Brand Evangelism Among Online Brand Community Members

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Abstract

In todays' digital age, the way consumer interacts with other consumers as well as organization had changed dramatically. Benefited from social media development, online brand community had recognized as powerful alternative media that could contribute to overall brand success. Among others, online brand community could significantly affect brand evangelism or brand referral behaviors. As previous studies attempt to examine how members of online brand community commitment determine their brand satisfaction, loyalty and repurchase intention, this study attempts to extend the understanding on how members' brand community commitment influenced brand evangelism. This study conceptualized brand evangelism into two constructs namely positive brand referral and oppositional brand referral. Beside, brand congruity also plays a crucial role in building brand community commitment. The study among 138 members of online brand communities revealed that brand congruity has a significant relationship on brand community commitment and brand evangelism dominated by positive brand referral. Brand community commitment also found to partially mediate the relationship of brand congruity and brand evangelism. Implication and future research direction also were highlighted at the end of this article.

Key Words: Marketing, Brand Congruity, Brand Community Commitment, Brand Evangelism.

Introduction

Social media had changed todays' social communication landscape at large. It is said that today, we live in 'referral powered' community. Consumers' attitude and behavior towards certain brand can easily be changed by just a referral from someone they trust and respect. It is hold true in today's digital edge, whereby almost every one of us belongs to specific brand communities. For instance, Kozinet (1999) forecasted that over 40 million people will belong to one or more online communities in the next millennium. More importantly, brand communication through social media or blogs is uncontrolled communication. Cruz and Mendelsohn (2010) stressed that brand performance is controlled by customers and potentials comparatively to the owner of the brand itself. Thus, online brand community will affect marketing activities at large. Empirical evidence has revealed that online brand communities play a crucial role in enhancing organization's brand success such as loyalty, increase market penetration, boost revenue and create positive word of mouth advertising (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; Kim, Choi, Qualls, & Han, 2008).

According to Cruz and Mendelsohn (2010), members of brand community are more engaging and more likely to buy and recommend the brand to others as compared to non-members. This is supported by the study of Becerra and Badrinarayanan (2013) that members that demonstrate high brand identification towards their brand community would contributed to brand evangelism (positive referral or oppositional brand referral). However, in reality, word-of-mouth or brand referral could be positive or negative. For instance, in 2014, McDonald Malaysia was terribly affected by the Islamist boycott due to negative allegation from social media that claimed McDonalds Malaysia is supporting Israel (Jain, 2014). Hence, it is importance to understand how customer especially members of online brand community perceived the organization's brand.

With the increasing power of online consumers and higher Internet penetration around the globe (Casalo, Flavian & Guinaliu, 2010b), online brand community contribute to greater communication platform between companies and consumers. Mangold and Faulds (2009) suggested that social media which is a common platform for online brand community is recognized as a new hybrid tool in the integrated marketing communication. As such, it is importance for managers to manage their communication tools effectively which include online brand community's activities and actions. It is because, the information shared within the communities need to be consistent with the organization's communication objectives (Mangold & Flauds, 2009), supporting the brand image and creating lasting brand equity (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Despite the growing importance of online brand community and/or social media as new tool for integrated marketing communication, little focus had been done to understand contribution of online brand community to overall brand success The mixed results from previous studies suggested the urgency of the study to broaden the study into new context and sample with additional predictors and consequences (Casalo et al., 2010a; Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008; Kim et al., 2008). Previous studies attempt to link the relationship between brand identification on brand evangelism (Bacerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013; Doss, 2013), whereby Doss conceptualized brand evangelism as a unidimensional construct. Recent study of Collins, Glabe, Mizerski and Murphy (2015) attempt to identify possible characteristics of brand evangelism. Little study attempt to link the relationship between brand congruity and brand community commitment on brand evangelism in the context of online brand community. Hence, it is important to understand whether brand community commitment would lead to brand evangelism. This study conceptualized brand evangelism into two constructs namely; positive brand referral (providing positive referrals regarding the brand) and oppositional brand referral (the act of dissuade others from consuming competing brands).

Literature Review

Online community is defined as an aggregation of people who share a common interest and communicate through electronic mailing lists, chat rooms, Internet user groups or any other computer-mediated mechanism (Kim et al., 2008). Stokburger-Sauer (2010) defined brand community as a group of users and admirers of the brand who engage jointly in group actions to accomplish collective goals and/or to express mutual sentiments and commitments. This is consistent with Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) who refer brand community as *'a specialized, non-geographical bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of the brand* (p.412)'. Taken these definitions into account, this study defines online brand community as a social relationship among users and admirers of the brand to accomplish collective goals and/or to express mutual sentiments and commitments via online. People who have a common interest and high self-brand consistent would actively participate in the brand community. Several researchers in brand domain stressed the important role of perceived brand congruity and self-personality in consumers' affiliation with brand (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar & Sen,2012). In this study, brand congruity refers to the degree to which consumers think the image of the brand community match their own self-image (Sirgy, Lee, Johar & Tidwell, 2008). It is postulated, the higher the brand congruity, the higher the brand community commitment of the members.

Brand community commitment refers to the extent of member psychological attachment to an online community and their belief in the value of the relationship (Kim et al., 2008). Kim et al. (2008) argued that concept of commitment is need urgently be employed in the online environment as customers more Internet-dependent for information and purchases. Everything included the brand switching could be done as a simple as one click. Thus warrant organization to have deeper understanding on how commitment is develop and how it affects consumers' brand referral especially in online context.

Previous studies explore how brand community commitment and engagement would contribute to brand satisfaction and loyalty (Gummerus, Liljander, Weman & Pihlstroom, 2012; Laroche, Habibi, Richard & Sankaranarayanan, 2012; Hung, 2014; Jang, Olfman, Ko, & Koh, 2008), little had attempted to link how those committed members would elicit brand evangelism (Becerra & Badrinarayanam, 2013). Brand evangelism was first coined by Kawasaki (1991), is an extension of word-of-mouth (WOM) conception (Doss, 2013). According to Kawasaki (1991), customer evangelism is refers to customer who are intrinsically motivated to zealously spread WOM. Collins and Murphy (2009) define evangelism as user of the brand or product that volunteers their time and resources recommending the use of that product or brand. Study by Becerra and Badrinarayanam (2013) among 325 members of brand community indicated that feeling of brand attachment would influence positive brand referral and oppositional brand referral.

A study by Doss (2013) among 425 members of Harley Davidson, MINI, iPhone and Saab brand community revealed that brand identification that similar to brand congruity had a significant direct relationship to brand evangelism. However, the researcher did not systematically separate brand evangelism into two construct namely positive brand referral and oppositional brand referral. Hence, based on the importance of online brand community commitment, this study attempt to investigate how brand congruity and brand community commitment influence brand evangelism (positive brand referral and oppositional brand referral). Based on the preceding discussion, it is hypothesized that:

H1: Brand congruity has a significant effect on brand evangelism.

H1a: Brand congruity has a significant effect on positive brand referral.

H1b: Brand congruity has a significant effect on appositional brand referral.

H2: Brand community commitment has a significant effect on brand evangelism

H2a: Brand community commitment has a significant effect on positive brand referral

H2b: Brand community commitment has a significant effect on oppositional brand referral.

H3: Brand congruity has a significant effect on brand community commitment.

H4: Brand community commitment mediate the relationship between brand congruity and brand evangelism

H4a: Brand community commitment mediate the relationship between brand congruity and positive brand referral.

H4b: Brand community commitment mediate the relationship between brand congruity and oppositional brand referral.

Thus, the following research framework is developed:

Brand Evangelism

Brand Congruity — Brand Community Commitment —
- Positive brand referral
- Oppositional brand referral

Figure 1: Research Framework

Research Methodology

This study is cross-sectional study and based on non-contrived setting. A self-administered questionnaires were distributed to respondents through mall intercept. Six shopping malls in Kedah, Penang and Perak were approached. The selection of such shopping malls is because of its major attraction for local community. As there is no systematic number of members of each brand community and are unknown, thus, the sample selection is based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) rules of thumb. As the total population is unknown, the adequate sample size should be 384.

Respondents were randomly selected during their checkout from the shopping mall. Every 3rd shopper were approached. Screening procedures i.e. only respondents identified as members in any online brand community were selected. In early December 2014 till mid January 2015, three major shopping malls were approached namely; Taiping Sentral, AEON Alma and AEON Queensbay Mall. 300 questionnaires were distributed to identified respondents during the check out at cashier counter. Another 300 questionnaires were distributed within mid January till end of February 2015 that covers another three shopping malls namely, Aman Jaya Mall Sungai Petani, Kulim Landmark Central and Alor Setar Mall Shopping Centre. At the end of February 2015, 285 questionnaires were collected. Thus response rate is 47.5%. However, based on pre-data screening, only 138 responses were usable. Hence, percentage of usable is 23%. The percentage of usable rate is consider acceptable that is consistent with Hornik and Ellis (1988), that response rate for mall intercept is lower than other survey methods. The remaining data could not proceed with further analysis due to too many missing values and unanswered.

The questionnaire consisted of several sections mainly to gain information regarding consumers' belief, attitude and behavior towards their online brand community. The first part detailing members' demographic profiles including; gender, ethnicity, income, education attainment, social media behavior and membership tenure mainly in dichotomous scale. The second part comprises the measurement for brand community commitment and brand evangelism. The measure for online brand community commitment adapted from Hur, Ahn, & Kim (2011) with 4 items and 5 items of brand evangelism from Becerra and Badrinarayanan (2013). All measurements are in 5-point Likert scale.

Findings and Discussion

Respondents' profile of this study is presented as in Table 1. Table 1 shows that majority of the respondents were female (61.6%) and from generation Y (aged between 16 to 25 years old) (60.9%). In term of ethnicity, majority of the respondents were Malays (73.2%) followed by Chinese (18.1%), Indian (6.5%) and other ethnic from Sabah and Sarawak (2.2%). Most of the respondents were degree holders (38.4%) and diploma holders (34.8%). More than half of the respondents were students (55.8%), followed by private sector employees (36.2%), government servants (6.5%) and self-employed (1.4%). Majority of the respondents earned less than RM1000 specifically for students, followed by RM1001 to RM2000 (32.6%) and RM2001 to RM3000 (15.9%). Another 11.6% of the respondents have more than RM3000 monthly income.

Table 1: Respondent's Profile

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	53	38.4
Female	85	61.6
Age		
16 to 25 years	84	60.9
26 to 35 years	36	26.1
36 to 45 years	18	13.0
46 to 55 years	-	-
Above 55 years	-	-
Ethnicity		
Malay	101	73.2
Chinese	25	18.1
Indian	9	6.5
Other	3	2.2
Academic attainment		
Certificate	33	23.9
Diploma	48	34.8
Degree	53	38.4
Post graduate	3	2.2
Other	1	.7
Occupation		
Government servant	9	6.5
Private worker	50	36.2
Self-employed	2	1.4
Student	77	55.8
Other	-	-
Income		
Less than RM1000	55	39.9
RM1001 to RM2000	45	32.6
RM2001 to RM3000	22	15.9
RM3001 to RM4000	7	5.1
RM4001 to RM5000	4	2.9
Above RM5000	5	3.6

Beside profiling the demographics profile of the respondents, this study also attempts to profile numerous profile regarding respondents general behavior on online brand community. When asked about their average time spent on Internet, majority of the respondents spent between three to six hours per day (36.2%), followed by one to three hours (23.2%), six to nine hours (19.6%), and more than nine hours (15.9%). In term of time spent for social media, most of the respondents spent between one to three hours (43.5%) followed by four to six hours (26.1%). About 20% of the respondents spent more than six hours per day for social media and only 10.1% of them spent less than one hour per day.

As this study did not specifically focus on only one brand community, the finding shows that 23.2 of the respondents engaged in online automobile brand community, 19.6% in cosmetics, 18.8% in fashions, 23.2% in gadgets, 15.2% in healthcare related brand community. When asked about their years of involvement in the online community, 39.8% of them joint less than one year, 39.9% for two years, 8.0% for three years and 12.2% for more than three years. This can be summarized as in the following Table 2.

Table 2: General Behavior of Online Brand Community

Average of Internet Usage		
Less than 1 hour	7	5.1
1 to 3 hours	32	23.2
4 to 6 hours	50	36.2
7 to 9 hours	27	19.6
More than 9 hours	22	15.9
Average hour(s) spent on social media		
Less than 1 hour	14	10.1
1 to 3 hours	59	43.5
4 to 6 hours	35	26.1
7 to 9 hours	18	13.0
More than 9 hours	10	7.2
Type of online brand community		
Automotive	32	23.2
Cosmetics	27	19.6
Fashion	26	18.8
Gadget	32	23.2
Healthcare	21	15.2
No. of years of involvement		
1 year	55	39.8
2 years	55	39.9
3 years	11	8
4 years	9	6.5
5 years	5	3.6
More than 5 years	3	2.1

Reliability Test

Reliability coefficient of Cronbach's Alpha was used in this study specifically to assess the consistency of the scales used. George and Mallery (2003) suggested that the minimum acceptable coefficient value of .50. Based on the analysis, all the main variables were reliable (brand evangelism = .603; brand community commitment = .806 and brand congruity = .890). Following George and Mallery's (2003) rule of thumb, the internal consistency of items in this study ranged from 'good' to 'excellent'.

Pearson's Correlation

The strength of relationship between positive brand referral and oppositional brand referral on online brand community commitment was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Based on the findings, brand congruity had a positive, moderate correlation on brand evangelism (r=.504). Brand community commitment has a weak association to brand evangelism (r=.398). The following Table 3 summarize the result for Pearson's correlation.

Table 3: Pearson's Correlation Analysis of Variables

	1	2	3
1) brand congruity	1		
2) brand community commitment	.643**	1	
3) brand evangelism	.504**	.398**	1

** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Regression Analysis

In order to answer hypothesized relationships, regression analyses were conducted. All the regression analysis assumptions as suggested by Hair et al. (2006) were met with no serious violation were detected. The following tables summarized the result for H1, H2, H3 and H4.

Table 4: Relationship between Brand Congruity, Brand Community Commitment and Brand Evangelism

	Dependent Variable: Brand Evangelism			
	X-Y	X-M	M-Y	X,M-Y
Independent Variable:				
Brand congruity	.504**	-	-	.424**
Brand community commitment		.643**	.398**	.125
F Value	46.325	96.086	25.528	24.116
R2	.254	.414	.158	.263
Adjusted R2	.249	.410	.152	.252
Durbin-Watson	1.837	1.895	1.834	1.814

* p <.05, **p<.01

Based on the Table 4, brand congruity is significantly affect brand evangelism (β = .504, p< .01) with 25.4% is explained by the set of predictor. Hence, H1 is supported. Brand congruity is significantly affect brand evangelism (β = .643,p < .01) with 41.4% variance is explained by the brand congruity. Hence, H2 is supported. H3 also supported whereby brand community commitment statistically significant affect brand evangelism (β = .398,p < .01) with 15.2% is explained by brand community commitment. H4 pertaining the mediation effect of brand community commitment on the relationship of brand congruity and brand evangelism also supported whereby the result suggest the partial mediation following Baron and Kenny (1986) rule of thumb.

Detail examination on the relationship of brand evangelism dimensions following the same criteria revealed that brand congruity only relevant in explaining positive brand referral (β = .527,p < .01) with 27.8% variance explained thus supporting H1a. Brand congruity statistically insignificant in explaining negative brand referral (β = .028,p < .01) thus not supporting H1b. Brand community commitment also found significantly affect positive brand referral (β = .525,p < .01) with 27.6% variance explained and not significantly affect oppositional brand referral. Hence, H2a is supported and H2b is not supported. Due to several insignificant result, only positive brand referral was proceed to test of mediation. The result suggest that, brand community commitment partially mediate the relationship between brand congruity and positive brand referral. Hence, H4a is supported and H4b is not supported.

Consistent with expectation, high congruity and highly committed members among online brand community will contribute to brand evangelism specifically on positive brand referral. Using this sample, members of the brand community who feel self-congruence and have favorable attitude towards brand community will recommend the brand to others and had a higher tendencies to leave positive comments on the communities' site. This is supported by the in depth analysis that shows almost 60% of the respondents were towards the agreement (either agree and strongly agree) of the statements related to positive brand referral. This result concurs with the previous findings of Becerra and Badrinarayanam (2013) that suggest the higher the feeling of attachment of members towards their brand community, the higher the tendency for them to engage in positive brand referral. A study by Doss (2013) also indicate feeling of attachment towards the brand would leads to brand evangelism.

The results also suggest that brand community commitment is statistically insignificantly affect oppositional brand referral (β = .123,p < .01). Contrary to expectation, a highly committed members not

necessary leads to oppositional brand referral. In this study, oppositional brand referral is refers to the act of dissuade others from consuming competing brands (Becerra & Badrinarayanam, 2013). Although members of brand community were highly committed, it is not enough to lead them to display oppositional brand referral. This is inconsistent with the findings of Becerra and Badrinarayanam (2013) that indicated the higher the brand identification of members towards the brand community the higher the tendency of members to exhibit oppositional brand referral.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study suggests two major implications. First and foremost, it is observed that brand congruity has a significant relationship on brand community commitment and brand evangelism. Secondly, in the context of online brand community, brand commitment would only lead to positive brand referral and not extending to oppositional brand referral. It is indicates, even though members of brand community had a strong community commitment, their referral is limited to provide a positive feedback of the brand and does not goes beyond comparing with the competing brand. This is maybe hold true in Malaysian culture to safe face by not condemning others. It is evident in the advertising practices in Malaysia whereby very seldom audiences were exposed to direct comparative advertisement or messages from the competing brands. Based on the findings, it is proposed that practitioners need to address the brand commitment among the online communities effectively. Owner of the brand should seek formula to strengthen the bond between members and the brand as well as the community.

This study limit in term of number of sample. The small sample limit the researcher to examine the effect of different brand on brand commitment and evangelism. Future research should cover huge sample that covers nationwide sample and other brand community categories. Contrary to expectation, oppositional brand referral is insignificant. Thus, it should be tested in another setting mainly to improve the superiority of the construct. As this study only consider brand commitment, future research could also consider other determinants such as trust, congruity and other personal and situational factors on brand evangelism.

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