Less for More: Does Consumers' Proneness to Join More Online Brand Communities Negatively Impact Consumers' Sharing Ability?

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Abstract. Online consumer experience has been the focus of recent studies as an enabler to sharing commerce. Consumer experiences are key facilitators for consumers' social sharing of commerce. Nonetheless, as consumers have become prone to joining brands' conversations, risks of consumer oversaturation, undermining consumers' sharing ability should be expected to develop. The negative influence of customer relationship proneness (CRP) in joining and engaging with a high number of brand communities has not been examined. This study employs an online survey of members of a leading mobile phone company's online sharing community on Facebook to offer new insights on CRP's role in negatively affecting consumers' commitment to sharing within brand communities. This is the first study to examine the negative impact of CRP on online brand communities and brand relationship. It is also the first to examine the relationship between CRP in joining online communities and online community commitment in social networking sites.

1 Introduction

Online brand communities foster the development of long-term relationships with the brand as continuing followers are more inclined to provide valuable insights for brands to enhance their products and services (Zhang et al 2018). Whilst the integration between the social capital of people and social media is becoming the main marketing value that firms are seeking to build upon (Zeeni et al. 2021, Shane-Simpson et al. 2020; Hamadeh et al. 2020) it is to be expected that, given a high consumer response and participation in brand initiatives, consumers would likely demonstrate high customer relationship proneness (CRP) toward online brand communities (Fernandes and Proença 2008; Mahdi *et al.* 2022). CRP, which is defined by Fernandes and Proença, (2008, p.158) as "a consumer's tendency to engage in relationships with providers of a particular product category" has been considered to exert a positive influence on marketing constructs, consumer relationships in online communities (Fernandes and Proença 2008). Despite the growing amount of research on consumer-brand relationships within online based communities (Khobzi et al. 2019), there is no clear evidence on the negative im-

pact of CRP within social media on consumers' relationship with brands, their brand love and commitment to brand communities.

The need to study the negative impact of CRP stems from three main facts. Firstly, despite the large body of studies on online brand communities (Meek et al. 2019), there has been very little empirical research that examines the negative impact of CRP on online brand communities. Prior studies have largely looked at variables that drive consumers' proneness only, neglecting the impact of such proneness on brand relationships. Secondly, recent findings show that, over time, consumers in online brand communities may feel overly connected and overloaded within a community (Ramadan 2017), leading them to contemplate joining what they consider as better online communities. Since brands can be considered as persons with which consumers can form relationships (Fournier et al. 1998;) and following Dunbar's (2008) social networks constraints theory, relationships with online brand communities are likely to develop in a similar manner to relationships between people. Hence, consumers might be prone to either leave these communities or to significantly reduce their customer-to-customer as well as brand engagement, the consequences of which are not yet clear for customer-to-customer interaction or for brands. The extant literature lacks such direct examination of CRP, especially on consumers' commitment to sharing in online brand communities. Thirdly, once consumers are prone to leave existing brand relationships, it becomes crucial to understand the impact of this proneness on consumers' sharing within the online brand communities themselves, as well as the impact on brand love. This will help brands to efficiently manage their online communities taking into consideration neglected factors such as CRP.

To address the lack of understanding of the aforementioned factors, this paper examines the negative aspect of CRP in joining other online brand communities on Facebook on customers' commitment to sharing within the existing brand community, and the subsequent impact on brand love.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Information Quality and Commitment to Brand Community

Information quality is considered a key influencer of members' repeated visits and commitment to online-based communities (Lin *et al.* 2018; Islambouli *et al.* 2020). Furthermore, if the content's quality is deemed to be low, online community members may hesitate in using it and might decide to leave the community (Ramadan and Abosag, 2016). A study by Zhang *et al.* (2018) concludes that information quality increase community commitment which affects participation. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

H1: Information quality positively increases consumers' sharing commitment within the online brand community.

2.2 Similarity with Members

The feeling of similarity can be developed between like-minded individuals who share the same interest in a given online brand community through companies' differentiation strategies and based on members' brand ownership experiences (Engle-Warnick et al. 2020; Akoury 2020). In an online brand community, reciprocity characterizes similarity with members, based on the influence and relatedness between members in the same online community (Chan and Li 2010). As such, it is this sense of belonging that leads to repeat conversational encounters, driving the social usefulness of the interaction (Gupta and Kim 2007), which in turn will increase community commitment (Zhang *et al.* 2018). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H2: A feeling of similarity with members in an online brand community leads to a higher interaction in that community.

The information quality perceived in online communities is closely related to the similarity of members' interests and is dependent on the contribution of the members themselves as well as that of the host company (Ramadan and Kanso 2023). The match between members' interest and the reciprocity behaviors found in online brand communities leads to higher credibility and relevance of the online shared information (Chan and Li 2010). As members are similar, they are expected to share information that is based on the common interest of the online community (Schembri and Latimer 2016). This makes the shared information more persuasive, relevant, and credible to the members (Brown *et al.* 2007; Ramadan *et al.* 2023). Through this, the perceived similarity amongst members increases the persuasiveness of the shared information. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that:

H3: The feeling of similarity with members in online brand communities leads to higher information quality.

Not only the sense of shared emotional connections between members of a brand community leads to the extension of their self-identity with the community, to which they become further attached, but it also leads to an overall commitment to the community, hence the sense of community (Schembri and Latimer 2016). In addition, the feeling of similarity and identification within online brand communities increases consumers' commitment to the online sharing community (Ramadan, 2017). Hence, it is hypothesized that:

H4: A feeling of similarity with members in an online community increases consumers' sharing commitment to the online brand community.

2.3 Interaction

The term 'social interaction ties' is defined as the "*level of frequency and time investment of online community member interactions*" (Wang and Chen 2012 p. 571). The higher the time and frequency invested in interacting with other members, the higher the commitment to the sharing community (Gupta and Kim 2007). Through this, it is maintained that continued engagement leads to further involvement and commitment to the sharing community (Huang *et al.* 2014). With heightened interaction levels, members become embedded in the online communi-

ty, as well as becoming committed to it, as empirically proven by Jang *et al.* (2008). In addition, through interaction, members develop emotional attachment and a sense of obligation to the community (Ma and Chan 2014). Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H5: The higher the level of interaction between members in online brand communities, the stronger the consumer's sharing commitment within the online brand community.

2.4 Consumers' Sharing Commitment, CRP and Brand Love

2.4.1 Consumers' Sharing Commitment

Community sharing commitment defined as the *"member's helping behavior and active participation in the virtual community"* is viewed as being the main determinant of the success of the online community (Gupta and Kim 2007). Members' sharing commitment to the online community of a brand can precede their feelings towards the brand itself (Mrad and Cui 2020). Consumers are not necessarily fans of a brand to interact within a community and might have other reasons to engage and share in that community (Mrad and Cui, 2018). Our argument is based on the logic that the more members of online brand communities commit to more sharing in brand communities the more they will develop more attachment and love for the brand. On this basis, it is hypothesized that:

H6: Consumers' sharing commitment to an online brand community positively increases those members' love of that brand.

2.4.2 Consumers' Relationship Proneness

Customers' commitment forms over recurrent interactions with others. For this reason, to ensure long-term survival and vitality of an online brand community, brands would greatly depend on the strength of members' commitment to and continued interaction and sharing in the community (Wirtz *et al.* 2013), alongside their cohesiveness and strong sense of belonging. However, customers' commitment to sharing on online brand community can be seriously undermined by a high degree of customer proneness to join other online brand community (Wirtz *et al.* 2013). Accordingly, it is hypothesized that:

H7: High proneness to joining online communities negatively and directly affects the consumer's sharing commitment to the current online brand community.

2.4.3 Brand Love

Brand love is defined by Carroll and Ahuvia (2006, p.81) as *"the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular brand name"*. Existing literature on brand love focuses on defining and measuring brand love and on the conceptualization of brand love in marketing, mainly on the antecedents and outcomes of brand love (Bairrada *et al.* 2018; Cui et al. 2018; Mrad et al. 2020). Nevertheless, there is little research on the negative impact of customer relationship proneness in joining and engaging with online brand community. As long as consumers are prone to attending multiple online brands' communities, the possibility of consumers being oversaturated increases as a result of brands' over-engagement attempts (Fournier *et al.* 1998). This study argues that there is a nega-

tive influence of high customer relationship proneness in joining other online brand community on brand love:

H8: Proneness to joining online communities negatively and indirectly affects the consumer's love for a brand.

3 Methodology, Hypotheses Testing and Findings

The conceptual model was tested on 175 respondents who are members of a selected mobile phone company's online sharing community on Facebook using an online survey. The company was selected based on its leading share in the market and due to its well-established status amongst consumers. The survey included three parts. Part one contained questions on the participants' overall background and usage of Facebook and online sharing communities. Part two contained the adopted scales statements on the constructs within the conceptual model. Part three included respondents' related questions such as age, gender, occupation, and education level. The data was tested for validity by LISREL 8.8. Confirmatory factor analysis was used to assess the correspondence of all items with their respective latent variables. The resulting indices were chi-square χ^2=199 (104 degrees of freedom (d.f.)) and P=0.000. The model also had superior fit indices: *NNFI=0.978, IFI=0.983, CFI=0.983, GFI=0.890, AGFI=0.835, Standardized RMR=0.040 and RMSEA=0.067*. The incremental fit measures used were CFI, NNFI and IFI (greater than .90). For absolute fit measures, χ^2 statistic, RMSEA and GFI were used. All the hypotheses within the structural model were tested. The estimation of the model shows a good fit, with *χ^2 =242 (111), P-Value=0.00, NNFI=0.971, IFI=0.977, CFI=0.977, GFI= 0.866, AGFI=0.814, RMSEA=0.0782*. All linkages were significant as hypothesized (see Figure 1).

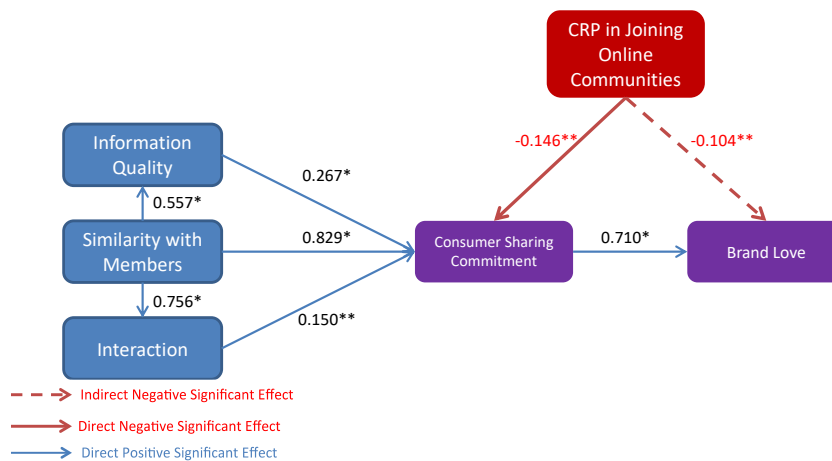*Note: *significant at p < 0.001 and **significant at p < 0.05*
Figure 1 – Model Estimation

The results from the estimation of the model clearly show good support for all hypotheses. As predicted, information quality has a direct impact on sharing com-

mitment to the online community (H1: $\beta = .267, p < .001$). Similarity with members was also significant as expected on both interaction (H2: $\beta = .756, p < .001$) and information quality (H3: $\beta = .557, p < .001$) as well as having a direct positive impact on sharing commitment to the online community (H4: $\beta = .829, p < .001$). The coefficients from similarities with members to interaction, information quality and sharing commitment to the online community are the highest in the model, confirming the importance of the perceived similarities with members to the online experience within the sharing community. Interaction also has a positive effect on sharing commitment to the online brand community (H5: $\beta = .150, p < .05$). Sharing commitment to the online community has a significant positive effect as expected on brand love (H6: $\beta = .710, p < .001$). Regarding the negative impacts of proneness, it is significant on sharing commitment to the online community via a direct effect (H7: $\beta = -.146, p < .05$), and significant on brand love via an indirect effect (H8: $\beta = -.104 p < .05$).

4 Discussion and Implications

This study makes key theoretical contributions. It provides new insights into how specific signals affect consumers' sharing commitment with a specific focus on the negative impact of consumer relationship proneness. While signaling theory focuses on the two-way linear relationship between the sender (i.e. the brand) and the receiver (i.e. the consumer), we believe within the context of online communities, it is crucial to recognize the complex relationships between members and their effect on the community; it is a network of relationships that cannot be controlled by the brand and is affected by similarity with members and CRP.

Brands are using an increasing number of signals to entice customers to commit to their online brand community. This study makes several managerial contributions. First, within online brand communities, the relationship quality between members can be dynamic and evolving, brands need not only to regularly monitor users' interaction and expectations but also to examine how they are evolving, so that the communicated value is continually updated to ensure commitment. Second, from a CRP point of view, brands must focus on content marketing and management. Indeed, companies would need to provide relevant and interesting information that would keep members committed to the community which in turn would minimize the negative effect of CRP. Third, brands will have to create innovative online sharing communities that foster the engagement and sense of belonging around the followed brand. This will enable brands to heighten consumers' attachment to the community and hence limit members switching to other sharing communities.

Fourth, as the similarity with members is the core base for fruitful interaction and better quality of information, managers of online brand community must identify the key traits and similar characteristics that are likely to be shared between members and help members to notice them. Managers of online sharing communities should actively encourage members' interaction on events and news that are likely to resonate well with all members, provoking better exchange of information.

5 Conclusion and future research

The literature has long discussed CRP to joining online sharing communities not as a negative variable. In fact, research on this area of interest has rather studied CRP as an engagement motive in online communities to access information. This study's contributions focus on addressing the channel overload effects from CRP to joining other online sharing communities and the implications for online brand communities and brand love. The key findings are two-fold; (1) information quality, similarity with members and interaction are crucial for a high commitment to sharing within the brand community, and (2) a high level of CRP can significantly and negatively impact consumers' commitment to sharing in the online brand community while also affecting brand love.

The study is not without limitations as it mostly focuses on consumer products (hereby mobile phones) and one social platform (Facebook). Future studies can be replicated on different platforms and for different product categories. In addition, future studies that aim at replicating this study could use bigger sample sizes across different markets.

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