the questionnaire.

3. CONCLUSION

Given the brands' increasing use of social media for engaging their customers, there is a need to better understand the factors that affects customer engagement in brand related social platforms. Currently, consumer engagement has become a popular research area. Customer engagement with its multidimensional structure having cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions, is a complex process where various factors are expected to affect it. The aim of the study is to identify the factors that can influence the dimensions of

customer engagement to brand related social platforms. Therefore, a model including various factors that represent different aspects of customer engagement is proposed: *Customer Engagement Evaluation Model (CEEM) in Online Brand Communities*. It also includes relationships between engagement dimensions, loyalty dimensions and the relationships between engagement dimensions and its corresponding loyalty dimensions.

The factors were determined based on a systematic review of the established literature. The proposed model consists of social factors (social interaction ties, social identity, trust, reciprocity), content based factors (perceived usefulness, perceived enjoyment, remuneration), brand related factors (perceived brand image, brand satisfaction) and self-oriented factors (self-image enhancement, altruism). Those constructs are considered as relevant influencers of each dimension of customer engagement in brand related social platforms. The proposed model (*Customer Engagement Evaluation Model (CEEM) in Online Brand Communities*) represents a starting point for understanding the antecedents and outcomes of each dimension of customer engagement. In this paper, empirical validity and reliability tests of the proposed model are presented. Future work will involve further validation of the model via various brand communities. For that, the questionnaire is planned to be applied to the members of brand communities from automotive, technology and retail sectors.

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