Toward Developing Conceptual Foundations of Internet Brand Community

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Toward Developing Conceptual Foundations of Internet Brand Community (I) Juran Kim University of Tennessee One purpose of this study is to offer conceptual foundations of Internet brand community by developing an integrated overview of the current research. Concepts from the Structuration theory are used for synthesizing the consumer behavior literature. This study attempts to find and fill the gaps between brand community and Internet brand community in the literature. To fill the gaps in the literature, potential research questions and future research directions are suggested. This study offers foundations to develop a conceptual model of Internet brand community by considering the basic concepts in the Structuration theory and critical characteristics of the Internet environment.

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Toward Developing Conceptual Foundations of Internet Brand Community

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Extended Abstract

The concept of brand community has been studied by a number of marketing scholars. Recently, Internet brand communities are attracting attention from marketers. Internet brand communities are growing taking various forms include extensions of a brand community built by corporations and Internet-centric brand communities built by consumers. Despite the widely acknowledged significance of Internet brand community, consumer behaviors within such a context have rarely been studied in the marketing literature, particularly when considering critical characteristics of the Internet environment. This paper seeks to address this distinctive absence.

In this paper, concepts that lie within the Structuration theory (Giddens 1984) will be used as a framework for integrating literature and conceptualizing Internet brand community. This paper’s objectives are as follows: One purpose of this study is to offer conceptual foundations of Internet brand community by developing an integrated overview of the current research. Concepts from the Structuration theory are used for synthesizing the consumer behavior literature. Among the basic concepts of Structuration theory, structure, social integration, time and space, and routines are employed for comparing the concepts of brand community and Internet brand community in the literature synthesis. Brand community and Internet brand community are compared based on the concepts in the Structuration theory.

A second purpose of this study is to find and fill the gaps between brand community and Internet brand community in the literature. Internet brand community is a new concept in academic literature. Comparing brand community and Internet brand community by using the basic concepts of Structuration theory, structure, social/space system integration, time and space, and routines, gaps between brand community and Internet brand community were found. To fill the gaps in the literature, potential research questions are suggested.

First, while the literature offer insights into defining the structure of brand community by discussing hierarchy and formalization, the structure of Internet brand community has only been discussed in terms of the super membership (Schau and Muniz 2003). Further, super membership in an Internet brand community is discussed not in an Internet-centric context but as an extension of offline brand community. It is imperative that the gaps between brand community and Internet brand community studies be filled in, in order to clarify the Internet brand community structure. Thus, the following questions may be drawn upon in future research endeavors to fill the gaps: How can the structure of Internet brand community be conceptualized? What are the differences and similarities in structure between brand community and Internet brand community? What are the differences and similarities in structure between Internet brand community as an extension of offline brand community and Internet-centric brand community?

Second, while the literature conceptualized integration of brand community as Customer-Brand Relationship, Customer-Customer-Relationship and Customer-Centric Relationship (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig 2002), the integration of Internet brand community has not been conceptualized. Further, loyalty and satisfaction related to the Internet brand community have not been discussed. It is imperative to fill the gaps between brand community and Internet brand community studies, in order to clarify the Internet brand community integration. Thus, the following questions can be drawn upon during future research efforts: How can Internet brand community integration be conceptualized? What are the differences and similarities in integration between brand community and Internet brand community? How can loyalty and satisfaction be conceptualized and measured in Internet brand community integration?

Third, Internet brand community studies clearly propose time-space compression in the Internet environment. By considering time and space, the following questions can be drawn upon for the future research efforts which will consider the Internet environment: How does time-space compression affect the structure of Internet brand community? How does time-space compression affect the integration of Internet brand community?

Fourth, Brand communities as subcultures of consumption are characterized by sets of shared beliefs and values, rituals, symbolic expression, shared consumption patterns and ideologies of consumption. But discussions of routines, shared consumption patterns, or shared values in the Internet brand community were hardly found in the literature. The following questions can be drawn upon in future research efforts considering Internet brand community: What are shared beliefs and values, rituals, consumption patterns and ideologies of consumption in the Internet brand community as subculture? How do Internet brand community members present symbolic expression in the Internet environment?

Finally, the future research directions for conceptualizing Internet brand communities are discussed by considering basic concepts in the theory of Structuration and critical characteristics of the Internet environment. Critical characteristics of the Internet environment will be discussed. Then, by considering those characteristics, the future research direction for the Internet brand community will be suggested to fill the gaps in the literature.

A conceptual model of Internet brand community will be suggested by providing theoretical underpinnings of Structuration theory in the Internet environment. The Structuration theory offers insights into the relationship between structure and interactivity, by providing the concept of the duality of structure. In fact, interactivity is a central issue in the Internet environment. However, few articles in the literature offered partial information toward interaction in the Internet brand community in order to build a conceptual framework for Internet brand community in the Internet environment, the relationships between structure and interactivity would need to be thoroughly captured into the model.

References

Consumers’ Internet and Internet Consumers: Exploring Internet-based Electronic Decision Aids

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Extended Abstract

As early as 1955, Simon introduced the notion of bounded rationality. Since then, it has become clear that the traditional approach in explaining consumers’ decision-making, which is based on rational choice theory, is incomplete and flawed (Bettman, Luce, and Payne 1998). According to Simon (1955), bounded rationality takes into account that consumers have cognitive limitations in respect to processing information, and that it is the interaction between task environment and human information-processing system that ultimately determines the behavior of consumers (Bettman et al. 1998; Simon 1990; Todd 1999).

Technological advances, shorter product lifecycles, and the globalization of market transactions have led to a new environment that is not characterized any more by its lack of products and information but by its abundance. In particular the development and fast dissemination of the Internet constitutes such a new task or information-search environment that makes available an enormous amount of information on alternatives (Alba et al. 1997; Urban and Hauser 2004).

It becomes clear that in such information- or choice-overloaded situations, in which the decision task becomes more complex, it is often not possible for consumers to make rational decisions. Customers simply do not have the time (Weenig and Maarleveld 2002) and/or the cognitive capacity to process all of the information available to them in a given time (Iyengar and Lepper 2000; Malhotra 1982, 1984). Because of limitations of consumers’ cognitive system—such limitations include limited online memory and computational capabilities (Bettman et al. 1998)—research has demonstrated that consumers simplify their decision-making processes in information rich environments or under time constraints by relying on simple heuristics (Payne 1982; Timmermans 1993).

While the amount of information available on the Internet keeps expanding, the human processing capacity remains limited. This has created the need for sophisticated decision support tools that are available to consumers in the Internet environment to reduce their cognitive stress by helping them make their choices and providing them with information that is appropriate and relevant for their specific needs (Ariely 2000). Internet’s own technological development accommodates this need. Dickson (2000, 117) therefore calls the Internet a super-diffusion innovation, i.e. one that stands above other technological innovations in that it increases effectiveness, efficiency, and speed of “the transmission of new ideas and technologies between individuals and cultures” (see also Diamond 1998).

The focus of consumer research to date on Internet’s technological advancement has been to investigate how Internet tools influence consumers’ online search behavior. Little attention has been given to examine how the Internet helps improve consumers’ decision-making (Kohli, Devaraj, and Mahmood 2004; Zeng and Reinartz 2003) despite the increasing needs of more research that benefits consumers in general and that helps “individuals make wise consumption decisions” in particular (Bazerman 2001, 500). In a different vein, Bechwati and Xia (2003) note that traditional models of decision-making need to be revisited in the new Internet context. Others go even so far as to suggest that the Internet has changed at least some part of traditional theories of marketing, economics, and other fields of business management (see Biswas 2004; Gaterski and Lundkvist 1998; Hawkins Mansell, and Steinnuller 1999). Diamond (1998) therefore calls on scholars to examine how the available Internet services change consumers’ decision processes. In response to these calls, the present study developed a conceptual framework to demonstrate that Internet’s technological advancement could be used to (1) reduce consumers’ perceived information overload; (2) replace or supplement consumers’ choice heuristics; (3) redefine consumers’ optimal choice; and (4) reduce consumers’ post choice cognitive dissonance.

Specifically, we argue that the Internet not only provides customers with electronic decision aids (e.g. recommendation agents, side-by-side comparisons, ordering and ranking) but also with multi-sensory stimuli (e.g. pictures, short films, or sound) that ultimately help customers in their decision-making process through mental imagery or mood-creation. While research has widely acknowledged the former form of decision aids, it has not sufficiently considered the latter one. We propose that both electronic decision aids and multi-sensory stimuli are being used by online consumers as choice strategies in addition to or instead of commonly discussed heuristics to reduce their perceived information overload and/or to deal with the huge information load provided by the Internet.

In addition, we bring forward that the electronic decision aids and multi-sensory stimuli on the Internet help consumers make more rational decisions. We borrow Bazerman’s (2001) definition of rationality, according to which a decision is considered rational when it maximizes the consumer’s expected welfare. As such, we propose that the most rational decision in the Internet environment does not necessarily have to be the most optimal choice according to the expected utility theory (Tversky and Kahneman 1981) or weighted adding strategy (Bettman et al. 1998). Rather, we propose that consumers judge their choice outcome or the “quality of the decision” according to a reference (e.g. recommendation, average customer rating) that does not necessarily constitute the theoretically optimal choice. This argumentation is in accordance with the information theory that implies to maximize consumers’ benefits (welfare) and minimize their costs (cognitive load through information load). Hence, the Internet environment requires a redefinition of “optimal choice” or “optimal decision performance.”

Finally, we argue that the Internet also changes post choice behavior. The foregoing discussion implies that a redefinition of “optimal choice” will also lead to more satisfied customers and ultimately alleviated consumers’ post-choice cognitive dissonance.