The Effects of Belonging to Consumer-Managed and Firm-Managed Virtual Brand Communities: the Case of Microsoft Xbox

Stefania Ordovas de Almeida, PPGA/FEA/USP
Jose Afonso Mazzon, PPGA/FEA/USP
Utpal Dholakia, Rice University

The growing use of Internet gave rise to a new way of communication between consumers and companies: the virtual brand communities. The development of these communities is an actual and relevant issue, besides that, in this field of research one of the questions that remain unanswered are related to the understanding of the similarities and differences between firm-managed and consumer-managed brand communities. In this sense, this study proposes a theoretical model that aims to better clear such a question, allowing important contributions in terms of academic and managerial implications to virtual brand communities’ development and management.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14068/la/v2_pdf/LA-02

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
The Effects of Belonging to Consumer-Managed and Firm-Managed Virtual Brand Communities: The Case of Microsoft XBOX
Stefania Ordovas de Almeida, PPGA/FEA/USP, Brazil
Jose Afonso Mazzon, PPGA/FEA/USP, Brazil
Utpal Dholakia, Rice University, USA

Over the last decade or so, brand communities have become established venues of marketing action for many products and services. The surging academic interest in this area can be traced to Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) seminal paper, in which they defined brand community as “specialized, non-geographically bound community(ies), based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001, p.412), and laid the theoretical groundwork for studying such communities.

More recently, Algesheimer and Dholakia (2006) documented the financial benefits of brand community programs to be extremely strongly positive. Other studies have shown that brand communities offer a low cost, effective, customized and reliable means of interacting with an active selected group of loyal customers (Algesheimer and Dholakia, 2006; Muniz and Schau, 2005; McAlexander et al., 2002). Despite the growing interest in this research area, some questions remains to be answered. One is that in spite of having considerable practical significance, little research has examined differences between firm-managed (FMC) and customer-managed brand communities (CMC). This issue is especially pertinent to many firms that have recently launched community sites only to find pre-existing thriving communities established and managed by their own customers. In this sense, specific questions concerning differences between FMC and CMC are studied in the current research: What are the differences between firm-managed and customer-managed brand communities? Which communities have a greater number of social interactions and are more effective in disseminating knowledge? Do these communities favor different sorts of interactions?

To examine these questions, we developed a theoretical model and research hypotheses to be tested. This model was based in an exploratory research performed in three phases: 1) Literature Review: this consisted of the comprehension of consumer participation in CMC and FMC through research available in the marketing, psychology, anthropology and other fields of literature; 2) Nethnographic Study: in this study one FMC and two CMC were analyzed for two products: Microsoft XBOX and National Instruments LabView. The analysis was done through the observation of the Forums in the brand communities’ during five month. The communities were based in English language. This phase allowed the comprehension of participation of consumers in different brand communities, managed by company or by consumers; 3) In depth interviews: were performed with four Brazilian consumers of high involvement products in order to fine-tune the dimensions and hypotheses for the theoretical model.

This exploratory research gave rise to a theoretical model and research hypotheses. This model will be explained through its dimensions, mediation (H1 to H7-all specify positive relationships) and moderation hypotheses (H8 to H10).

1) Demographic Homogeneity and 2) Shared Consciousness: according to Cova and Cova (2000) people belonging to the same community are part of a group that shares something is common, as interests. Preliminary exploratory studies performed showed that consumers with the same demographic profile are more willing to interact online. Also, in a virtual community, the internalization occurs when members agree that their values are in accordance with other group members values (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002),
showing a shared consciousness (Muniz e O’Guinn, 2001).

Hypotheses (C=construct)-

3) Community Openness: the openness of the community communication flow refers to the ability for consumers to discuss in this space topics that concerning the brand and its instrumental value. Professionals should focus not on the product, but in providing conditions for members to interact and influence each other (Bagozzi e Dholakia, 2002).

Hypotheses-

4) Availability of Virtual Venues: this is related to availability of high interactivity venues, as chat-rooms, virtual games, etc., and low interactivity venues, as e-mails lists and bulletin boards (Bagozzi et al., 2005). Dholakia et al. (2004) argue that the level of interactivity gets higher with the synchrony through real time communication.

Hypotheses-

5) Brand Attachment: refers to identification with the brand and congruency of this brand with consumer self-image. Is a consumer already has a relation with the brand it can enhance community identification (Algesheimer et al., 2005).

Hypothesis-

6) Community Identification: this dimension is related to the sense of moral responsibility proposed by Muniz e O’Guinn (2001). According to the authors this sense of moral responsibility produces collectible action and is connected to reciprocity.

Hypotheses-

7) Level of Participation in the Community: refers to the number of times consumers interact in the community, showing support to others. Algesheimer e Dholakia (2006) characterizes, in this sense, consumers that are enthusiasts in the opposite of the ones the search for benefices without contributing.

Hypothesis-
H6: C7?C8.

8) Behavioral Effects: to Algesheimer et al. (2005) the behavioral intentions of community members higher the tendency to stay in this community. So, consumers that intend to continue to have a relationship with the brand and with the community will show a higher tendency to develop more market related behaviors, as well as higher emotional relation with the brand (Algesheimer et al., 2005).

Hypothesis-

9) Marketing Effects: according to Fullerton (2005) a consumer is loyal why he/she has favorable attitude with the brand and is also a frequent buyer of it. To Bagozzi e Dholakia (2006) relationships where consumers have the same interests in the brand bring them to higher behaviors associated to repurchase and loyalty.

The moderation hypotheses considered in the model are following:

H8: Perceptions of Demographic Homogeneity will be higher for members of FMC relatively to CMC members.

H9: Perceptions of Shared Consciousness will be higher for members of CMC relatively to FMC members.

H10: Perception of Availability of Virtual Avenues will be higher for member of FMC relatively to CMC members.

These hypotheses will be tested using data that is being collected in January and February 2008 from two different communities for Microsoft XBOX: Portal XBOX (CMC) and XBOX Brazil (FMC). Empirical results will be able to be presented at ACR Latin American Conference.

References


