Is It Consumers Or Brands? An Investigation of Who Is Ultimately Influencing Sales in Online Brand Communities

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Today, there is a constant exchange of knowledge and experiences between consumers and brands taking place in Social Media and Online Brand Communities. Although both people and brands are enjoying the spotlight, there is little knowledge regarding who is really leading the show when it comes to influencing purchases.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The current use of digital social networks has changed the way people interact, cluster and act (Algesheimer, Utpal and Andreas 2005; Xiang and Gretzel 2010). Online brand communities (OBCs) were chosen as the focus of this research, as research has demonstrated that members’ judgments can greatly influence brand preference and purchase decisions (Hoffman and Novak 1996; Kozinets et al 2010). In an OBC, consumers share interests, needs, experiences and knowledge which lead the creation of social ties that support purchase behaviours (Wellman and Frank 2001; Hansen, Lee and Lee 2014) and help develop long-term relationships between brands and consumers (Dholakia, Bagozzi and Poreo 2004; Brodie et al 2011).

Based on these facts, it becomes fundamental for academics and practitioners to understand the dynamics taking place in OBCs, how social ties around a brand are built and how these can lead to long-term relationships and financial growth (Granovetter 1973; Thomson, MacInnis and Park 2005).

The effects of having ‘friends’ in the OBC amplifies the effect of posted brand content, which at the same time acquires the viral features intrinsic in these platforms (Turri, Smith, and Kempf 2013; Wirtz et al., 2013). However, current academic literature does not distinguish whether it is brand-generated-content or user-generated-content that is ultimately influencing the members of the OBC and, therefore, this research is centered on analyzing how social ties between members of OBCs impact brand awareness, purchases, customer satisfaction (Evenschitzky et al 2004; Cali and Kandampully 2013). In order to achieve this, the moderating factor of social ties between OBC members and the brand was measured; along with the strength of the effects generated by these on brand identity, eWOM, brand advocacy and customer loyalty (Oliver 1999; Muniz O’Guinn 2001; Lawer and Knox 2006).

An inductive ontology with an interpretive approach and convenience sampling (non-probability sampling) was used in this research (Couper 2000; Hair, Bush and Oriniu 2009). A BOS questionnaire (University of Bristol 2016) was developed as it allows the measurement of quantifiable data such as the social tie strength, reach, and relationships taking place in OBC’s (Marsden and Campbell 1984; Oppenheim 1992; Skitka and Sargis 2006).

Results from the data collected corroborated this theoretical concept as it demonstrated that friends are the foremost influential force for learning, joining and engaging in OBCs as these provide advice and support while brand content was the main driver of purchases. Furthermore, members who joined the OBC because they had previous social ties with other members exhibited a stronger attachment to the OBC and the brand than those who did not.

This research found that while relationships and belongings in OBC are driven by its members, awareness and eWOM are driven by both the brand and its members. Thus, a strong relationship between brand identity, loyalty and advocacy in members of online brand communities was confirmed.

Future research arising from this research could expand on the role of frequency of access and customer-engagement as moderating factors in the development of ties between consumers and the brand.

REFERENCES


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