Web 2.0: Online Communities Or Bla-Bla Land?

Natalia Drozdova, Norwegian School of Economics, Norway

Denis Utochkin , Norwegian School of Economics, Norway

Ingeborg A. Kleppe, Norwegian School of Economics, Norway

This paper explores users' interactions on Twitter and Kickstarter. Not only do users interact with each other significantly more often on Kickstarter than on Twitter, they also express a stronger community feeling. This paper contributes to the understanding of the variations of possible interactions across different online platforms.

[to cite]:

[url]:

[copyright notice]:

Web 2.0: Online Communities or Bla-Bla Land?

Natalia Drozdova, Norwegian School of Economics, Norway
Denis Utochkin, Norwegian School of Economics, Norway
Ingeborg A. Kleppe, Norwegian School of Economics, Norway

ABSTRACT

This paper explores users' interactions on Twitter and Kickstarter. Not only do users interact with each other significantly more often on Kickstarter than on Twitter, they also express a stronger community feeling. This paper contributes to the understanding of the variations of possible interactions across different online platforms.

INTRODUCTION

The brand community framework (Kozinets 1999; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) has been extremely fertile in studying the eruption of consumer-generated online content that followed the launch of Web 2.0 in 2004. In online conversations, a brand can work as a shorthand signifier (Holt, 2004) connecting consumers to aggregates of other consumers in a nongeographically bound online space (Belk, 2013). Cova (1997) suggests that the linking value of a brand can be more important than the consumption of the brand product or service. The early years of Web 2.0 have inspired an abundance of brand community insights, such as the concept of collective creativity in online crowds (Kozinets, Hemtsberger, and Schau 2008); consumer-to-consumer co-creation of word-of-mouth-marketing (Kozinets, Valck, Wojnick, Wilner 2010); how marginalized consumers use online communities to quest after greater inclusion in mainstream markets (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013); and how ordinary consumers can earn online leadership to an audience (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013).

A recent study challenges the strong hold of the consumer community concept (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2015). They claim that people's online activity is not driven by communicative interaction around a shared identity with a brand. Instead, they claim that it is the platform – or the mediation – that drives individual postings that might be inspired by ongoing affective trends or sentiments. Contrary to communities, a public is not about consumer-to-consumer communication. Arvidsson and Caliandro (2015) claim that online posting is mostly about publicity, not community.

Arvidsson and Caliandro (2015) study the #LouisVuitton on Twitter, and based on a quantitative content analysis their research suggests that people do not address each other in their tweets. The #LouisVuitton case confines to a larger group of studies that uses the field of fashion as their online study context (Dolbec and Fisher 2015; McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013; Scaraboto and Fisher 2013). The combination of Twitter as a mediating platform and the field of fashion constitutes a specific study context that might tint the conclusions regarding community versus public online content. The motivation for this research comes from this assumption, as we suggest that fields outside fashion in combination with other platforms need to be studied in order to make reliable conclusions regarding the types of interactions online.

In this study, we follow up on Arvidson and Caliandro's (2015) research and take their findings to a different context. As Web 2.0 has evolved, social media migrates to other sectors of the economy. In particular, the finance and banking sectors are blooming with new online platforms. Kickstarter, a reward-based crowdfunding platform, is the finance counterpart to pure social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Crowdfunding is defined as an open call, essentially through the Internet, for the provision of financial resources either in the form of donation or in exchange for some form of reward and/or voting rights in order to support initiatives for specific purposes (Schwienbacher & Larralde, 2010). Reward-based crowdfunding is one type of crowdfunding where funders get various non-financial benefits in exchange for their contribution such as a token souvenir or a promise of a future customer privilege such as early access to a product. Kickstarter attracts entrepreneurs who call for backers wanting to buy into new ideas at an early stage. Founders can inform about the development of the project and backers can post and have conversations on the project site.

We study the case of Obsidian Entertainment, a video game developer that has a large following both on Twitter and on Kickstarter. Our research question explores to what degree consumers interact with each other in conversations on these two very different online platforms.

THEORY

We use the conceptual dichotomy between publics and communities proposed by Arvidsson and Caliandro (2015). A community is based on, and supported by, interaction between its members, while publics are largely non-interactive and are instead sustained by a mediation device such as a specific topic of interest, brand, celebrity, hashtag, etc. Moreover, consumers participate in a community by engaging, communicating, and interacting with other community members. Participation in a public only requires sharing one's sentiment or perspective on a topic that ties the public together, without engaging in a conversation or expecting a reaction from other members of the public. Finally, members of communities develop and maintain a shared identity, while members of a public use publicity to reinforce their individual identities.

METHOD

Case

In order to avoid a bias stemming from potential differences between consumers communication around long-established brands and brands that first emerged through crowdfunding campaigns, we chose to analyze a brand that had a sufficiently large following before its Kickstarter success. Game developer Obsidian Entertainment fits this criterion. The studio had been founded by game designers well-known for their 1990s projects and released five major titles by 2012, accumulating a considerable fan base. In 2012, the developer turned to Kickstarter to seek funding for their new game. Obsidian Entertainment received nearly USD 4 million from more than 73,000 backers in 60 days. The game, named Pillars of Eternity, was released in 2015, enjoying critical acclaim and commercial success. Project's comments section spawned a massive discussion with more than 63,000 postings, making it a fertile ground for content analysis.

Measurement

We compare Twitter and Kickstarter on the two dimensions suggested by Arvidsson and Caliandro (2015). In doing so we build on qualitative and quantitative data using three algorithms written in Python, two for collecting Kickstarter comments and fetching tweets with specific keywords, respectively, and one for conducting computer-assisted text analysis on collected data. We collected and analyzed a total of 13,942 tweets and 60,882 Kickstarter comments.

Since we are interested in investigating consumers' communication patterns, we exclude all postings by the brand representatives.

Interaction dimension. We define 'interactive communication' as postings in which users address one another. Both on Kickstarter and Twitter, users type @USERNAME when addressing other members. By counting the number of comments or tweets containing the @ symbol and excluding instances where it is followed by an email domain name, we find the number of times users have reached out to other members of the online platform. We also analyze how features of the platform can facilitate/discourage users' interaction.

Identity dimension. We conduct a qualitative analysis to identify the core values of the collective and also employ quantitative techniques to estimate the number of postings that contain personal pronouns that point towards a sense of shared identity ('we', 'our', 'us') and individual identity ('I', 'my', 'me').

Arvidsson and Caliandro (2015) identify communicative dimension as the third measure of communities and publics. It is rooted in the interaction dimension and the identity dimensions. Therefore, we will not measure it separately in this paper.

FINDINGS

The analysis reveals significantly higher interaction between the users of the Kickstarter platform in comparison with Twitter. On the Kickstarter commentary, in 48 % (29026 comments) of the comments backers were addressing other backers. On Twitter, only 8 % (435 tweets) of the tweets that mentioned Obsidian Entertainment were addressed to a Twitter account other than the ones affiliated with the brand. Twitter provides an easier way to address other users (users can be tagged to create an interactive link to their profile), while Kickstarter does not provide this option. On the other hand, the 'newsfeed' on Kickstarter presents a flow of the comments in chronological order. This news feed appears the same for all users. Twitter, however, lacks a centralized discussion thread.

In order to analyze the identity dimension, we first conducted a qualitative analysis of the Kickstarter commentary and Twitter feed. We followed the Corley and Gioia (2004) data-analyzing template. First, we meticulously managed our data by organizing postings chronologically in a collated data file. Second, we read the data file and searched for emerging patterns and systematic variation. We were particularly looking for shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility (in accordance with Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Analysis of the Kickstarter commentary revealed a rather strong *we*-feeling, with many funders expressing a group sentiment instead of an individual one – '*So, are we getting any details on...*', '*We want Linux support!*', '*We love your work more than you think =)*', '*Everyone here is rooting for you!*', '*We are all counting on you!*'. Even though first person singular pronouns are prevalent, the share of comments that refer to 'we-ness' is substantial: mentions of individual self appears in 42% of backers' comments, while 13% of the postings by funders appeal to the shared communal identity. The ratio of 'we-comments' to 'I-comments' was therefore estimated at 0.29 (the higher the value, the larger the share of 'we'-postings compared to comments referring to one's individual identity).

Funders also express excitement of being one of the people behind a project and are looking forward to sharing this experience with others – '*Hey Guys, im happy to collaborate in funding this project. I'm a developer too ...*', '*Looking forward to belong to your party and go on this adventure together*'. It seems that on Kickstarter there is a natural we-feeling, as only the ones who pledged funds to the project can leave comments on comment feed. Therefore, there is a natural border between the 'we-who-funded-the-project' and the 'outsiders'.

Kickstarter gives backers a common goal which unites people and makes them willing to work together towards its achievement ('*Hey everyone ! Next is going to look fantastic! Let's work together to make Project Eternity a reality!*', '*I'm i,n – hope that we get enough money for a MAC version*'). Many funders also monitor the progress in achieving this common goal, and share their observations with others - '*We're so close to hitting the half-way point. It's just unbelievable!! This game is SO happening!*', '*Half way there!!*'

Shared rituals and traditions is another important element of a community, whose function is to maintain the culture of the community. The analysis of Kickstarter community revealed the use of slang by many funders. Probably the most popular is '*Shut up and take my money*', which was used at least 175 times. The frequent usage of the phrase was noticed by the commenters, with one of them actually admitting: '*I think this project warrants a "Shut up and take my money!" meme!*' Also, many creative variations of this phrase were used, such as '*Please cease your vocalizations and accept my gold coins!*'

Another important element of the brand community is moral responsibility. Moral responsibility is a sense of duty to the community as a whole, and to individual members of the community. The existence of moral responsibility implies that the communities formally and informally recognize the bounds of what is right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Analysis of the Kickstarter commentary reveals the existence of certain ideological preferences, which motivate funders to back the project. Users point out the differences between 'soulless games' produced by publishers and Obsidian – '*Obsidian entertainment going to make a game without a publisher telling them what to do and how to do???? F*** YEAH!*', '*we're sick and tired of consolized games and this will be a breath of fresh air!*', '*The publisher model is broken, Kickstarter let's us bypass the retardation of the publisher model and go straight to giving the gamers what they want*', '*They want freedom from stupid publishers, let's give it to them.*'. There is an ideology behind the project, which lets users distinguish between the 'bad publishing model', and the independent project that they are funding.

We also read thoroughly through the tweets mentioning Obsidian Entertainment or Pillars of Eternity. From our initial sample of 13,942 tweets, we excluded tweets containing links (as the majority of them are promo tweets linking to news websites), tweets in languages other than English, as well as postings by official company's account and accounts of its founders. That limited our sample to 2,243 tweets. Content analysis of the tweets revealed three main topics:

> Tweets containing various technical inquiries ('*Someone needs to talk to the MTG people and convince them to team up with Obsidian Enter.*')

> Tweets containing announcements ('*Just announced! Tyranny, the epic new RPG from Paradox Interactive and Obsidian Entertainment ! #whatifevilwon*'), or discussion of potential news events ('*I hope Obsidian Entertainment gets the rights to Fallout and they make a game (with enough time and resources this time) that outsells FO4.*')

> Tweets containing personal experiences ('*Today is my 1 year anniversary of working at Obsidian Entertainment! It's been a great year! Time definitely flies when you're having fun.*', '*Took some time to escape into Obsidian Entertainment's "Tyranny" rpg. It's awesome. (steam)*')

While the share of postings appealing to individual identity was nearly equal for Kickstarter and Twitter communication (47% and 48% respectively), the 'we'-feeling is considerably weaker on Twitter: 'we-ness' was expressed in mere three per cent of the tweets in our sample, resulting in a ratio of 'we'-tweets to 'I'-tweets of 0.095. In addition, we were not able to identify any shared traditions or rituals. The emotional modality of the tweets is very diverse. Some users express strong positive emotions - '*obsidian entertainment BEST F***ING DEVS IN THE WHOLE WORLD*', while others share very negative experiences - '*Obsidian Entertainment has to be the poorest excuse for a game development company ever. Every game they've released has been trash.*'. While Kickstarter limits the possibility to comment only to the ones who funded the project, Twitter does not impose any limitations of such type, therefore it seems natural that emotional modality of the comments on Twitter is significantly wider than on Kickstarter.

DISCUSSION

This paper reveals significant differences between the users' interactions on Twitter and Kickstarter. Not only do users interact with each other significantly more on Kickstarter than on Twitter, they also express a stronger community feeling. The common goal (funding the project) and the feeling of belonging to the same project seem to unify Kickstarter users. We find indication of all three dimensions of community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) such as consciousness of kind, shared slang, and moral responsibility (expressed via ideological preferences towards independent game development) on Kickstarter. On Twitter, on the other hand, users seem to lack communal feeling and strong unifying factors, which is in line with the findings by Arvidson and Caliandro (2015).

Based on our analysis, we suggest that brand communities and brand publics co-exist on the Internet. Indeed, it is possible that communities and publics are but two points on a continuum of consumer collectives.

The important contribution of our analysis is the variations of possible interactions across different online platforms. Some platforms may in fact be a 'bla-bla land', but others may facilitate strong community feelings among users. Further research is needed in order to fill in the gaps on the public-community continuum of consumer interactions online as well as observe consumer behavior in other study contexts.

REFERENCES

Arvidsson, A., & Caliandro, A. (2016). Brand public. *Journal of Consumer Research, 42*(5), 727-748.

Belk, R. W. (2013). Extended Self in a Digital World. *Journal of Consumer Research, 40*(3), 477-500.

Corley, K. G., & Gioia, D. A. (2004). Identity ambiguity and change in the wake of a corporate spin-off. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 173-208.

Cova, B. (1997). Community and consumption: Towards a definition of the "linking value" of product or services. *European Journal of Marketing, 31*(3/4), 297-316.

Dolbec, P. Y., & Fischer, E. (2015). Refashioning a field? Connected consumers and institutional dynamics in markets. *Journal of Consumer Research, 41*(6), 1447-1468.

Holt, D. B. (2004). *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding.* Boston MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Kozinets, R. V. (1999). E-tribalized marketing?: The strategic implications of virtual communities of consumption. *European Management Journal, 17*(3), 252-264.

Kozinets, R. V., Hemetsberger, A., & Schau, H. J. (2008). The wisdom of consumer crowds: Collective innovation in the age of networked marketing. *Journal of Macromarketing*, 339-354.

Kozinets, R. V., De Valck, K., Wojnicki, A. C., & Wilner, S. J. (2010). Networked narratives: Understanding word-of-mouth marketing in online communities. . *Journal of marketing*, 71-89.

McQuarrie, E. F., Miller, J., & Phillips, B. J. (2013). The megaphone effect: Taste and audience in fashion blogging. *Journal of Consumer Research, 40*(1), 136-158.

Table 1: Summary of Results

Obsidian Entertainment, Project Eternity		Kickstarter	Twitter
Interaction dimension		- Share of backer-to-backer (consumer-to-consumer) comments: 48%	- Share of tweets addressing someone other than official Obsidian account (consumer-to-consumer postings): 28%
		Generally, Twitter users interact with each other significantly less than Kickstarter users.	
Identity dimension		- Existence of We-feeling 'We'-postings to 'I'-postings ratio: 0.322 47 % of all posts used first person singular pronouns 15 % of all posts used first person plural pronouns - observable usage of common slang ('Shut up and take my money' used more than 175 times) - moral responsibility (expressed via ideological preferences towards independent game developing)	- Lack of we-feeling 'We'-postings to 'I'-postings ratio: 0.072 48 % of all posts used first person singular pronouns 3 % of all posts used first person plural pronouns - no common slang or shared rituals - no shared understanding of moral responsibility expressed
		Kickstarter users seem to be unified by the existence of common goal (funding the project). They use significantly more we-postings than Twitter users, share common slang and express shared ideological preferences. Tweets, on the other hand, do not merge into a coherent discussion.	

Muniz, A. M., & O'Guinn, T. C. (2001). Brand Community. *Journal of Consumer Research, 27*(4), 412-432.

Muniz, A. M., & Schau, H. J. (2005). Religiosity in the Abandoned Apple Newton Brand Community. *Journal of Consumer Research, 31*(4), 737-747.

Scaraboto, D. &. Fisher, E. (2013). Frustrated fatshionistas: An institutional theory perspective on consumer quests for greater choice in mainstream markets. *Journal of Consumer Research, 39*(6), 1234-1257.

Schwienbacher, A., & Larralde, B. (2010). Crowdfunding of small entrepreneurial ventures. *SSRN Electronic Journal* .