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The Antecedents and Outcomes of Identifiability in Online Brand Communities

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ABSTRACT

User generated content is a fundamental aspect of an online brand community (OBC), therefore facilitating the continuance of knowledge sharing and social interaction is imperative to the success of the community. The purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of perceived identifiability on the factors that encourage ongoing participation in OBCs. Results indicate that perceived identifiability has a significant positive influence on an OBC members' participative behaviour and sense of belonging. Whilst network ties have a significant positive influence on perceived identifiability and a sense of belonging all of which are factors shown to be critical to the ongoing success and sustainability of OBCs.

Keywords: Online brand community, identifiability, participative behaviour, sense of belonging, network ties.

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INTRODUCTION

Online brand communities (OBCs) are open environments where membership is predominantly free of charge. This means that members can choose to share their knowledge and socialise, therefore by the same token they can choose to leave the community at any given time (Abouzahra & Tan, 2014). User generated content facilitates the continuance of knowledge sharing and social interaction of online communities. Particularly, a review of the literature regarding OBCs highlights several factors as critical to their ongoing success. These are a) having active members who participate regularly in the community (Koh & Kim, 2004; Liaw, 2011; Lu et al., 2011; Meek, 2016), b) having members who have developed a sense of belonging (SOB) to the community (Casalo et al., 2007; Meek, 2016; Sicilia & Palazon, 2008; Woisetschläger et al., 2008), and c) having members who have developed strong network ties with other members in the community (Meek, 2016; Sutanto, 2013).

To encourage participation and attract members, many communities allow people to join without having to provide any personal details, so they remain anonymous to the extent that they use a pseudonym and their true identity remains hidden. Anonymity traditionally refers to the inability of others to identify an individual or for others to identify one's self (Christopherson 2007) and is a factor that produces a wide range of effects such as participative behaviour (Meek, 2016), autonomy (Yoon & Rolland, 2012), intention to reciprocate (Feng & Ye, 2016) and a sense of belonging in online communities (Lee, 2004; Meek, 2016).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Social Identity of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) model suggests in a community environment, where anonymity is the norm and individuals know little about each other, they immerse themselves in the group (Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Blanchard, 2008; Haines, Hough, Cao, & Haines, 2012; Lee, 2004; McCloud, 2000; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). This increases the relevance of their identity with the group and produces favourable outcomes, such as cohesion with the group or increased sense of community (Blanchard, 2008; Lea, Spears & Watt, 2007; Lea, Spears & de Groot, 2001; Talò, Mannarini & Rochira, 2014; Walther, 1992). SIDE also proposes that when names are made available in a group setting the group's social identity becomes less important, since the emphasis has shifted to the individual developing a personal identity within the community (Blanchard, 2008; Haines et al, 2012). Based on this premise, members in an OBC start off by identifying closely with the community due to their affinity with the brand; however, by contributing regularly they form network ties with other members and over time and through active participation, members become recognisable. Their identity then becomes related to their individual contributions to the community which in turn increases their sense of belonging (Blanchard, 2008).

Social Information Processing theory (SIP) is another interpersonal communication theory used to explain how people in anonymous online environments effectively relate to each other (Mathwick et al., 2008; Walther, 1992). SIP proposes relationships in an online environment have the same basic structure as traditional face-to-face relationships even though they take longer to develop initially, therefore although it takes longer to establish close friendships in an online community, the more their network ties increase the less anonymous members become (Blanchard, 2008). Previous studies also suggest network ties are established between people from diverse backgrounds in online communities due to the lack of physical or verbal cues, which is less likely to occur in face-to-face settings (Mathwick et al., 2008; Walther, 1992).

The Hyperpersonal Model of Relationship Development, builds on the SIDE and SIP models and presupposes people develop more network ties in online communities than in face-to-face situations because computer-mediated communication allows them to portray themselves any way they like (Blanchard, 2008; Walther, 1992). Members of OBCs can choose what

information they share and edit what they write before posting (Blanchard, 2008; Walther, 1992). Therefore, although network ties take longer to establish, they result in stronger, more lasting relationships (Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther, 1992). Alternately, self-disclosure and posts of a personal nature have been linked to the development of close friendships in online communities, based on the theory that perceived anonymity and the absence of non-verbal social cues encourages members to share experiences of a more personal nature (Tidwell & Walther, 2002).

This study investigates the association between *network ties*, *perceived identifiability*, *participative behaviour*, and a *sense of belonging*, across a range of OBCs. The findings give marketing practitioners, organisations and OBC creators an indication of whether the anonymity factor in OBCs impedes or enhances the success of the community.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

Methodology

To enrich theorisation qualitative data was collected from a range of online brand communities. The qualitative method of research was designed to clarify and expand on the findings from the literature review, and provide primary data to substantiate the research framework and hypotheses. A series of focus groups was conducted to build on the information derived from the literature as they provided the opportunity to have a more intimate dialogue with participants of online brand communities (OBCs). This face-to-face communication, through open discussion with members from a range of OBCs, was important to clarify the researcher's interpretation of the concepts outlined in the literature. Focus groups were also an opportunity for the researcher to meet members of different OBCs in an environment encouraging of group-based interaction and guided by a moderator; and were aimed at gaining a greater cognitive and emotional understanding of the influences of identification on participative behaviour and sense of belonging in OBCs.

The three focus groups conducted for this study included 20 members from a diverse range of OBCs (presented in Table 1). The structure of the focus groups encouraged participants to openly discuss issues of interest and relevance, with other members of the group able to interject and contribute their opinions to the topic under discussion. This free-flowing style of conversation replicates the interactive dialogue used by members in OBCs, an added advantage of using a focus group setting for this research. Participants in the focus group sessions were members of different OBCs from a diverse range of demographic and psychographic backgrounds. This allowed for a good representation of the population. A semi-structured group interview approach, using open-ended questions, was employed to draw out rich, informative responses while maintaining a focus on the topics under discussion. Open-ended questions were purposefully chosen to stimulate both individual responses and group discussion, and related to the influence of identifiability on participative behaviour and sense of belonging in OBCs.

Table 1. Focus group sample characteristics

Respondent	Age	Gender	Occupation	Community type
Focus Group 1				
R#1	25-40	Male	Student	Cameras (Canon)
R#2	25-40	Male	Lecturer	Automobiles (Ford)
R#3	25-40	Female	Administrator	Medical (Mennings Disease)
R#4	25-40	Male	Lecturer	Football (Richmond Football Club)
R#5	25-40	Female	Student	Cooking (Jamie Oliver)
R#6	40+	Male	Administrator	Gaming (Castle Age)
Focus group 2				
R#7	18-24	Female	Lecturer	Books (Linda)
R#8	25-40	Male	Scientist	Gaming (Minecraft)
R#9	18-24	Male	Student	Gaming (Battlefield)
R#10	25-40	Male	Student	4 wheel drive vehicles (Hilux)
R#11	40+	Male	Manager	Gaming (PlayStation)
Focus group 3				
R#12	18-24	Female	Student	Medical (Beyond Blue)
R#13	18-24	Female	Student	Gaming (World of Warcraft)
R#14	18-24	Male	Student	Gaming (Magic the Gathering)

R#15	18-24	Male	Student	Entertainment (Sony)
R#16	18-24	Female	Student	Gaming (Grand Theft Auto)
R#17	18-24	Female	Student	Books (Amazon)
R#18	18-24	Male	Student	Gaming (PlayStation)
R#19	18-24	Female	Student	Fashion (LookBook)
R#20	18-24	Male	Student	Gaming (PlayStation)

Focus Group Findings

When asked how identifiable members felt they were, and how their level of anonymity affected their behaviour, several participants in the focus groups commented that although they were anonymous they had become recognisable over time, not only from their pseudonyms but as part of a small network of close friends. This corresponds with the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation (SIDE), and suggests in a group environment, anonymity increases members' identity with the group and produces favourable outcomes, such as cohesion with the group or an increased sense of community (Spears & Lea, 1992; Walther, 1992). The following quotes illustrate how anonymity was no longer relevant for several respondents. Their observations imply, they had become well known within the community through active participation and considered themselves part of the group. This supports the idea that the more identifiable members are, the more they participate and the stronger their sense of belonging.

I've been in the Magic (Magic the Gathering) forum for years, I play with the same group I chat with, they know me. I'm going to a tournament next year with some of them (R#14).

It doesn't mean anything. We all know each other, we're in a team, it's just a stupid name, like a...nickname it's what you talk about and how you play the game they know you by (R#13).

I was in a community of people who had mods that had been going on for years; people knew the characters that made those mods, so they were well known by everyone in the community (R#8).

Yeah! You have people who are constantly on the forum and constantly asking questions, they end up with tens of thousands of posts and become forum personalities that everyone knows (R#9).

It was also apparent from respondents' comments that anonymity reduces social or cultural cues, allowing friendships to develop based on people's contributions to the community, rather than their background or status outside the community. This is akin to Social Information Processing theory (SIP), where the lack of physical or verbal cues helps to bridge the cultural divide, resulting in the development of close network ties and increased participative behaviour (Mathwick et al., 2008; Walther, 1992), and is reflected in the following quotes from respondents:

I know people from all over, it doesn't matter where they come from the community is a good place to meet up. Yeah! Now we're friends. (R#9).

I didn't know anyone to start but made friends over time, in fact the people I'm friends with now I probably would never have talked to if I hadn't joined this community (R#15).

Other participants suggested using a pseudonym gave them a sense of anonymity, and subsequently the freedom to express themselves without worrying about being recognised outside the forum. For example, one participant in the first focus group offered this explanation when asked how using a pseudonym had affected his participative behaviour:

I don't feel confident to speak face to face all the time, anonymity allows for more open discussion, in front of someone it's harder to say things, but online I can write it (R#1).

We are being judged but there is a disconnection (R#11).

Both observations by R#1 and R#11 correspond with Best and Kreuger (2006) and Lea et al., (2001, p. 528) who argued that being anonymous "decreases attention to others, reduces concerns about being positively evaluated by others, and creates an impersonal, task-oriented focus for group interaction".

The qualitative research demonstrates that members of OBCs become known to each other through the network ties they develop and their contributions to the community. In the focus groups several participants suggested they were not considered anonymous anymore because they all knew each other well based on the history of their interactions and ongoing participation in the community. This suggests that anonymity gives individuals the freedom to participate in an OBC and the more identifiable members of OBCs are, the more they will participate which enhances their sense of belonging.

HYPOTHESES AND RESEARCH MODEL

Network ties are the social relationships that develop between individual members of OBCs, the strength of which depends on how frequently they interact and how emotionally involved the members are with each other (Dholakia et al., 2004; Granovetter, 1973; Wirtz et al., 2012). Sutanto et al. (2011, p. 143) argued “each member of a virtual community creates an identity for himself through his postings, and in the meantime, starts to develop an understanding of other members’ identities, which enables them to anticipate others’ responses to a particular issue or post”. This assumption is supported by the focus group participants’ comments. For example, when questioned about network ties respondents had developed and how their relationships affected their membership, R#4 stated “*it’s the people that make me stay; they make me feel part of a special group*”; while R#19 pointed out “*it becomes less about the subject and more about the community of people who all know each other. Once you have a group of friends you want to go on more to see what they’re doing*”. Consequently, if members can relate to a number of friends within a community, they will tend to participate more in order to maintain those relationships (Li et al., 2015). Network ties or the friendships individuals make in OBCs therefore increase one’s level of identifiability as the more they interact with each other the more well-known they become to each other and to the community as a whole.

Hypothesis 1: Network ties have a positive effect on members’ perceived identifiability in online brand communities.

The relevance of developing close relationships in an online environment has also been linked to the concept that over time members exhibit a sense of belonging to the community (Blanchard, 2007). This is reflected in the following observation from the focus group research “*we all go on at different times but I can always find a thread from someone I know, it’s our community, we made it what it is*” (R#15). In this study, sense of belonging (SOB) is an established term representing attachment, identification with and membership to a community (Tonteri et al., 2011; Zhao et al., 2012). The SOB construct is extremely relevant to OBCs, as members have a strong connection to the brand and an attachment to the brand community (Brogi, 2013). Members of OBCs share feelings of belonging that creates a bond with other members of the community based on their shared association with a specific brand (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Zhao et al., 2012).

Hypothesis 2: Network ties have a positive effect on members’ sense of belonging in online brand communities.

Omernick and Sood (2013) found that individuals who are less anonymous and therefore more identifiable contribute longer threads and participate over a longer duration in virtual communities as opposed to offline interaction. Anonymous individuals will also find ways to identify each other over time and through regular online posts, indicating that the more members feel they are recognisable within the community the more they will participate.

Hypothesis 3: Perceived identifiability has a positive effect on members’ participative behaviour in online brand communities.

Another perspective in OBC research indicates feelings of belonging and membership to the community is fostered by regular interaction between members (Amine & Sitz, 2004). Developing a sense of belonging in an OBC is through the accumulation of interactions with other members and becoming identifiable as a valid community member. Therefore, the more members contribute to the community and the stronger network ties they develop the more well-known they become and subsequently the more they will feel they belong.

Hypothesis 4: Perceived identifiability has a positive effect on members’ sense of belonging in online brand communities.

Tonteri, Kosonen, Ellonen, and Tarkiainen (2011) also found a sense of virtual community (SOVC), which encompasses SOB, was enhanced through the reading and posting of messages in an online community. Therefore, although SOB is considered to be a critical success factor in OBCs, it also appears to be an antecedent to participative behaviour and an outcome of participation. These findings highlight the need for clarity with regard to the influences on participation and sense of belonging, as well as the direction of the relationship between the two constructs.

Hypothesis 5: Sense of belonging has a positive effect on members’ participative behaviour in online brand communities.

Based on the findings from the focus groups and the literature, the research model postulates that network ties have a significant influence on perceived identifiability and a sense of belonging, and that perceived identifiability has a significant influence on the level of participation, and the sense of belonging members have to the community. Furthermore, the relationship between a members’ sense of belonging and their participative behaviour is also investigated. Figure 1 represents the conceptual model for this study.

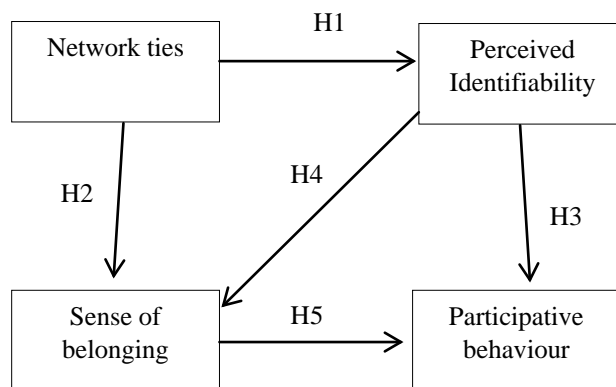


Figure 1. Conceptual research model

DISCUSSION

There has been a rapid increase in the number of OBCs over the last decade, prompting an interest from marketers and scholars in the field of online consumer behaviour, yet little empirical research has been undertaken specifically related to OBCs (Li et al., 2013; Lhotáková, 2011). To date studies have mainly focused on virtual communities in general. However, OBCs encompass a consumer-brand-consumer triad (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) and uniqueness that differentiates them from other types of online communities. Studies show the more members communicate with each other online the more they feel connected to the community and the brand around which the community revolves (Liaw, 2011; Koh & Kim, 2004). Because members of OBCs participate voluntarily in a community, they choose their level of participation depending on their objectives and the influences that shape their online experience (Bateman et al., 2011; Tsai, Huang & Chiu, 2012). Therefore, if members develop network ties with other members there is a higher chance that they will continue to involve themselves in the community over the long term.

Findings from the qualitative research in this study indicate that the more identifiable members are in the community the more they participate, and develop a sense of belonging. This is consistent with Doolittle and MacDonald (1978) who suggest that when people in a community interact with each other they develop a feeling of safety and belonging that reduces their perceived anonymity. In this way the feeling of being recognised in the group encourages continued participation in the community. Furthermore, as members became better known in the community and have developed mutual associations or network ties with others, regardless of their initial motive for participating, their sense of belonging increases as they develop attachments to more people. Although anonymity may be of benefit to new members by giving them the confidence to join into conversations or browse without making any contributions, as they become more committed to the community they like to be recognised by other members. Therefore, being less anonymous or more identifiable through contributions to the community will increase their sense of belonging.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Future research into the influence of identifiability in OBCs could explore comparisons between company-initiated OBCs and consumer-initiated OBCs, and the level of anonymity required for membership to the community. The role of moderators in OBCs would also be an interesting theme for research as there are differences between successful and unsuccessful OBCs that may have some relevance to the way they are managed and the administrative teams' objectives.

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