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Advocacy participation and brand loyalty in virtual brand community

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Abstract

Brand owners use virtual communities to strengthen brand loyalty by engaging consumers in active content creation activities. Personal and reciprocal communication and consumers' participation in virtual brand communities are the main sources through which communities contribute to brand loyalty formation. This research examines the antecedents and consequences of advocacy participation in virtual brand communities. The results show that the VBC members' advocacy participation is strongly contributed by the community's ability to promote reciprocal and personal use experience, which also directly affects the members' brand satisfaction. The results further show that advocacy participation and participation frequency positively contribute to especially attitudinal loyalty formation. Participation is found to be negatively related with brand satisfaction.

Keywords: Virtual Brand Community, Social Media, Advocacy Participation, Loyalty

1. Introduction

Virtual brand communities (VBC) are important forums for consumers to share product and brand information and experiences. For companies VBCs provide a channel to understand consumer needs, engage customers, and promote brand loyalty (Casalo et al., 2007). Cova and White (2010) outline that by the interactions within VBCs value is co-created, and thus, the brands act as social platforms. According to Chi (2011) the main benefit of VBCs is that dialog and content creation is more efficient than in offline

communities. Brand communities also act as a reference group for its members, thus affecting their buying behavior (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). Furthermore, along with taking part in information sharing activities VBC members simultaneously promote the brand around which the community is set up, and further influence the members' loyalty formation (Koh & Kim, 2004). For example Laroche et al. (2012) state that brand owner-led VBCs are set up to enable brand owners engage in closer and more interactive relationships with consumers and gain better insights into their brand perceptions. Therefore, VBCs are considered effective platforms for brand owners' and consumers' interaction (Adjei et al., 2010), which enhance customer relationship management (Casaló et al., 2007). Thus, the focal factor of a well-functioning and effective VBC is that its members actively participate in the community activities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

As noted, VBCs are applied as means of engaging consumers in dialog with brand owners (Hur et al., 2011). In the present study VBC participation is examined as an active type of participation called advocacy participation, which is defined according to van Dyne et al. (1994) as behaviour targeted at other members of a community and described as maintaining high standards, challenging others, and making suggestions for change. Advocacy participation is seen as the essential type of participation for a VBC that effectively acts as the means of brand loyalty formation by engaging the members in active and diversified communication with other members and with the brand. Although advocacy type of participation is studied in offline context, little is known about its consequences in VBC context and how the community members' overall intensity to take part in posting and lurking behaviour moderates the effectiveness of advocacy participation as the means of loyalty formation. Therefore, this study examines, firstly, the effects of advocacy participation in a virtual brand community on brand satisfaction and brand loyalty. Secondly, we study how the VBC's ability to provide reciprocal and personal use experiences affects the VBC members' propensity to participate in advocacy type of communication. Finally, the moderation effect of overall participation intensity in VBC activities on the community members' loyalty formation towards the brand is explored.

2. Social media participation and brand loyalty

Customer loyalty towards the brand has been considered an important consequence of participating in an online brand community (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). According to Laroche et al. (2012) the main idea of brand communities is to strengthen already satisfied customers' loyalty towards the brand. Therefore, the VBC members are commonly those customers that already have positive use experiences of the brand's products or services and hold positive attitudes towards the brand. In the present study brand loyalty is understood to be constructed of attitudinal and behavioural aspects, which measure the customers' degree of attachment to a brand and is connected to prior use experience and brand satisfaction (Liu et al. 2012). Several studies have shown a positive linkage between brand community participation and brand loyalty (e.g. McAlexander et al., 2002; Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2011). Shang et al. (2006) studied the effects of consumers' participation in virtual communities on brand loyalty. They found that different forms of participation had different causes and effects. While visiting and reading in brand communities affected positively to brand loyalty, no positive relationship was found between posting and loyalty.

Royo-Vela and Casamassima (2011) studied the relationship between belonging to a Facebook brand community and brand loyalty by examining different types of participation: active participating, passive participating and non-participative belonging. They found that belonging to a Facebook community has a positive influence on brand loyalty. Also some indications of positive correlation were found between active participation and brand loyalty. Also Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) showed a brand community participation to positively affect the community members' brand loyalty. The previous studies also suggest that participation and satisfaction are positively related (Gummerus et al., 2012; Shang et al., 2006). According to these studies, brand satisfaction and belonging to a virtual brand community are positively associated. The active type of participation in VBC, such as advocacy participation, is found to have lesser effect on the community members' satisfaction and loyalty towards the brand. For example Gummerus et al. (2012) state that although the community members can be expected to possess some level of positive brand satisfaction and loyalty, by engaging them in virtual community activities their brand relationship can be strengthened. Based on the prior evidence we expect the VBC members' advocacy participation to have positive consequences in their brand satisfaction as well as brand loyalty. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

> *H1: Advocacy participation is positively associated with the members' brand satisfaction.*
>
> *H2: Advocacy participation is positively associated with the members' attitudinal and behavioural brand loyalty.*

Consumers' perception of reciprocal and personal communication in VBCs is created by the community's ability to respond to its members' actions and postings, treat the members as active participants of conversations, and ensure that the members' opinions are heard. This, in turn, decreases frustration for waiting and feelings of being disregarded, and thus, increases satisfaction. (Liu 2003) In addition, Anderson et al. (1994) propose that interactive communication enhances satisfaction, intimacy, and involvement. Thus, interactive communication is likely to contribute to positive attitudes toward a virtual community as well as the sponsor of the community. Song and Zinkhan (2008) show, that interactive communication positively affects satisfaction and loyalty. However, only few studies have examined how interactive communication affects consumers' engagement behavior. Anderson et al. (1994) makes an exception of this. He shows that interactive communication increases participants' satisfaction and engagement in the conversation. Based on this, we are putting forward the following hypotheses:

> *H3: A community's ability to provide personal and reciprocal experience positively affects the VBC members' satisfaction with the brand*
>
> *H4: A community's ability to provide personal and reciprocal experience positively affects the members' advocacy participation in the VBC.*

We define loyalty according to Oliver (1999) to consist of attitudinal and behavioural aspects. Attitudinal loyalty refers to a customer's overall commitment to the brand and behavioural aspect to a customer's commitment to repeat purchases of the brand over time (e.g. Dick & Basu, 1994). Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) define behavioral loyalty as purchase loyalty, referring to a consumer's intention to repurchase the brand. Attitudinal loyalty refers to a consumer's commitment towards the brand. Oliver (1999)

suggests that attitudinal loyalty may convert into behavioral loyalty as a result of repeated positive experiences with the brand. A number of studies suggest a positive correlation between satisfaction and loyalty (e.g. Casalo et al., 2010). Likewise, studies conducted in the online environment in general, and virtual communities in particular support the correspondence (Song & Zinkhan, 2008). Thus, we put forward the following hypotheses:

> *H5: VBC members' satisfaction to the brand positively affects attitudinal and behavioural loyalty.*
>
> *H6: Attitudinal loyalty is positively associated with behavioural loyalty.*

Previous research shows that the consumers' loyalty formation is affected by their differing brand communities' participation practices and participation intensities. In particular, the participation intensity has been found to influence loyalty (Shang et al., 2006; Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2011). Prior research shows that customers engage more often in noninteractive behaviour like lurking other members' comments in VBC than active participation in VBC discussions. Shang et al. (2006) suggest that noninteractive behavior increases customer loyalty even more than active participation. However, according to Algesheimer et al. (2005) active participation in content creation generates positive associations and strong relationship towards the brand, and is the main source of a vibrant and independently active brand community. In addition, Gummerus et al. (2012) posit that in VBC context, consumers differ significantly from each other in terms of their tie strengths towards the brand and other individuals, which is reflected into their VBC behaviour. Thus the final hypothesis is set:

> *H7: VBC participation intensity strengthens the paths in the conceptual model.*

3. Research methodology

This research tests a conceptual model shown in figure 1, which examines the antecedents and consequences of consumers' participation in VBCs. The empirical data were collected through an online questionnaire survey in 2012. The link to the survey was placed on the case company's Facebook brand site. At the time of data collection, the Facebook site had 13.000 "likers".

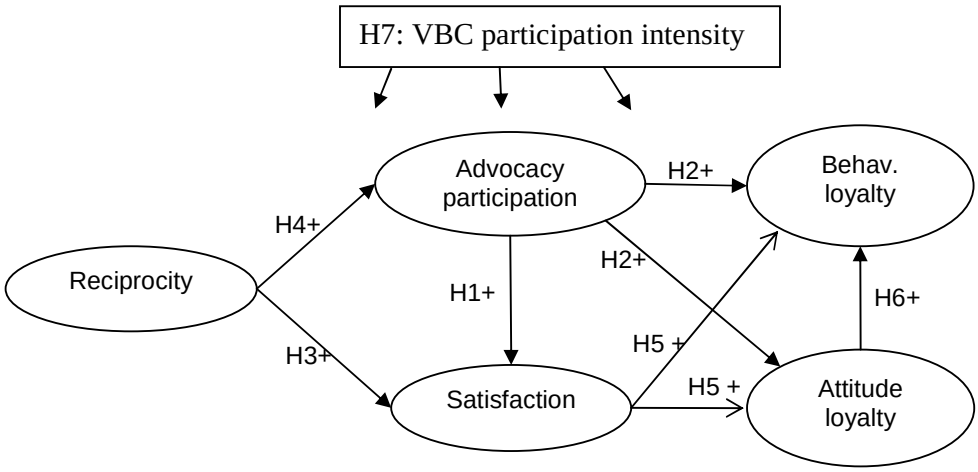

Figure 1: Conceptual model

The most of the respondents are members of the case company's virtual brand community. Table 1 displays the profiles of the respondents, clustered into "passive" and "active" segments. A two-step cluster analysis method was applied to identify the clusters, which describes how the respondents differ in their demographics and brand community participation. A dummy variable was formed to analyse how a consumer's belonging to either passive or active cluster moderates the paths in the conceptual model. The clusters differ from each other most significantly in terms of community posting intensity.

Variable (predict import.) N 478	**Passive** 60.5 % (289)	**Active** 39.5 % (189)
Posting (1)	No (93.8%)	Yes (89.9%)
Advocacy participation (0.43)	Mean 1.36	Mean 2.24
Visiting (0.34)	Rarely (54 %)	Often / rather often (93.1%)
Attitudinal loyalty (0.24)	Mean 2.94	Mean 3.69
Reciprocity and personality (0.21)	Mean 3.11	Mean 3.57
Age (0.17)	Under 35 (52.2%)	45 or higher (48.1%)
Behavioral loyalty (0.15)	Mean 3.76	Mean 4.22
Education (0.06)	Polytechnic (36%)	Vocational (23.3%)
Satisfaction (0.03)	Mean 4.54	Mean 4.67
Annual income	30.000 – 49.999€/v (34.6%)	30.000 – 49.999€/v (38.6%)

Table 1: The description of data.

The most items were on 5-point Likert scale (1=completely disagree…5=completely agree). Two items measured the members' degree of posting and visiting activity with 5-point scale (1=never, 2=once a month, 3=few times a month, 4=weekly, and 5= daily; Royo-Vela et al., 2010). The respondents' advocacy participation was measured with a scale constructed by van Dyne et al. (1994) and Koh and Kim (2004). Reciprocity and personality was studied with the scales of Wu (2005) and Liu et al. (2003). Satisfaction was studied with the scale of Janda et al. (2002). Attitudinal and behavioural loyalty was measured with the scales of Shang et al. (2006).

4. Empirical findings

The original research instrument consisted of 30 items. The items were designed to measure seven constructs. An EFA was applied for the pre-analysis and scale reduction. Instead of the original seven-factor model, a model with five factors was produced (see table 2): behavioral loyalty, attitudinal loyalty, satisfaction, reciprocity and personality, and advocacy participation. Reciprocity and personality are the measures of interactivity, which were separate scales in the original scale. In the final measurement model, the personality and reciprocity factors were merged as one. The validity of the measurement model and unidimensionality of the constructed scales were tested with CFA. Cronbach's alphas ranged from 0.83 to 0.95, demonstrating good reliability. The AVEs of the factor constructs, presented in table 2, range between 0.516 and 0.737. The component loadings of each item also varied between 0.539 and 0.929, the items were found to converge on their assigned factors. The correlations between the constructs were below the square roots of the AVEs, thus, the factor constructs are distinctive and suggest acceptable discriminant validity.

	Factor constructs and items	**Loading**
Behav. Loyalty (*α* 0.837)	I feel important to buy Pentik's products instead of other brands.	0.791
	I will actively look for the products that I need from Pentik.	0.753
	I always use Pentik's products.	0.734
	I am going to buy Pentik's products.	0.730
Att.Loyalty (*α* 0.925)	I am more interested in Pentik than the other brands.	0.931
	I feel more attached to Pentik than the other brands.	0.927
	I pay more attention to Pentik products than the other brands.	0.900
	I find myself consistently buying Pentik products over the other brands.	0.756
	I always think of Pentik's products when intending to buy decoration products.	0.742
	If Pentik products were not available at a store, I would rather not buy at all...	0.705
Satisf (*α* 0.932)	My overall evaluation of Pentik is very good.	0.875
	Overall, I am satisfied with the decision to use Pentik products.	0.872
	I think I did the right thing when I decided to buy Pentik products.	0.871
	My choice to buy Pentik products was a wise one.	0.864
	Based on all of my experience with Pentik, I feel very satisfied.	0.801
Recip & Person (*α* 0.833)	The Pentik's Facebook site understands my information needs.	0.840
	When clicking the links on the FB site it feels like the site responds to me.	0.802
	…like a personal conversation with a friendly and knowledgeable…	0.749
	I easily find information that I need.	0.615
	Finding information that I need from the Pentik's FB site is very fast.	0.540
Advoc. Particip (*α* 0.891)	…provide to other members…valuable information.	0.928
	I usually participate in the Pentik's FB site to evoke discussions.	0.827
	I usually write and respond to others' discussion with great excitement.	0.815

Correlations, AVEs, and square roots of the AVEs (in bold)

	Mean	Std.	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5
1. Satisf	1.71	0.85	0.933	0.735	**0.857**				
2. AdvPartic	3.29	0.67	0.893	0.736	0.077	**0.858**			
3. BehLoyal	3.94	0.45	0.837	0.563	0.749	0.253	**0.750**		
4. AttLoyal	3.30	0.94	0.930	0.693	0.399	0.256	0.746	**0.832**	
5. RecipPerson	4.59	0.52	0.839	0.516	0.418	0.394	0.450	0.342	**0.718**

Table 2: Testing the measurement model by CFA, correlations, and AVEs

The structural model was tested with AMOS 18. The main results of SEM are summarized in table 3. Several goodness-of-fit indices were simultaneously examined to evaluate overall model fit. The present model was assessed to indicate a good fit, despite the high chi-square: $\chi^2(220) = 512.26$; IFI = .961; TLI = .955; RFI = .923; RMSEA = .053 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993). RMSEA 0.06 indicates a reasonable fit to the model (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). Table 3 also displays the results of the direct effect model. In addition to direct effects we have tested indirect effects of advocacy participation on attitudinal and behavioural loyalty through brand satisfaction. In addition, indirect effect of brand satisfaction on behavioural loyalty through attitudinal loyalty was also examined. The mediation analysis was conducted by the bias-corrected bootsraping method. The moderation effect of participation intensity is also reported in the table.

The direct effect model supports the hypothesized relationships on most parts. A VBC's ability to provide personal and reciprocal use experience is found to be a strong driver of the members' brand satisfaction (β 0.42) and their advocacy participation (β 0.43). Contrary to our hypothesis, advocacy participation is negatively associated with brand satisfaction (β -0.11). Advocacy participation affects directly (β 0.23) attitudinal loyalty. The effect was also found to be partially mediated through brand satisfaction with β -0.04, total effect of being β 0.19. Participation was found to have a direct effect (β 0.08) but no mediation effect on behavioural loyalty through satisfaction. The results further show that the community members' overall brand satisfaction contributes directly to attitudinal loyalty (β 0.54) and behavioral loyalty (β 0.08). The effect of brand satisfaction on behavioural loyalty is partially mediated through attitudinal loyalty (β 0.19) with total effect β 0.74.

Direct effect model	**β**	**CR**	**R^2**	**Moderation effect of VBC intensity**
Reci&Person → Satisf	.466	8.42***		.053
Reci&Person → Particip	.397	7.71***	.16	.262*
Particip → Satisf	-.109	-2.12*	.19	-.049
Satis → AttidLoyal	.384	7.97***		.060
Particip → AttidLoyal	.231	5.00***	.21	-.015
Particip → BehavLoyal	.082	2.52*		-.081
Satis → BehavLoyal	.542	13.52***		.145*
AttidLoyal → BehavLoyal	.506	11.24***	.81	-.129*
	Indireffect	**Total effect**		
Particip → Satisf→ AttidLoyal	-.042*	.189***		Partial mediation
Particip → Satisf→ BehavLoyal	.037	.119*		No mediation
Satisf→ AttidLoyal → BehavLoyal	.194***	.736***		Partial mediation
Model fit: $\chi^2(220) = 599.16$; IFI = .952; TLI = .945; RFI = .916; RMSEA = .060				
Moderation effect of participant segment (χ^2 difference test on model-level differences): unconstrained model $\chi^2(440)$ 861.43 vs. constrained $\chi^2(466)$ 914.49, χ^2 difference: 53.06***				

Table 3: The results of direct effect model and moderation effects.

Note: difference significant *** at the 0.001 level, ** at the 0.01 level, * at the 0.05 level.

The moderation effect of the member activity intensity was analyzed by examining how overall community participation intensity affects the paths in the direct effect model. The VBC members' participation intensity was found to have a significant effect on the model level (χ^2 difference 53.06). Further analyses show that participation intensity

moderates three paths: ReciPerson-AdvocParticip, Satis-BehavLoyal, and AttidLoyal-BehavLoyal. The respondents' higher overall participation intensity strengthens the relationship of ReciPerson on advocacy participation (β 0.26) and satisfaction on behavioural loyalty (β 0.15). However, the effect on the link between attitudinal loyalty and behavioural loyalty was weakened by the community activity (β -0.13). That is, attitudinal loyalty is less strongly converted into behavioural loyalty when the VBC members' participation intensity increases.

5. Discussion

The objective of this study was to examine the construct of advocacy participation in the case of a virtual brand community (VBC) and its influence on the formation of satisfaction, attitudinal, and behavioural loyalty towards the brand. The results show that active participation in VBCs' content creation activities positively contributes to brand loyalty. The direct effect model shows that the community members' higher participation in the community's information exchange fosters their attitudinal and behavioural loyalty towards the brand, thus supporting hypothesis two. However, a negative relationship was discovered between participation and satisfaction, thus, hypothesis 1 was rejected. This suggests that as VBCs act as channels of customer support and exchange platforms for use experiences, the active members of VBCs are thus also influenced by other members' negative experiences of the brand, lowering their satisfaction to the brand. In line with hypotheses three and four, a VBC's ability to provide reciprocal and personal user experience was discovered to significantly affect the community members' engagement in advocacy activities with the community and also increase their brand satisfaction. Support was also found for hypotheses five and six as the analyses showed the VBC members' brand satisfaction to positively affect their attitudinal and behavioural brand loyalty, and that, attitudinal type of loyalty precedes the behavioural type. The final hypothesis anticipated VBC participation intensity to strengthen the paths in the model. The effect of overall participation intensity in the VBC was studied through moderation analysis. The results showed partial support for the hypothesis. The VBC members' posting frequency was found to especially affect the conceptual model. The analyses suggest that higher participation frequency increases the direct effects of satisfaction on behavioral loyalty and interactivity on advocacy participation. However, higher participation frequency seems to weaken the link between attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. That is, among less active members behavioural loyalty is more commonly formed through attitudinal loyalty, whereas among active users behavioral loyalty is influenced directly by satisfaction. Thus, brand owners are advised to identify advocacy participation and reward such behavior to strengthen the effectiveness of virtual brand communities.

6. Conclusions

As shown above, the results of hypothesis testing mostly support prior findings. The findings of this study are in line with Royo-Vela and Casamassima (2011) that satisfaction positively affects loyalty, but not the positive relationship with participation (Shang et al. 2006; Royo-Vela & Casamassima, 2011). We further found new evidence of the effects of advocacy type of participation, which has not been examined previously in the VBC context. Our results also support that interactivity of VBC

positively affects the members' brand satisfaction (Song & Zinkhan, 2008) and advocacy participation (Anderson 1994). The findings also are congruent with the prior studies that suggest satisfaction to have positive effect on attitudinal loyalty and that attitudinal loyalty precedes behavioral loyalty (Oliver, 1999; Casalo et al., 2010). However, we show that the route to behavioral loyalty differs between consumers depending on their participation on the VBC. Thus, this study supports the suggestion that consumers buying behavior differ significantly from each other based on their degree of VBC participation (Gummerus et al., 2012).

For managers this study provides evidence of how the VBC members' active engagement in content creation activities strengthens their brand loyalty. The results suggest that advocacy type of participation positively affects the community members' attachment to the brand and also increase their repurchase intensions of the brand (though with lesser degree). The participation negatively affects brand satisfaction as the active members of the VBC' are under the influence of other members' negative experiences of the brand's products. This highlights the need for the company to actively provide support and take part in the discussions where the brand-related problems and negative experiences are tackled. This shows the community members that the company is concerned of the members' problems with the products and actively developing products based on the customer feedback. This study also highlights that companies should invest in careful planning of VBC infrastructures to be able to provide interactive and personal use experiences, which strongly contributes to the members' propensity to take actively part in content creation activities and to brand satisfaction, therefore, effectively acting as the means of relationship building platform.

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