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Minna Mäläskä

Oulu Business School, Finland, minna.malaska@oulu.fi

Waqar Nadeem

Oulu Business School, Finland, waqarchaudry@live.com

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Examining the Nature of an Online Brand Community as a B2B Brand Communication Platform: *A Netnographic Analysis of the CISCO LinkedIn Group*

Minna Mäläskä

Oulu Business School, Finland
minna.malaska@oulu.fi

Waqar Nadeem

Oulu Business School, Finland
waqarchaudry@live.com

Abstract

Building on the extant research on branding and social media, this study examines the nature of an online brand community as a B2B brand communication platform through netnographic analysis of the CISCO LinkedIn Group discussions. The empirical analysis yielded four distinct themes characterizing B2B brand communication within the online community that contribute to the existing theory: company employees' persuasive communication, company employees' communal communication, community members' persuasive communication and community members' communal communication.

Keywords: B2B branding, Social media, Online community, Netnography

1 Introduction

Online social networks represent a new medium of interpersonal and inter-organizational communication and interactions (Michaelidou, Siamagka & Christodoulides 2011). Compared to traditional channels, social media also offers novel opportunities for companies to build relationships with customers and other stakeholders, which is seen as an underlying determinant of success particularly in B2B marketing (Haley 2002). The development of interactive technologies and social media has fostered the development and utility of online communities in building brand relationships, awareness and trust (Casaló, Flavián & Guinalú 2008) in B2B markets

too (Andersen 2005). Online communities also promote two-way communication and interaction between a company and its stakeholders, which is seen as the foundation for brand value creation (Jones 2005).

Joining online communities has become increasingly common among business professionals (Skeels & Grudin 2009). In particular, the community building aspects of social networking sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook have made them immensely popular as they make it possible for companies to interact and engage with wide audiences. According to Stelzner's (2011) social media marketing industry report, 93% of marketers indicated that they were using social media for marketing purposes and 90% thought it essential for their businesses. Several other commercial surveys predict an increasing exploitation of social media in marketing, particularly among B2B companies in the future (Harvard Business Review 2010; White Horse 2010).

Despite the endeavors of B2B companies to incorporate social media into their marketing programs (Adiele 2011; Baird & Parasnis 2011), a good deal of skepticism remains of its business relevance in the B2B context (Michaelidou et al. 2011) given its predominance in consumer-marketing practice. Building and managing highly dynamic and interactive online communities is a particular challenge for business marketers given the lack of available knowledge and experience (Hummel & Lechner 2002; Cothrel 2000). As most of the research has been conducted from the consumer markets perspective, the value of social media and more specifically the online communities in B2B branding are not well supported by theoretical reasoning.

This study seeks to address this knowledge gap by examining the nature of an online brand community as a B2B brand communication platform through a netnographic analysis of the content of conversations and communal interactions within the CISCO LinkedIn group. This study focuses on branding particularly at the corporate level.

The paper proceeds with a literature review on B2B branding particularly from the value co-creation perspective. The study also considers the insights of social media and brand community research gained mostly from consumer markets to elaborate on the phenomenon. The methodology is then described followed by the empirical findings, conclusions and discussions and suggestions for future research.

2 Theoretical background

Corporate branding is essentially about communicating and acting upon the company's core values (Urde 2003; Balmer 2008) to engender trust and preference and to distinguish it from its competitors (Kapferer 1994). Brand value ultimately results from both direct brand experiences (value-in-use) and communicative interactions between the brand and its stakeholders, that is, indirect brand experiences (Payne, Storbacka, Frow & Knox 2009; Ballantyne & Aitken 2007). These experiences and interactions have traditionally been thought to be generated and controlled solely by the company. However, in the recent branding research the role of external actors in branding has been increasingly recognized (Jones 2005; Ballantyne & Aitken 2007) asserting that there are actors within the company's network that participate in branding acting on their own initiative beyond the company's direct influence (Mäläskä, Saraniemi & Tähtinen 2011). Branding is then perceived as a collaborative and dynamic process of communications and interactions between a company and its stakeholders (Mertz, He & Vargo 2009; see also Veloutsou 2008).

Digitalization along with increased interactivity (Avlonitis & Karayanni 2000) and customer empowerment (Christodoulides 2009) have even changed the principles of branding. Given the dynamism of digital channels and the viral nature of social media, marketers have less control over the brand related information available online (*ibid.*). According to Gregory (2007:64) brand communications include both planned and unplanned communication (including word of mouth) and by extension, all communication between third parties. In light of this, user-generated content and many-to-many conversations within online communities can be viewed as brand communications influencing the brand value beyond the value provided by the company itself. In order to exploit the profound essence of the interactivity and stakeholders' participation in brand value creation, companies must adopt more dialogue-oriented conversation strategies instead of trying to dominate the discussions (Christodoulides 2009).

Whereas personal selling and face-to-face communications are commonly seen as the most critical activities in B2B branding, digitalization has posed some challenges to that perception. According to Baumgarth (2010), due to digitalization the number of personal encounters has decreased forcing companies to build relationships and engender trust with stakeholders online, devoid of a physical presence. The extant academic research has recognized that online community practices are increasingly implemented to engage with stakeholders and to improve brand associations and loyalty as community practices endorse interpersonal relationships, experience and trust (Schau, Muñoz & Arnould 2009) which are often absent in faceless digital interactions. Research on brand communities further emphasizes that their active members often become co-creators of brand meaning, perceptions and value, rather than passive bystanders of the branding process (e.g., McAlexander et al. 2002; Muñoz & O'Guinn 2001).

The previous studies on brand communities and the definitions they have generated are, however, strongly grounded in their consumer market context and have only limited relevance for B2B purposes. In the B2B sector, online communities are more generally discussed within the research on lead-user innovation, user design or crowdsourcing (e.g., Urban & Von Hippel 1988) rather than branding. However, recent research has indicated that building online communal platforms around brands can also be of significant strategic value for B2B organizations as it enhances communication and collaboration (Andersen 2005).

Business-to-business sector professionals may have different reasons to participate in online communities than consumers. The reasons might include to share experiences, establish relationships, to cultivate interests and skills, invite feedback, search for support and encouragement or even to explore ways to contribute to the greater good, to name but a few (see e.g., Andersen 2005; Fournier & Lee 2009). Distinct from the consumer-driven conceptualization of brand communities (see e.g., Muñoz & O'Guinn 2001) a B2B brand community serves as a platform for its members to connect, share and interact with each other, rather than a platform from which to worship a brand (Andersen 2005). Given the high level of rationality in organizational buying, B2B brand communication in general focuses more on the functional than emotional attributes (Lynch & de Chernatony 2004).

Social media and online communities are an important source of information. According to Ward (2000) professional users commonly participate in online communities to gain extensive access to product and market knowledge, and complete the information provided by the marketer (see also Deeter-Schmelz & Kennedy 2002). Andersen (2005) asserts the role of online communities as knowledge and experience sharing platforms offering substantial opportunities for professionals to connect globally with peers who would otherwise be inaccessible due to physical and social distance. B2B professionals in general have a strong tendency to contact peers with similar interests and concerns, in order to gain personal recognition and to express their socio-cognitive roles through community participation (Andersen 2005; Andersen 2001; Andersen & Sorensen 1999).

Community success is however greatly reliant on the members' activity level and involvement (Koh & Kim 2004) and that is determined by the nature and frequency of the interactions and their usefulness according to the users' needs (Adiele 2011; Fournier & Lee 2009). Achieving interactivity has usually been the major obstacle as in most online communities less than 10 per cent of the members are active (Cothrel 2000) and an even smaller minority make any substantial contributions to the community. The company's role is to proactively incubate new activities, events and themes to facilitate interactions and foster integration in order to keep the community active (McAlexander et al. 2002; Andersen 2005). According to Andersen (2005) online brand communities in B2B markets should not be structured purely for marketing aims and commercial activities but in line with Schau et al. (2009) the community should offer its members something they value in order to justify its existence. This is in line with the view of Fournier and Lee (2009) brand communities exist primarily to serve the members' needs instead of the company's alone, emphasizing shared interest and experiences as the foundation of community existence (see also McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig 2002).

3 Methodology

While mainly explorative in nature, the study uses the netnographic method to assess and explore the online brand community communications and to expand the knowledge of the unstudied phenomenon. Netnography is a qualitative, ethnographic approach specially designed to study computer-mediated communications and social interactions within online communities (Kozinets 2010: 60).

The study has adopted a qualitative method of data gathering and analysis particularly for its suitability to understand and uncover a complex phenomenon (Ghauri & Gronhaug 2002: 88) where there is a dearth of previous research (Shaw 1999). Online communities encompass plenty of qualitative aspects, relations and insights that are impossible, or at least very difficult, to quantify even with the most sophisticated automated techniques (Paccagnella 1997; Cothrel 2000). In-depth analysis and human intervention is particularly required to capture the spectrum of tones and sentiments embedded in the conversations and the dynamism and spontaneous of interactions that are a particularly prominent feature in social networks, but which analytic software, lacking sensitivity and accuracy, usually fails to address (Branthwaite & Patterson 2011).

The current research chooses to focus on the LinkedIn group structured around Cisco Systems, an industry leading manufacturer of computer network equipment. The aim is

to develop understanding of the nature of an online brand community as a B2B brand communication platform. Cisco is an often-cited example of best practice for a B2B company that has integrated social media into its organization strategy (Social Media Today 2011). Cisco has an internal policy that encourages employees to use social media to interact and engage with customers and other stakeholders (Paquette 2010), making it an attractive case to study.

LinkedIn was chosen because it is the third most popular social media tool used by marketers after Facebook and Twitter and it is, by far, the largest business-related social networking site that is increasingly growing in popularity particularly among B2B professionals (Stelzner 2011). LinkedIn also allows access to the user's profiles offering additional information about their identities and professional affiliations.

There are plenty of Cisco related groups on LinkedIn of which the CISCO LinkedIn group is the largest. It is also among the biggest B2B brand specific groups on the whole of LinkedIn that supports discussions between its members. At the time of data collection in 2012 the group boasted approximately 80,000 members. The CISCO LinkedIn group is an unofficial user-governed community initiated and moderated by a couple of brand enthusiasts, neither of whom has any direct affiliation to the company, instead of by the company itself. The CISCO group is not the most active Cisco-related LinkedIn group in terms of discussions, however, it is not exclusive nor does it otherwise restrict topics (cf. Cisco Certification group). It is therefore open to a wider brand audience which was also used as a selection criterion of the research setting. With all the data publicly available, the CISCO LinkedIn group provided easy access to rich data content that would otherwise have been difficult to obtain (see Beckmann & Langer 2005).

The interactions within the group were observed without interruption in order to gain genuine and rich insights into the community practices as they occurred (see Kozinets 2010: 59). The most popular discussions (in terms of comments and likes) were chosen for analysis, which resulted in an 82-page printout of textual data and a total of 20 discussions and 678 comments. The single postings that did not generate any discussion were excluded from the analysis.

The iterative process of netnographic analysis went through an abductive process from familiarization with the content shared within the community, to classification, coding and categorization of the data (Kozinets 2010). Owing to the exploratory aim, the existing theory was used as a tentative guide for initial coding. The analysis then proceeded to restructure the data in order to interpret latent meanings from the content and formulate the themes.

Acknowledging that the members might act on their own initiative without a conscious intention to influence the brand (Mäläskä et. al 2011), the focus of the analysis was explicitly on the content that might influence the brand experiences and perceptions. Of particular interest were the interactions between the community members and the interactions between the community members and the company representatives, instead of the commercial messages provided by the company alone. Company representatives were fairly easily identifiable from the rest of the community members based on their LinkedIn profiles because, Cisco social media policy (Paquette 2010) dictates that they are required to use their own names and identify themselves as Cisco employees when participating in social networking sites.

4 Empirical findings

The empirical analysis yielded four distinct themes that characterize the nature of an online brand community as a B2B brand communication platform. These four themes are discussed below in more detail and supplemented with illustrative extracts from the CISCO LinkedIn group discussions.

4.1 Company employees' persuasive communication

Despite the CISCO LinkedIn group being a self-governed, unofficial brand community, it is not surprising that Cisco marketing staff take advantage of it as a channel to distribute persuasive messages, such as, company news and announcements to a targeted audience. Such discussions were mainly initiated by the community manager of the Cisco company. The persuasive messages are, however, formulated as enquiries so that rather than exploit the online community purely as a promotional platform the message is presented in a manner that preserves the communal tone and encourages dialogue between the members. An overly commercial approach is to be avoided because if forum moderators deem the message to be promotional, it will be removed from the discussions section. However, the analysis suggests that the members acknowledge that when they decided to participate in the Cisco community they would be exposed to commercial messaging to some extent. Accordingly, the community is seen as incorporating an acceptable level of promotional activity compared with non-commercial forums.

“Hi Cisco Partners! Who all is attending Cisco Partner Summit this week in San Diego or virtually? Who are you most excited to hear from and what about?” *Cisco representative X*

The conversation initiatives included event promotion (as in the extract above), company and industry announcements and polls for example. The community members were also invited to engage in conversations and provide feedback about Cisco products and technologies or business in general. This provided insights for marketing and branding to identify potential future improvements in relation to the company and its offering.

4.2 Company employees' communal communication

Besides initiating brand-related discussions, the company employees also participated in some interactions with the other community members. Cisco employees participated in 10 out of 20 discussions and a total of 31 of 678 comments were made by Cisco employees. This does not indicate a very high interactivity or engagement level from the Cisco employees towards the community. However, it was interesting to notice that the 31 comments came from 26 different people, representing a variety of different professions within the company (other than marketing) and working at different organizational levels emphasizing the dynamism and pervasiveness of brand communication throughout the organization.

“Hi Joe, thanks for bringing up such a great topic. --- With regards what we Cisco SE Managers look for in pre-sales and SE's and train, it is true that our customers expect us to have top notch technical skills. --- We also do a lot of soft-skills training internally” *Cisco representative Y*

This clearly shows that people beyond the marketing function are also following the discussions and communicating with existing and potential customers and other stakeholders through the CISCO LinkedIn group. Company employees contributed to the discussions for example by responding to queries to inform the community members about the company's products and services and also provided more general information about the company's operations as well as their own professions and backgrounds. Given the professional emphasis of the community, the comments were presented in a very neutral manner concentrating on the factual and rational arguments related to the brand rather than emotional attachments and were, thus, less marketing oriented. Furthermore, instead of emphasizing their affiliations with Cisco some of the employees presented themselves in very neutral manner and contributed to the topics of discussions very objectively with no evidence of pursuing an agenda. The communication was thus very communal in nature.

4.3 Community members' persuasive communication

The community members readily provided word of mouth recommendations in a persuasive manner to influence general perceptions of the brand image and trust. In many comments and discussions the Cisco brand was assessed against its competitors, addressing the brand positioning in the market. Detailed comparisons of the advantages and disadvantages of Cisco products and services in relation to those of other suppliers were provided by the community members to differentiate between the brands and express their preferences.

“Hi, every 1 --- I would like to add some more point in the glory of CISCO witch [*sic*] other vendors lack. cisco have most reliable power in it hardware, less ios bugs, --- last but not least is its' technical resource available around the world...” *Community member A*

The analysis suggests that the members also actively invited third-party opinions and referrals from each other, independent of marketing and advertising, to vindicate possible future purchases. The brand communication often resided with the brand advocates as company employees seldom interfered in the discussions.

The analysis also reveals instances of Cisco channel and manufacturing partners promoting their products and services within the communal discussions. The offering usually included co-promotional aspects expressing brand affiliations between Cisco and the partner. However, there were also independent vendors commenting on relevant discussions in a persuasive manner to connect with potential customers and promote their offerings.

“@khalil, We offer video training bundles for what you are looking for. You can find more details at www.itemsolutions.com. We also offer payment plans.” *Community member B*

Considering that the community is structured around the Cisco brand, it is obvious that the conversations more or less evolved around it and based on the prevailing tone and attitude reflected by the comments, the general atmosphere was favorable to Cisco. However, the conversations also included criticism and some of the community members were endorsing competing brands.

“Cisco is over price and about the same quality as other offering from other vendors. The only place Cisco has an edge is in “core switching”. --- For some reason I prefer Adtran switches. ---” *Community member C*

Given that the community was considered as Cisco’s territory the opposing opinions were often introduced in a constructive manner but more critical comments were also made. Furthermore, as the debate evolved around a business offering the comments were more rationally than emotionally loaded with an emphasis on technical information and functionality.

4.4 Community members’ communal communication

In addition to brand-related topics, members were inclined to share personal experiences and opinions on professional issues that they felt connected to; something that increased the sense of belonging among the community members. The conversations between the community members included for example peer-to-peer knowledge exchange and support concerning the common challenges and practices, related to their profession and the industry in general.

“--- Maybe someone on this forum who has passed CCNA recently lend you their book for some time. Just giving you some ideas.” *Community member D*

“@Vivek, That is a great idea. Genesiuse, I would be more than willing to share my Cisco eBooks with you....” *Community member E*

Member generated conversations make the discussion topics more diverse and foster the interactivity of the brand community that ultimately drives community value to its members. Yet, it is worth noting that nine of twenty discussions (including the most popular ones) were initiated by two people: the owner and the manager of the CISCO LinkedIn group. In addition, to the conversation initiatives coming from the owner or the manager of the CISCO LinkedIn group or from the company’s side, those regular community members proactively posting a new topic were few and far between. The analysis suggests that the community members were clearly more comfortable with contributing to on-going conversations than taking the initiative to start one. The community members particularly tended to participate in discussions in which they were able to express their own professional expertise and connectedness with the community and share opinions and acquire knowledge on common and topical issues. These conversations could be perceived as a valuable source of information for the other users but also for the company in order to detect the “weak signals” sensing the industry trends and to acquire demographic insights of their target audience.

5 Conclusions and discussions

Bearing in mind the exploratory nature of this study, it can be concluded that an active online brand community is an efficient means for company employees beyond the marketing function and also for a wider group of external stakeholders to participate in brand communication and contribute to brand value creation. The study contributes to the existing theory by highlighting four distinct themes that characterize the nature of the online brand community as a B2B brand communication platform: *company employees’ persuasive communication, company employees’ communal communication,*

community members' persuasive communication and community members' communal communication (see Figure 1).

Company employees' persuasive communication is mainly conducted by the company's marketing personnel and includes providing company/industry news and announcements, conducting polls, promoting events and inviting feedback from the community members. Company employees' communal communication involves employees from different departments and levels of an organization and includes responding to member's queries, informing the community members about the company's products and services and providing insights about the company and its personnel. Community members' persuasive communication, for one, includes providing word of mouth recommendations or criticism, addressing brand positioning, inviting third-party referrals, promoting brand-related offerings or competing brands. Community members' communal communication includes sharing personal experiences, exchanging peer-to-peer knowledge and offering support on common challenges and practices.

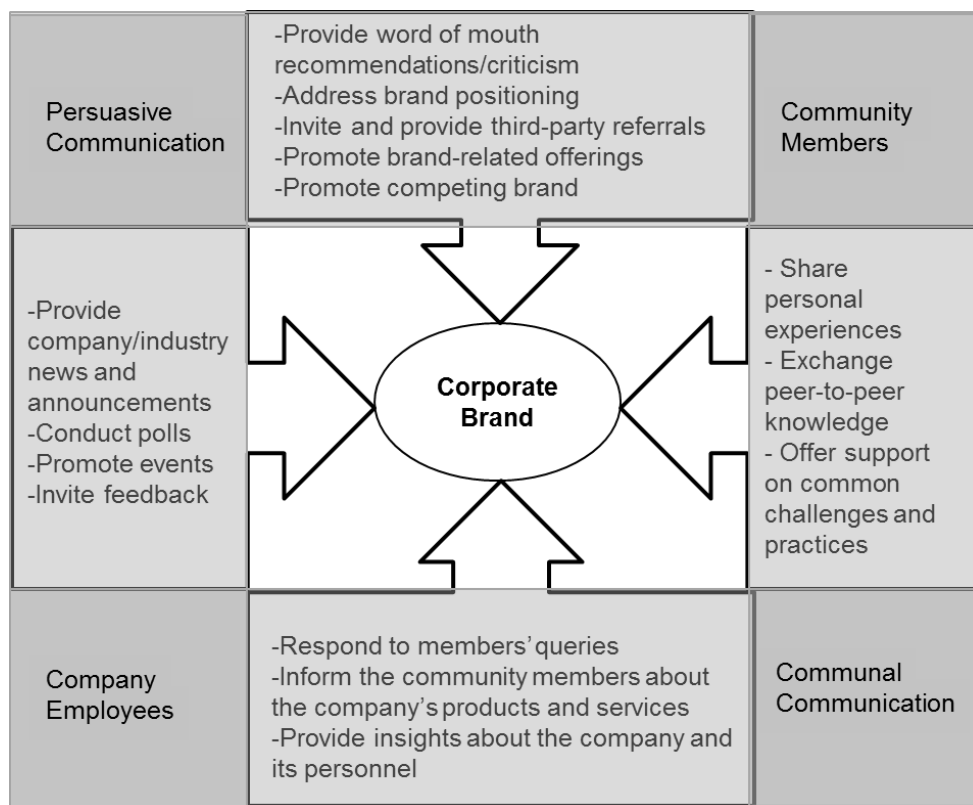


Figure 1: Online B2B brand community as a B2B brand communication platform

In line with the contemporary branding research the study emphasizes the social interactions between the company and its stakeholders as an integral part of the branding process (Jones 2005; Ballantyne & Aitken 2007; Schau et al. 2009; Baumgarth 2010). The study also supports the previous notions that the new technologies and social media have come to change the nature of brand communication pushing it towards being more dialogue-oriented (Christodoulides 2009) with an emphasis on the active role of external actors (Anderson 2005; Gregory 2007; Mäläskä et al. 2011). Instead of viewing the online brand community solely in terms of additional one-way marketing and information broadcasting channel, marketers need to participate in new forms of

communications and interactions that encourage engagement and create mutual value for the community members. The study also adds to the extant theory by emphasizing the role played by individuals as members of an organization in brand community building beyond marketing and branding. With the help of modern information technology and social media both internal and external B2B stakeholders can be united in a community that contributes to brand perceptions and experiences through communal interactions. Accordingly, this study also contributes to the brand community research by suggesting that extensive online communities can also be established around B2B brands (Andersen 2005).

The study also concludes that B2B professionals have various reasons to participate in online brand communities, which is in line with the previous studies (Fournier & Lee 2009). The study further emphasizes that brand community participation particularly serves the members' professional, social and self-expressive interests in terms of knowledge sharing and acquisition, supporting the previous findings by Andersen (2005) and Ward (2000). In addition, the study addresses the economic self-interest of B2B stakeholders that guides their community participation.

6 Limitations and suggestions for further research

Owing to the explorative nature of the research and the methodological choices made, this study has several limitations that should be considered in its interpretation and application. Because the research focused only on one B2B online brand community within one market sector its generalizability is restricted and the findings may not be transferable to all companies within the industry nor other industries. Future research opportunities exist in involving more representative communities in such analysis. The study focused solely on the data expressing the community activities that were visible online and therefore includes only the active community members in the analysis. However, despite the group size, the CISCO LinkedIn group in general is fairly inactive which is quite common among company specific LinkedIn groups compared to groups structured around more common interests or topics. The low ratio of group activity (1–2 discussions and 20–50 comments per week) indicates that over 99% of the community members are silent and therefore remain invisible. By focusing only on the online content, the study does not examine whether the community involvement influences the brand experience of non-active members and that can be considered a limitation. In a similar vein, this study also lacks the company's perceptions and insights of the phenomenon and it is therefore impossible to say whether the company actually acts upon the community generated feedback and suggestions. Accordingly, on the basis of the empirical data it is impossible to say if the company accommodates the knowledge to reinforce the branding image. Further empirical research is therefore needed in order to evaluate the role and importance of online brand community practices in B2B marketing and branding and to reduce the subjectivity of the interpretation. The data available online should be complemented with empirical interviews or survey data in order to develop a better and more holistic understanding of the phenomenon. From the managerial perspective it would also be beneficial to gain a more profound understanding of the value that community involvement creates for its members in order to be able to motivate and inspire the company stakeholders to participate in the community.

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