“Role of emotional branding in promoting active participation in a virtual community.”

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Abstract

Popularity of virtual community for online and offline brands has been a soaring flight with even more paid attention by the practitioners and academicians. However, there is lack of theories in literature relating to emotional branding with respect to online communities. The study proposes emotional branding as an important factor for promoting active participation as it leads to customer loyalty. Also, to identify the effects of interactive features such as communication, customization and culture that enhances emotional branding elements in a virtual community.
1. Introduction

Virtual community is getting popular for online and offline companies as a marketing tool to achieve brand loyalty. The survival and expansion of the community depends on the level of active participation by the members. Therefore, factors promoting active participation have a significant role to play. This study proposes emotional branding as an effective tool to promote active participation in an online community. As in a virtual environment the absence of human interaction and sensory elements lack, it needs to provide with more sensory experiences to increase member’s involvement.

Online community was first defined by Rheingold (1993) and since then different but coherent definitions has been proposed by different authors. It is the group of people with common interest who interact regularly over the internet (Ridings, et al., 2002). It provides a platform to share information and experiences with the members of the community which also creates group cohesiveness (Casalo, et al, 2008). Some authors suggest that greater level of participation in the activities also leads to bonding identity to the online community (Algesheimer et al., 2005). This strong association to the virtual community will create value and promote a member to be loyal to the community. Therefore, active participation within a virtual community will lead to customer loyalty (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996). While the importance of online community as a powerful tool in promoting customer loyalty has been accepted by the industry practitioners and academicians, there is a need to study the promoting factors of active participation with an emotional branding strategy approach to overcome the lack of sensory elements in a virtual community. Also, to identify the effects of interactive features such as communication, customization and culture that enhances emotional branding elements in a virtual community.
2. Literature review

2.1 Online community

Online community is different to traditional community which is more geographically bounded. This has been explained by Boorstin, (1974, p. 89) as traditional communities are shifting from tight interpersonal bonds of geographically bounded collectives to directions of common but tenuous bonds of brand use and affiliation. Most of the internet based communities which are also known as virtual communities fall under relational based communities as the members are not physically bounded (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Members of such communities exchange information and knowledge related to that site and show emotional attachment similar to other members of the community with the brand.

Fig:1 Traditional model of a brand community (Muniz and O Guinn’s 2001).
Virtual communities have become a tool for many website based companies to distribute information, products and gain market share. Members of the virtual community are involved more if there are applications available to interact, website is designed as user friendly and more activities are going on. Many companies with online presence such as BT, Sky, Yahoo, Altavista, America Online have discussion groups and chat rooms available for the attracting more customers to their websites (Thompson and Sinha, 2008). An excellent example of an online community is Facebook with 150 million users around the world in just 5 years (Arabian business.com, 2009). For a community to survive and expand the members need to
actively participate and for the brand to provide such tool of engagements. Providing the members of the virtual community with powerful ways to share, connect and engage in trusted social experiences with other members. Virtual community can be used to create engagement between providers and customers which will build relationship that will eventually have an effect on loyalty (Thompson and Sinha, 2008). With online communities in hand a customer can easily evaluate alternatives without any time limits and conversely discard any unwanted options and for the brands it can attract customers to their websites and retain them as loyal and profitable customers (Valtersson, 1996). Some travel companies such as virtualtourist.com and lonelyplanet.com has already attracted large flow of customers on their website after introducing online community (Wang, et al, 2002).

2.2 Antecedents of participation in a virtual community

Trust

Trust plays an important role in the active participation in an online community. It lifts uncertainty attached to a relationship especially in a virtual environment where member interaction is not face-to-face. According to Harris and Goode (2004), trust is a vital factor in an online context where individuals perceive higher risk in a relationship.

Commitment

Organizations spend huge portions of their marketing budgets to increase consumer’s level of commitment to the brand. Organizations communicate through different channels to reinforce the bonds created with their existing customers to reduce the high cost of attracting new ones. In the case of virtual community the provider needs to strengthen the level of commitment of the members to the community which will encourage active participation and leading to e-loyalty. According to Casalo’, et al., (2008) providers should organize virtual meetings for
their members for discussions and suggestions regarding the brand. Organizations need to promote communication between the members to increase their commitment to the community.

Satisfaction

The non-economic satisfaction which considers the psychological factors in account is more relevant to virtual communities. An example of such satisfaction is emotional satisfaction in a relationship with a partner. Some authors suggest that satisfaction is a global evaluation or resultant attitude caused by an interaction or behaviour of other members of the virtual community. Therefore satisfaction is not the result of a single interaction but any new interaction will provide perception of the member with new information that will determine the level of satisfaction (Casalo´, et al., 2008).

Sustainability

Sustainability is an important factor to consider for a virtual community. Taken lightly can lead to the death of the virtual community. The generic reason for discontinuation of a virtual community is reduced active participation, not meeting the needs of the members. To guarantee the sustainability of the virtual community, companies need to constantly evaluate the growing and changing needs and interest of the members (Wang et al., 2002).

2.3 Emotional branding

In the e-commerce industry brands are competing hard on their distinctive identities to differentiate themselves from other brands in the overcrowded online market. Contrary to the real world scenario where products and services offer not only benefits and features but also use customer’s sensorial aspects to influence decision making process whereas in a virtual environment it lacks sensory touch. For e-brands to overcome competitive pressure firms are
focusing on customer’s sensory needs and desires to create a deep rooted relationship through emotional dialogue, positioning their brands apart from others. Through emotional branding a firm creates controls consumer’s emotions and make them better receptors to brands (Gobe’, 2001; Travis, 2000). Moreover, Gobe’ (2001) emphasizes the importance of emotions and proposes the use of emotional branding as a methodology to connect product to the consumer in an emotionally profound way. Also, profound relationship with the customers can be created and recreated through emotional connectivity and the dialogue with customers on more refined and complex need for diversity can promote emotional satisfaction exceeding material pleasure.

Therefore, Gobe’s emotional branding concept based on the four pillars: relationship, sensorial experiences, imagination and vision can be used to create, recreate and sustain emotional relationship and dialogue. Adopting the model will enable to identify the emotional branding strategy for virtual community.

Fig: 3 Gobe’s four pillars of emotional branding, (2001).
2.4 Emotional branding approach to virtual community

In a new virtual world, getting higher brand equity is difficult because customers are virtually shopping with the lack of personal and sensitive stimuli compared to the physical world; therefore, we need to apply emotional branding strategies to the e-brand creation based on online shopping experiences. It is assumed that emotional branding strategies provide good e-branding methods for virtual communities for attracting members, building emotional relationships, and creating e-loyalty.

2.5 Emotional e-branding with 3 C strategies

Combined with emotional branding strategies, the e-brand has a powerful potential for building an essential connection with the customer because emotional branding supports customer’s engagement in both active and interactive experiences by delivering an increasingly accessible and rich array of sensory experiences through the Internet’s multimedia capabilities (Schmitt, 2000). Through sensorial experiences and emotional dialogues, e-brands promote a profound relationship, and then establish their long-term competitiveness, not just differentiation among other e-brands. This implies that using emotional e-branding strategies for virtual community will lead to same benefits as acquired for e-brands.

Therefore, in order to develop an e-branding process with emotional branding strategies, the Gobé’s four pillars of emotional branding process shown in Fig. 3 can be used, and adapt it as a blueprint to explain essential characteristics of “emotional e-branding.” Considering the characteristics of the new digital marketplace and electronic consumer behaviour, four pillars has been selected as key elements of creating emotional e-branding: emotional communications, customized experiences, multimedia capabilities, and connection.
Furthermore, as an effective method for employing four pillars of emotional e-branding, “3 C strategies,” including Customization, Communication, and Culture, based on the features of e-brand’s four pillars are created (Gobe’, 2001). Fig. 4 explains a process of developing three elements of 3 C strategies from four pillars of emotional e-branding and identifies each characteristic of three elements. Customized experiences, through Internet’s multimedia capabilities, are embodied on websites and delivered to customers as customization services. Among four pillars, meanwhile, emotional communications and communities are created as channels of emotional dialogues through communication services. Besides, e-brands suggest new culture as they conduct groundbreaking and magnetic services, which are related to four pillars or have broader concept through integrating the characteristics of four pillars.

Fig: 4 The 3 C strategies (Kim and Sook, 2005)
The above literature suggests emotional branding is an effective tool for e-branding in creating strong emotional relationship between the customers and the firm leading to loyalty. This strategy can be employed for a virtual community environment to increase member participation. Replacing communities as an element of emotional e-branding strategy with connection element for virtual community will provide emotional e-branding strategy for a virtual community that can be effectively deployed through 3 C strategies.
3. **Research model**

The existing studies on promoting active participation have not highlighted the importance of emotional branding factor that can give optimal results when associated to technological and product design features. Therefore, based on the literature review following hypothesis has been derived to test the effect of emotional branding components on active participation in a virtual community.

H1: Greater the emotional communication between the member and the provider, greater will be active participation in a virtual community.

H2: Greater the connection between the member and the virtual community, greater will be the participation.

H3: Greater the customized experiences for the member, greater will be participation.

H4: Greater utilization multi-media capabilities in a virtual community, greater will be active participation.

The following diagram summarises the concept of the research as in emotional e-branding elements employed through 3 C Strategies as an independent variables which has a positive effect on the intermediate variable (Active participation), leading to E- loyalty as a dependent variable.
Fig: 5 Conceptual research model on emotional branding promoting active participation.

Emotional E-branding elements
- Emotional communication
- Connection
- Customized experiences
- Multimedia capabilities

3 C Strategies
- Customization
- Culture
- Communication

Active Participation → E-Loyalty
Bibliography
