

SOCIAL MEDIA AND BRAND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT FOR CONSUMER ELECTRONIC CHAINS IN ALBANIA

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Abstract

This article aims to study the development of the online brand communities and their effect in social media and social network sites for consumer electronic chains in Albania. Social networks are seen as one of the most important and popular segments of social media nowadays. Nowadays, we face a growing number of social networking platforms. For this reason, the clear definition of the distinctive features of these social networks provides a concrete contribution to the application of marketing concepts. Development of brand communities in social network sites for consumer electronic chains in Albania, it is of key importance due to the need to better understand and interact with their end consumer. Normally as a first stage of interaction, it would be to produce information for their community. In the end, the aim of these brand communities would lead to the contribution and creation of information from end consumer themselves. The study conducted followed the principles of a case study through a single case in the biggest Albanian consumer electronic retail chain. The main findings of the study presents the customer engagement through social media sites more in terms of contribution than creation.

Keywords: Social Network Sites, Social Media, Brand Community, Retail Branding, Web 2.0

INTRODUCTION

Even though, the consumer electronic chains in Albania are in the first steps, they are trying to develop a marketing channel following the steps of the international players in the retail industry. At this regard, one key point, which all the retailers are emphasizing recently, is about the creation of brand communities that would help to better interact with their end consumer. This

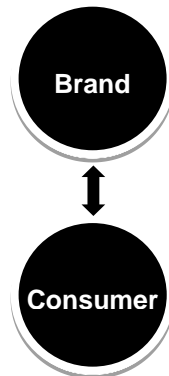
development would lead to a big increase in the business opportunities in terms costs, managing the online presence and selling products, which represent more importance to their customer. This paper, through the usage of the case study design research method will try to explain and distinguish the potential for the development of brands communities in one consumer electronic retail chain in the Albanian industry. All this information should develop further the online marketing channels, without creating damages to the traditional distribution methods. The study aims to analyze the B2C market structure, without taking in consideration the B2B structure.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A social network can be defined as an "internet-based service that enables individuals to (1) build public or semi-public profiles within a particular system, (2) associate with a list of other users they have a common bond, and (3) to see and describe their links to the links and those made by others in the same system"(Boyd & Ellison, 2008). This definition of authors defines the basic structure of social network development, which can be different from one network to another. In principle, the development of social networks has to do with building a personal profile that creates different connections with other user profiles within the network. The main foundation on which social networking sites develops, relates to the creation of a prominent profile that introduces a list of friends that are also part of the social networking system. In this way, for each profile, it is possible to understand the social network with which the user communicates and distributes the information consistently. Because of the fact that the all user activities on social network bases on the information, they provide on the Internet, there is a continuing risk to the possibility of exposure to a real and virtual risk (Gross & Acquisti, 2005). The concept of distribution is the foundation of the philosophy of social networks. The usefulness of social networking sites often focuses precisely on the information used during this distribution process (Crespo, 2007).The first important moment in determining the relationship between the brand and the consumer has to do with the understanding that the consumer does not consume the product, based solely on the need for consumption but also to connect with other customers via the brand (Cova, 1997).In this respect, based on the above statement, we can build a basic brand community model, as presented in the figure 1, seen as a link between consumers and the brand, which bases only between these two components without including other interactions outside of this structure. This model raises the logic that the customer is the first step to link to the brand and then from this link he will become part of the community by creating links with other customers.

Figure 1 - Brand community traditional model

Customer-Brand Connection
(Traditional Model)

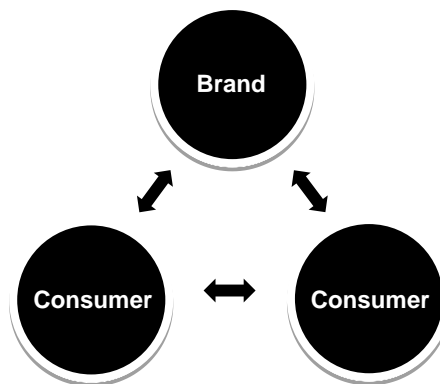


Source: (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002)

The concept of brand communities firstly introduces as "a specialized community without geographical constraints, based on a structured group of relationships among the followers of a brand" (Muniz & O'Guinn, Brand Community, 2001). This concept developed the model in a way presented in figure 2.

Figure 2 - Brand community model with a triple connection

Triad Connection in Brand Community
(Muniz & O'Guinn 2001)



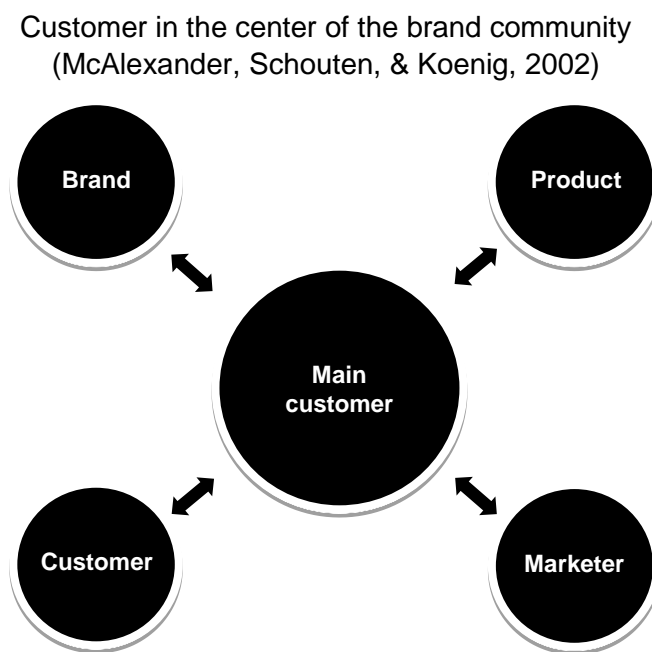
Source: (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002)

The brand community, as the authors put it, is a specialized community as the basis of this community is the brand. Regardless of the form, whether this is a commodity or a service, the customer creates a relationship and interacts on different time and geographical basis with the

brand. The above definition provides the basis for the further development of the theoretical concept of the brand community.

The importance that a community customer receives is growing ever more over time, making it now the model center (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). The proposed new model contains the relationship with the proposed consumer in the traditional model, customer-customer relationship, and specific customer relationship with brand and product. All these developments presents in the figure 3.

Figure 3 - The customer-centered brand community model



Source: (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002)

In terms of studying the links created, an important effect on disseminating ideas, innovations and adapting new products, has the influence of colleagues and mouth-to-mouth communication. For this reason, at the time of conceiving campaigns to promote ideas or products, it is important to take into consideration that these network effects (Kempe, Kleinberg, & Tardos, 2015). An important issue with social networking sites is about the attitude and behavior of the consumer regarding privacy. This in itself is a standard feature of these platforms as it shows that the customer has the need to provide information about himself in a continuous way. Nowadays this need has become a common expectation, whereby every individual should provide information about his status, current employment, and summer vacations and so on. In a recent study by the authors Tsay-Vogel, Shanahan and Signorielli

(2018), they are giving the appropriate suggestions in setting the boundaries where the customer should provide his personal data.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of the research is to generate understanding of the way consumer electronic chains in Albania use social network to develop their online brand communities and the way that they use these communities do develop new marketing ideas. The research objectives are to explore the patterns of interaction, orchestration and effect that enacts by brand community members, during their daily operation within the social network sites. To meet these objectives the information was gathered data through qualitative interviews and secondary sources from a single case study organization. A case study is appropriate when researching “the complex processes of contemporary marketing management” such as relationship marketing and online marketing communications (Kapoulas and Mitic, 2012). The purpose is not to generalize to any population but “to a real world that has been uncovered” (Easton, 2000). To present a revelatory case a single case study design will be used (Yin, 2003). The study conducts within a well-known consumer electronics business in Albania, which have a consolidated position in the market. Business taken in question was the market leader of their sector. The case company is a successful Albanian consumer electronic retailer with at least 15 years of operation. It has 14 stores and concessions as well as an e-commerce site. The study conducts in February 2018. In order to avoid incomplete information and vague information, we did the interview in the company of the interviewer, providing relevant explanations about different points of the study aim. In order to maintain the confidentiality of the business, we remove the name addresses and other sensitive data from the study. We did the interview with key management persons of the marketing department, who had knowledge about marketing, managerial and technological processes related to the company, and who could provide useful insight regarding the development of their brand community within their social network sites. The respondent discussed three topics such as the influences of electronic marketing channels adoption, the planning processes in avoiding the channel conflict, and the e-commerce channel structure.

STUDY RESULTS

Study results divides in two main section including an overview of the online brand community of the consumer electronic retail chain, the consumption process and the contribution and creation process of consumers in the social network sites.

Online brand community overview

The brand's presence on online marketing channel apart the e-commerce website is across the Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Instagram and LinkedIn platforms. The key social media platforms for the brand are Facebook and Instagram, with approximately 225,734 likes and 28,200 followers respectively in February 2018. Even though the firm has opened earlier Twitter, Google+ and LinkedIn, still they could not become as popular as Instagram. This relates with the penetration of this social media sites in Albania. A detailed review regarding the current activity of the brand communities in each of the social media sites conducted during the period 1st of February until 28th of February 2018. Table 1 highlights the main themes across different social media platforms used by the consumer electronic retail chain.

Table 1 - Key themes for retail chain activity on social media platforms

Theme	FCB	INS	TWT	YTB	LNK	GG+
Product-based	•	•	•	•		•
Store-based	•	•		•		
Price-based	•	•	•	•		•
Public Relation	•			•	•	
Competitions	•	•	•			
User-Generated Content	•					
Customer Service Response	•					

Much of the content is visual, with typical themes relating to new products, competitions and promotions, store events. In general, the same content sends to all platforms but there is visibly greater engagement on Facebook with activities spanning the boundaries between the social and the retail space, including activity related to store-openings and events as well as customer service content being present in this platform.

Consumption process in the brand community

Currently according to the marketing department of the retailer, the consumption process within the brand community in the social network Facebook arranges through different type of posts. As per the digital marketing person comments “we are working every day to create a menu for our community members online. This means that we are not providing the same information in the same format at each posting schedule. Normally as the customer needs to eat different meals, they need to have different timing for the information”. In the current stage consumption

of social media posts, was limited to maximum three posts per day, which calculates from the opening time of the retailer until the closure of the stores.

Contribution and creation process in the brand community

The contribution process arranges mostly through liking and commenting on different posts about products. Normally the contribution average in terms of liking is about 20 - 50 likes per post, which relates with the posting schedule and when the community is online. Apart this for special events and promotions likes and comments have a big increase, but mostly this increase is paid and not organic. About comments, main one were relates to pricing information and availability in different stores of the retail chain. As per the marketing manager citation, “we have a strategy to reply to each of our customers in a personal way. In the past when Facebook had an issue with giving individual replies to each reply and this creates confusion because customers do not understand if you are referring to them or to another comment. Currently we are providing information which includes answering, images and even links to our e-commerce platforms”.

In terms of creation, as per the audit of Facebook social network site, it seems that there is no clear strategy how to make customers create content within the community brand. As per the digital marketing citation “we used to do a lot of activities to engage with our customers online and to motivate them to create content with our products but this have changed with the time, as customers are more focused now on technology and images than on interaction. They seek our Facebook page to get information rather than provide it”. Anyhow, a new strategy that digital marketing aims connects brand community with different business partners. In such direction, the creation process relates with the new novelties and collaboration that the retailer presents in the market.

CONCLUSIONS

Currently social media and social network sites are a great tool for consumer electronics retailers to develop their brand community online. Through such tools, they can manage to provide different information to their customers. All these information will be a starting point to create the brand community. Normally taking in consideration the interaction models of brand communities for every information the retailer would expect to have a reaction back from the consumer, resulting in their contribution to the community. In the case of our retailers, the contribution process arranges in providing additional information to the posts that the retailers presented online. Meantime in terms of creation, the community seems to be little proactive. As

per the retailer approach in order to develop this part, the aim is to provide social topics that the community cares about and wants to develop.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The aim of this exploratory research was to generate a substantive understanding of retailer brand community in the Facebook social network, and due to the nature of the chosen research methodology, we cannot generalize the findings that emerge from this study to a wider population.

There is a plan for future development of this research by moving beyond a single revelatory case and studying those who we consider a wider sample of retail chains online pioneers, comparing the findings, in order to develop the emergent theoretical understanding of this subject area.

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