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Brand communities embedded in social networks ☆

Melanie E. Zaglia *

University of Innsbruck, School of Management, Department of Strategic Management, Marketing and Tourism, Universitaetsstrasse 15, 6020 Innsbruck, Austria
University of Michigan, Stephen M. Ross School of Business, Visiting Scholar, 701 Tappan Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA

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ABSTRACT

Brand communities represent highly valuable marketing, innovation management, and customer relationship management tools. However, applying successful marketing strategies today, and in the future, also means exploring and seizing the unprecedented opportunities of social network environments. This study combines these two social phenomena which have largely been researched separately, and aims to investigate the existence, functionality and different types of brand communities within social networks. The netnographic approach yields strong evidence of this existence; leading to a better understanding of such embedded brand communities, their peculiarities, and motivational drivers for participation; therefore the findings contribute to theory by combining two separate research streams. Due to the advantages of social networks, brand management is now able to implement brand communities with less time and financial effort; however, choosing the appropriate brand community type, cultivating consumers' interaction, and staying tuned to this social engagement are critical factors to gain anticipated brand outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Community activity "is the biggest change in business in 100 years" (Ahonen & Moore, 2005). Community research has been an important topic in different areas over time. However, since the mid-nineties communities have experienced a renaissance, and have since risen in quantity and relevance; from the point of view of the consumers, the extensive and still growing accessibility of the internet boosts the participation in virtual communities worldwide; corporations, on the other hand, invest increasingly in their installation and maintenance. Forward-looking, communities will be important for consumers, as well as for marketers, as they represent a reaction to the lack of traditional forms of collectivization (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995): consumers gather, interact, and participate based on the "norm of reciprocity" (Chan & Li, 2010); without companies' concerns that consumers might avoid relational devices (Ashley, Noble, Donthu, & Lemon, 2011). The recent development and success of such consumer communities, especially in virtual environments, show that "this form of online organization is creating a large impact in the business community" (Ganley & Lampe, 2009).

Brand communities are a special form of consumer communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), and have become a major current issue in the study of brands, since they bind brand and community together. Social interactions between community members profoundly influence customers' relationship with, and attitude towards, the brand (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). These social formations offer many advantages (e.g., Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003), and serve as a tool to build strong and lasting relationships with customers (e.g., Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005).

In addition to the rise and the high value of brand communities, "saying that networks are important is stating the obvious" (Cross, Liedtka, & Weiss, 2005). The actual numbers of selected online social networks are impressive. Facebook, for instance, reaches more than 500 million active users around the world in April 2011 (Facebook.com, 2011a), LinkedIn represents over 100 million members in over 200 countries and territories around the world (LinkedIn.com, 2011), and Twitter counts 106 million people in April 2010, growing by a rate of 300,000 members a day (Huffingtonpost, 04/30/2010). "Along with other forms of computer mediated communication, they [social networking sites] have transformed consumers from silent, isolated and invisible individuals, into a noisy, public, and even more unmanageable than usual, collective" (Patterson, 2012). Consequently, successful contemporary brand strategies also entail exploring and seizing social network environments.

In such virtual environments users often gather together in subgroups with a specific brand in its center (Woisetschläger, Hartleb, & Blut, 2008), a brand-related community; consumers sharing their interest for a brand, exchange information and knowledge, or they simply express their affection for this specific brand. Muniz and O'Guinn

(2001) introduce the concept of a network based brand community which they define as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand". Hence, a brand community can exist everywhere, also virtually (Thompson & Sinha, 2008). This characteristic indicates that brand-related communities such as the Apple group with 110,015 members (Facebook.com, 2011b) or the Starbucks fan page with 21,238,192 members (Facebook.com, 2011c) potentially offer a multitude of benefits to marketers.

Research during the last decade has investigated the existence of, and primarily social processes within, brand communities. From various studies, one can derive that social exchanges in brand communities exist throughout different product categories and branches, cultures, and different types of communities. The latter includes offline and online brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Muniz & Schau, 2005), small-group brand communities (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a), virtual large network brand communities (Adjei, Noble, & Noble, 2010), and brandfests (Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007).

Consumers and companies connect in distinct and extended ways. Brand aficionados perceive social identities with small-group friendships groups, with virtual brand communities, with the brand, and with the company, all in a system of interconnected relationships (Bagozzi, Morandin, Bergami, & Marzocchi, 2012). Similarly, literature offers a range of studies in the fields of common virtual consumer communities (e.g., Algesheimer, Borle, Dholakia, & Singh, 2010; Dwyer, 2007), and online social networks (e.g., Cheung & Lee, 2010; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). However, to date, the existence, functionality and influences of brand communities and social networks have mainly been investigated separately. In fact, one of the few existing studies in this area researches the influence of customer-based brand equity on brand community dynamics and represent social networks as a well applicable environment for generating new brand community members; applying a quantitative research approach (Schäfer et al., 2011). A related study investigates the differences of consumer- versus marketer-generated brand communities (Sung, Kim, Kwon, & Moon, 2010), but does not focus on the distinct setting of a brand community within a social network. Thus, the combination of both venue and their coalesced meaning for marketing management and research still remain to be explored. Consequently, this paper aims to contribute to research by investigating the existence of brand communities embedded in a social network environment, and gaining further insights into the interplay of these related social concepts. Furthermore, building on recent identity research (Bagozzi et al., 2012), embedded brand communities allow their members to perceive multiple social identities: with the brand community, the brand, the company, and with the social network. Together with an analysis of the social and psychological processes of their members, this research seeks to contribute to marketing research and to help marketers understand how to best utilize such communities in social networks. The author therefore scrutinizes motivational drivers for participation, and differences between diverse types of sub-groups embedded in a social network.

First, this article provides an overview of the literature on social network and brand community research, on which this research builds upon. The study then explains the design of the empirical study, the netnography approach. Finally, the discussion of the findings highlights contributions to marketing theory and practice, and lays down a number of implications for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Social network

One of the main questions of social theory is how social relations affect behavior, organizations, and institutions (Granovetter, 1985).

Social network theory postulates that human behavior is embedded in a network of interpersonal relations (e.g., Granovetter, 1985), and prior research demonstrates that social networks influence their members' behavior (de Valck, van Bruggen, & Wierenga, 2009). This insight becomes even more crucial as the number of social network members and the amount of time spent in these networks will continue to rise; in other words, the western world is increasingly developing into a society of networks (Raab & Kenis, 2009), and the strong growth of social networks in developing countries (Checkfacebook.com, 2011) indicates the global effect of this trend.

The number of connected and interacting people or groups of people, with patterns of connections and relations describe the characteristics of a social network (e.g., Doyle, 2007). Social networks exist, for example, as friendships between individuals, relationships between groups, and business relations between corporations (Mizruchi & Galaskiewicz, 1993; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Rapoport & Horvath, 1961). Online social networks are virtual places that cater for a specific population; on such platforms people with similar interests gather to communicate, exchange contact details, build relations, and share and discuss ideas (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). In the consumer-to-consumer area de Valck et al. (2009) describe social networks also as virtual communities of consumption, which feature characteristics like high consumer knowledge and companionship, and therefore influence consumer behavior. Among other activities, users can interact, share stories in written form, or visually, in the form of pictures and videos (Cheung & Lee, 2010).

From the perspective of information technology, online social networks are "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). In social networks members often use their real identities to create a profile. This characteristic is opposed to the classical use of pseudonyms and enhances the authenticity of interaction. Furthermore, along with text based information, profiles in social networks often incorporate visual information, audio and video content. Finally, blogging, instant messaging, chatting, update notifications for the profiles of one's connections ("friends"), and planning meetings are only some of the common features found in such social networks; recent developments offer additional features like conducting and participating in polls, or "checking-in" to places (e.g., restaurants, public locations, or private addresses). Most of the latter elements describe "web 2.0" elements and members use them to pursue their objectives of socializing, content sharing, and having a good time (Messinger et al., 2009).

2.2. Brand community

Brand communities are specialized consumer communities; they differ from traditional communities due to their commercial character, and members' common interest in and enthusiasm, or even love (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2008), for a brand. However, each of these communities contains three common markers: consciousness of kind, shared rituals and tradition, and moral responsibility (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

The primary community marker is consciousness of kind, which describes the perceived membership of participants and intersects with social identity theory (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a). Members feel connected with other members, and separate themselves from outsiders (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006b); literature also explains this social categorization as in-group and out-group comparison (Bagozzi, Dholakia, & Klein Pearo, 2007). Members therefore, often derive a feeling of belonging from their membership to the brand community (Algesheimer et al., 2005).

The second community marker compromises of shared rituals and traditions. Through these social processes members create their own

meaning of the community experience; in turn, they also communicate these meanings within and over the borders of the community (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu, 2008). The celebrations of brand history, or the exchange of brand related stories, are indicators for this marker (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). In addition, members often share a common set of values and behaviors; for example a specific form of language or signs which are used within the community (Casaló et al., 2008).

Ultimately, moral responsibility completes the three community markers and makes members of a community feel morally committed to other community members and the community as a whole (Casaló et al., 2008). Moral responsibility appears, for example, in the form of supporting members with the proper use of the brand, or integrating new members into the community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

In addition to the three brand community markers, consumers' perceptions, especially their social identity, determine membership within a brand community. Social identity is "the part of the individuals' self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1982); further, this social-psychological construct comprises three components: cognitive, evaluative and affective (Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999). First, the cognitive component entails self-categorization of community membership through individuals; they identify similarities with other members of the same group and differences to members of other groups (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006b); therefore, this component relates closely to the community marker consciousness of kind. Second, the evaluative component refers to the assessment of the community and one's membership (i.e., group self-esteem) (Ellemers et al., 1999). Third, the affective component encompasses the positive emotions experienced by individuals on the basis of their perceived belonging to the group, and positive emotions towards other group members (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000). To characterize membership, including all three components of social identity is essential.

Concluding, if individuals feel a sense of belonging for, and also identify with the brand community and the other community members, they can be classified as brand community members. In online brand communities, for example, the interaction of members is often computer-mediated, members meet rarely face-to-face but still share a social identity and consciousness of kind (Sicilia & Palazón, 2008).

2.3. Distinctions and conjunctions: social network and brand community

Due to the characteristic of the personal interaction of its members, brand communities display another special form of consumer communities (e.g., de Valck et al., 2009), as their focus regarding to the content is tight. Consumer communities, in turn, "represent substantial social networks of consumer knowledge and companionship that affect consumer behavior" (de Valck et al., 2009), leading to the ambiguity of consumer communities—in particular brand communities—and social networks being uniform concepts.

Nevertheless, the author classifies and interprets social networks and brand communities rather as distinct but overlapping concepts. Main differences include the thematic orientation (i.e., wide and general in a social network, compared to relatively narrow and focused in a brand community), the strength of the ties between members, and their personal involvement with the community or social network. Finally, in contrast to brand communities, online social networks are usually widely accessible (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). However, the reflection of these differences demonstrates that social networks and brand communities do not necessarily differ in kind, but show a difference in degree. Furthermore, a recent study shows that consumers and companies are connected in distinct and extended ways.

Brand aficionados perceive social identities with small friendships groups, with virtual network-based brand communities, with the brand, and with the company, all in a system of interconnected relationships. Such multiple group affiliations represent common bonds or common identities, and they can be rather network-based, or similar to a friendship group, where both are linked in a chain of relationships (Bagozzi et al., 2012). Hence, brand enthusiasts perceive a social identity with the brand community and with its social network environment separately, but simultaneously. Similarly, theory leads to the assumption that social networks do not, or at least only to a certain extent, feature brand community attributes such as; community markers, social identity, salient brand emotions, and commercial characteristic (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Anyhow, much of social network theory and research has focused mainly on the links, but not on their nature and meaning; hence, a clear distinction of the two phenomena cannot be determined. Instead, both embody social phenomena and overlap in some respects; mainly, social networks and brand communities share the basic property of their members interacting with each other. These ongoing interactions are critical for the survival and success of social networks; similarly, social relationships are crucial in brand communities; the latter is built around a brand, its core asset, but ultimately grows and persists due to the relationships among its members (Jang, Olfman, Ko, Koh, & Kim, 2008).

2.3.1. Embedded brand community

Studying and using social networks, one notices that within this phenomenon additional sub-groups develop. Such sub-groups focus on a specific topic (e.g., interest, concern, or project), and are therefore narrow in scope compared to the diversity of social networks. In the professional social network LinkedIn, for instance, users join groups which focus on business events or shared interests. Similarly, they adhere to the alumni group of a certain university. In Facebook, the private social network under study, people choose to become fans of certain pages or members of sub-groups.

To get an idea of a Facebook fan page, one can picture a website for a certain activity, brand, or interest within Facebook; such a page usually entails interactive applications. Facebook members become fans of a page's subject by clicking on the button "I am a fan of…" (After the data collection of the empirical study presented in this paper was completed, Facebook has changed the naming of this button to "I like"). The company's aim of a Facebook fan page is "to broadcast great information in an official, public manner to people who choose to connect with them" (Facebook.com, 2011d). A Facebook group is "a space for people to share their opinions and interest in that subject" (Facebook.com, 2011d). Groups can be open, closed or secret, whereas pages are always public. In general, groups tend to be smaller than fan pages; however, users also create and participate in groups around a certain topic, for example a brand.

Although prior research investigates social networks and brand communities separately, the conjunction of both social phenomena requires additional analyses, as well as conceptualization and theories. On the one hand, the size, superficiality, and the wide scope of social networks might affect embedded sub-groups; furthermore, individuals join a brand-related sub-group within a social network with less effort; they are already signed up and to "register" only one click is needed; hence, such sub-groups might not require high brand involvement and do not embody brand community characteristics. On the other hand, these characteristics might be advantages for the evolution of brand communities; in this respect, social networks might present another platform on which brand aficionados meet and interact, namely in embedded brand communities. The author of this study follows the latter perspective as social networks have become "a new world of screen-based communication on computers, and increasingly, mobile phones"; furthermore, "social networkers of the world have become lifecasters who are happy to share the previously private and deeply personal detritus of their lives" (Patterson, 2012).

2.3.2. Heterogeneity of embedded communities

In addition to investigating whether sub-groups within social networks represent embedded brand communities, understanding and comparing possibly different sub-groups (e.g., fan page and group) and their main characteristics, also appear to be important. Prior research illustrates that such special consumer communities differ regarding the strength of their members' relationships and either emphasize the network of members' relations within the community (e.g., Adjei et al., 2010), corresponding to fan pages; or, in contrast, pay particular attention to the relations between individual members (Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Klein Pearo, 2004), like in a group setting. Similarly, research on attachment differentiates consumer communities in common identity and common bond groups (Prentice, Miller, & Lightdale, 1994). In this regard, identity and bond illustrate two dimensions of members' attachment to corresponding communities (Ren, Kraut, & Kiesler, 2007).

Thus, depending on the intensity and form of interaction and brand affection of the members, brand community characteristics (e.g., community markers and social identity) abound to different extents. Different types of communities stemming from the intensity of these characteristics have not been discussed in brand community research yet. Subsequently, the question arises whether such types of brand communities exist, and if they differ regarding their functionality, antecedents and consequences. A better grasp on those sub-groups demands an understanding of antecedents to participation, such as motivational drivers. "Recognizing that brand communities can become important marketing instruments and understanding who joins a community for what reasons may have potentially powerful managerial implications" (Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schröder, 2008).

In conclusion, this paper investigates empirically whether brand communities embedded in social network environments exist; a deeper goal is to explore how they exist, on what rationale they build on, and what forms with what functions they embody. Building on these results, the author also examines the differences of potentially diverse brand community types within social networks, as well as the motives for participating in such sub-groups.

3. Research methodology

To investigate the research questions a netnographic research approach seems to be most appropriate because of its unobtrusive and naturalistic attributes (Kozinets, 2002). The access to "spontaneous consumer talk that is more natural and more 'real'; 'heartfelt' data that is more vivid and textured" (Puri, 2007) makes this qualitative approach ideal for scrutinizing the existence of brand communities within social networks. Further, previous research presents netnography as an eligible approach to investigate virtual consumer communities (e.g., Cova & Pace, 2006).

3.1. Sample

The social network Facebook is highly eligible for this empirical study; this platform is very popular, internationally available, and provides numerous and diverse examples of brand-related communities in the form of Facebook groups and fan pages. To being able to select an appropriate brand and its corresponding group and fan pages, the author first aimed to narrow the comprehensive variety of brands that are present on Facebook. For this purpose, the author considered that global brands, which have accordant resources to conduct a successful media strategy available, would be of interest for this study.

Thus, the choice of the sample within Facebook builds on a scan of the 100 leading global brands based on the "Interbrand Best Global Brands Rating 2009"; the search application in Facebook enables one to find the largest groups and fan pages (amount of members) of each brand. Of the 100 given brands based on the Interbrand rating, appropriate fan pages for all brands exist on Facebook, expect for two (Allianz and Axa). In contrast, no fitting groups (brand-related groups with a minimum of 500 members) are available for 11 brands (e.g., Colgate).

To assess how appropriate a community is for netnographic research, one compares the sub-groups according to questions proposed by Kozinets (2002) (e.g., Is the segment focused and relevant to the research question? Is the activity within the community high? Is the data detailed and descriptively rich?). Following this approach, the Canon Digital Photography group embodies the most fitting group. Reasons for this decision are the salient popularity (108,259 members) and the highest degree of activity on the discussion board of all 100 scanned groups, resulting in a descriptively rich body of data (3,046 discussion threads) (Facebook.com, 2010). In terms of an accordant Facebook fan page, the Canon Camera Malaysia fan page with 151,380 enthusiasts (Facebook.com, 2011e) qualifies best for the netnographic investigation. The fan page is company-hosted, which was found to be typical for fan pages of large organizations. Furthermore, one of the author's personal interests is photography. Due to the perennial use of Canon cameras, the author is familiar with the brand and its product. This familiarity is crucial for applying netnography, and therefore also corroborates the choice of Canon fan page and group and their members as applicable sample for this study.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

Applying the netnography approach, the author followed the steps suggested by Kozinets (2010). Therefore, participant-observation characterizes the data collection, which included a high knowledge of and getting familiar with the brand and the product, joining the community, lurking and observing, as well as actively participating in the accordant group and fan page. The presented findings build on included observed data and data collected during interaction with community members, as well as general impressions that were sketched as filed notes. The netnographic study incorporates more than 2000 discussion threads within the group, each consisting of multiple posts, during 15 months. The analysis of the fan page includes 128 discussion threads during a 10-month time period; some of the discussion threads show extraordinary interactivity with up to 494 messages. In addition, an exceptionally high interactivity on the fan page wall allows a thorough netnography.

To investigate if brand-related communities in social networks correspond to the concept of brand communities as defined by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001)), the introduced brand community characteristics appear to be appropriate measures. Therefore, the author develops and employs structured categories which act as a point of reference for the netnographic research. Categories on the community markers, as well as on brand emotions and the commercial character, determine whether the group and the fan page correspond to the idea of a brand community. Moreover, categories on the different components of social identity (Ellemers et al., 1999) allow one to investigate the existence of social identity in the community under study, and thereby the perceived membership of the participants. Finally, categories for possible participation motives build on prior research on motivations for participation in brand communities, or social networks (e.g., Dholakia et al., 2004).

To check for and verify the different types of brand (related) communities embedded in the social network under study, the author conducted an additional descriptive analysis of their characteristics, including number of members, as well as number and nature of applications. To this purpose, the author reports community attributes of the pre-selected 98 brand fan pages and 89 groups based on the Interbrand ranking, and subsequently compares these attributes by utilizing an independent T-test.

4. Results

4.1. Embedded brand community

Referring to the characteristics of brand communities, all three community markers (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) are present in the group and on the fan page. Starting with consciousness of kind, participants use notions like "we" or "us" to describe the community which indicates the feeling of belonging and also the existence of the cognitive component of social identity (Ellemers et al., 1999). For example, one member states: "…I am loyal to canon though. They have been the leader for a very long time. Plus, if I switched to Nikon, I would have to leave this group: -(". Additionally, the data shows a high familiarity between regular members who are often very knowledgeable about what equipment other members possess; furthermore, they are aware of other members' attitudes and opinions, and expect them to behave accordingly in discussions. Another expression of consciousness of kind is oppositional brand loyalty. In numerous situations in the group and on the fan page members present oppositional brand loyalty, mainly as the classical opposition to Nikon cameras. In this context a member states, "If you could choose [one Nikon and one Canon product] which would you go for—The 7d, because the other one is Nikon"—"There's a lot of "feel like" involved here, and we are at opposite ends of that one for sure ;0)". This social categorization refers to how individuals classify themselves and others into different social groups, based on similar actions, intentions, values and traits (Tajfel, 1982); thereby members create a differentiation between in-group and out-group (e.g., Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008).

Common threads help to unite community members. An example is a discussion which develops based on a Nokia Sales Executive; he claims that SLR cameras will become obsolete because of the advancement of cameras in cell phones, which results in an enraged discussion of community members. Legitimacy, the final aspect of consciousness of kind distinguishes between "real" photographers and "wannabe" photographers in the communities: "These are usually very rich people that go to the camera store and say "gimme the best camera you got" They think since they bought the best camera in the store they don't need a manual, the camera will automatically take amazing pictures". Concluding, all different aspects of the key community marker are common in the embedded sub-groups.

Second, rituals and traditions also exist in the observed communities. Brand related stories are widespread discussion topics among group and fan page members. However, discussions about brand history are not as common. Maybe, this finding is partially due to the relatively novelty of digital photography. The most apparent indicator for the existence of rituals and traditions is the observation of a common set of values and behaviors; for example, the use of jargon. This specialist language often leads new members to ask questions to get clarification of technical terms: "What is SS?"—"Shutter Speed. Sorry about that. [followed by an explanation of what this means]" Furthermore, members enforce rules; they show others who misbehave what is deemed to be appropriate behavior in the community: "In all the time, I have never seen anyone in here displaying the attitude and ill manners that you have displayed in this series of posts. In spite of this, everyone has treated you with dignity and respect and done their best to answer your question. Please mend your way." To create meaning for the brand, experience discussions about advertisements, product placements, and the use of canon products for special occasions are common in both sub-groups.

Lastly, sense of moral responsibility (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) represents an important ingredient of the community experience in both, group and fan page. Integration and retention of members, support in the use of products, and general assistance are regular behaviors in the sub-groups. Thereby, threads include many discussions about buying decisions; however, members also talk frequently about commercial issues of photography, legal aspects, photo editing,

solving of occurring problems, etc. Respondents usually refer to their own experience and knowledge when answering posts, or by giving references to different sources. An example of a grateful member: "[…] Let me tell you—the people in this group are an AMAZING resource. The suggestions above are great. […] If I ever have a question—I post it here!"

The commercial character of the community experience (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) and a high interest in and affection to the brand (Jang et al., 2008) indicate that the fan page and the group distinguish themselves from other types of consumer communities; both characteristics are present in both sub-groups; the latter manifests itself in discussions such as: "Tell us what camera you have and your favorite thing that it does or can do.—I love my 40D like a puppy.—The thing I like most is the fact that it is simply "Canon".—The Canon 600 mm f4L IS USM prime lens :) The love of my life but don't tell my wife that please."; the awareness of the commercial character of the community, in turn, leads to posts requesting other members to "Please, be SMART CONSUMERS […], don't just rush go out buy 550D […]. You own it today or you own it next week, it'll still be around."

Finally, the Canon group and the fan page offer many cues which indicate the existence of all three components of social identity (Ellemers et al., 1999); they highlight that individuals perceive themselves as members of the brand community. Examples for the cognitive component and the special importance members attach to their community experience are: "[…] Thank you all so much for this invaluable advice!! It is so nice to have a helpful group to pose questions to […]"—"This forum has been amazingly helpful-worth being on Facebook for it." In addition, individuals derive self-esteem from their community membership in different ways, proofing the existence of evaluative social identity. For example, users often express how valuable the contributions of other, knowledgeable members are and receive recognition of peers: "I know it's asked over and over, but I would like some advice from real people… not the stuff I've been reading on review websites for months. [question and answer] Thanks User A, that was a very well thought-out answer. I appreciate you taking the time to really read my question and answer it thoroughly. I like this group, all you guys are awesome! :)". Ultimately, members feel emotionally connected to their communities and accordant peers: "I LOVE this facebook group, everyone has been so helpful and willing to give me instruction. I LOVE IT!".

4.2. Motives for participation

Referring to the individuals' drives which lead them to participate in the communities; members frequently seek help from the community to receive information which is specifically tailored to their needs (see Dholakia et al., 2004); this first-hand advice of experienced peers serves later as a base for intended buying decisions. Users perceive such advice as highly valuable; they see peers as an objective source of information, as they tend to trust other like-minded members with whom they share similar values (Wu, Chen, & Chung, 2010). These peers, in turn, aid to reduce their perceived risk before they make investments (Goldsmith & Horowitz, 2006). "I really want a canon digital SLR camera […] But it's a big investment so any help would be great!" Another key reason for users to join groups and fan pages is to learn and improve their skills (e.g., Dholakia et al., 2004); common examples are question and answer based learning, commenting and criticizing the work of others, taking part in competitions, etc. Additionally, social network environments pave new ways for consumer learning; members can simply upload their work in the form of videos or photos, and provide or receive feedback from other knowledgeable and experienced users: "I was wondering if you guys could check out some of my pictures, and was wondering on how to improve. I […] would like to get better." On the fan page, members often proclaim that companies do not do enough to contribute to their progress through their learning curve. "Why don't Canon give

some tips on photography???"—"sent you the user guide book already =)"—"Not enough! give tips on how to make a great picture […].!"

However, the company enhances the learning experience by providing, for example, fan page members with a daily challenge, in which they can compete for the best pictures. Another strong antecedent of participation in sub-groups is the sharing of members' passion (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005) for the brand and for the hobby: "For me, I think it is fun and interesting to see people get involved and get concern which means love towards Canon." Furthermore, many discussions also show members seeking an opportunity to dream and fantasize (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010) about possessing expensive equipment, being a professional photographer, or about new camera solutions, etc: "Your Dream Kit. If money were not an object, what products from Canon would you have in your kit?"—"Hope one day I be as good as you. :) its my passion, shall make a dream become reality.. :D wish me the best.. :)". Next, social enhancement, entertainment and enjoyment, as well as forming and retaining relationships (Dholakia et al., 2004) are important reasons for many members to get involved in the community; these drivers are frequent topics in the many hours during which members engage in discussions. Ultimately, members also join brand-related online communities to give voice to their concerns. This finding corresponds to the work of Bhattacharya and Sen (2003), who argue that identification with a brand leads to an enforced motivation for stronger claim on this brand.

4.3. Heterogeneity of embedded communities

Although both sub-groups, Facebook fan page and group, show brand community characteristics, they differ in certain regards. First distinctions already appear based on the descriptive analyses. An independent T-test shows a significant difference between the number of members within the investigated fan pages (m = 543,932; SD = 1,047,545.51), and those adhering to groups (m = 10,133, SD = 14,576.65; T(4.94) = 97.04, p = 0.000). Furthermore, a comparison of the number of applications (various tools, activities or information) indicates that companies commonly utilize fan pages for promotional and informational purposes, as fan pages (m = 7.63, SD = 3.70) host significantly more applications than groups do (m = 4.95, SD = 10.00, T(2.48) = 187, p = 0.014). Applications on fan pages often employ innovative marketing tools dedicated to contents such as social corporate responsibility, celebrity endorsement, user competitions, and others. In contrast, only 50% of fan pages comprise an application for discussions, while almost twice as many of the groups (95.6%) host such an application. Applications allowing users to share photos and videos are popular on both fan pages and groups.

In relation to the brand community characteristics, the main differences refer to the perceived membership of the participants. Individuals discuss and mention the key community marker, consciousness of kind, more frequently and much more in the group than on the fan page. Similarly, social identity, especially its cognitive and affective component, is also of higher relevance in the group. In the Canon group users form strong relationships; therefore, the degree of social relatedness is much higher than on the fan page. However, due to the organization of events by the Canon marketing department, and promotion of those events, taking part in activities outside the online community is more common on the fan page.

Finally, individuals help each other to a greater extent in the group, pointing to a higher moral responsibility; the Facebook group is a distinctly more efficient source of advice than the fan-page, as individuals respond faster, more thoroughly and fewer questions remain unanswered. These differences of fan pages and groups also correspond to prior research on strengths of relationships in consumer communities. In fan pages, activities related to the community's purpose are central, and consumers participate mainly due to utilitarian (e.g., getting

information) motives (Dholakia et al., 2004). Likewise, common identity implies that members perceive a commitment to the community's purpose or topic (Prentice et al., 1994), and members feel more attached to the community as a whole than to specific group members. Therefore, main causes of commitment to the group as a whole are social categorization, interdependence, and intergroup comparisons (Ren et al., 2007), which also correspond to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982). In contrast, an increasing amount of consumers experience their beloved brands and products by using them with a group of brand community members who share close friendships and engage in regular social interactions. "For such communities, the demarcation blurs in that brand-related activities intermingle with the group's social activities" (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a). Such groups are strongly socio-centric, and their members often have known each other for a longer time period. Furthermore, members may display higher levels of brand involvement and a stronger social identity than in network-based communities.

Regarding the motivational drivers for the community participation, additional differences exist. Individuals, who join the community to seek information, find posts of remarkably higher value in the group; they offer a wider array of knowledgeable message posters who frequently answer discussion threads. In contrast, a lot of posting takes place on the wall of the fan page, where requests easily get lost without being answered. Social enhancement, however, is more important to fan page members, as they find more possibilities to serve their needs on fan pages; for example, a daily photo competition. Finally, discussions about company management are of minor importance in the Canon group; however, on the fan page criticism and discussions about brand management are frequent, pointing to stronger claim on the brand. Moreover, on the company initiated Canon fan page members are aware of the presence of Canon management: "Think logically—do you think Canon would've not corrected me already if I'm wrong? They know what I post". Therefore, they see the fan page as a channel to convey their concerns and opinions to the management of their brand, and expect to receive company recognition and acknowledgment in return.

To conclude, individuals' behavior differs regarding the frequency, subject matter, and intensity of social interaction and discussion threads on the fan page and group sites under study. These sub-group characteristics also result into different motivational drivers for participation in the accordant embedded community.

5. Discussion

This paper aims to investigate the existence of brand communities embedded in a social network environment. Brand communities within social networks do exist and they classify into different sub-groups based on dissimilarities. Contrary to generic virtual brand communities, members of embedded brand communities take two conscious decisions when joining the corresponding community: first, they join the social network, which is, in turn, the requirement to subsequently being able to participate in the embedded brand community. The key motivational antecedents for participation in the latter are: passion for the brand and the field of interest, willingness to learn and improve skills, social relation to others, and reception of information tailored to specific members' needs (which individuals perceive as more objective and useful than information from other sources), entertainment, and enhancement of one's social position.

Overall, both of the explored sub-groups show brand community characteristics. However, the strengths of these peculiarities differ. Specifically, the perceived membership due to consciousness of kind and social identity is more distinct in the group than on the fan page; in addition group members feel a higher moral responsibility and find better fulfillment of their need for information. The fan page, however, serves as a platform to convey concerns and suggestions to brand management and to receive social enhancement.

Based on this results, the Facebook group, certainly states a clear brand community, showing strong value of all community markers, social identity, brand emotions, and the commercial character. The fan page, on the other hand, seems to embody a weaker form of a brand community; in general, brand community characteristics are present but the perceived membership in form of consciousness of kind and social identity are less salient; in addition social relations and the support of peers are of less importance. However, independent of the type of the sub-group, social networks offers spaces where brand communities may evolve.

5.1. Theoretical implications

By demonstrating the existence of brand communities in a social network environment, this study contributes to brand community, identity, and social network research. Individuals interact with many social network members characterized by different interests, purposes and social identities. At the same time, they perceive shared consciousness of kind and a distinct social identity with certain peers; sub-group members share their enthusiasm for the same brand and interact regarding their object of interest.

Consequently, consumers are members of both wider ranging and closer knit communities at the same time; they hold multiple memberships. These findings are in accordance with recent research that illustrates complex connections of consumer to organizations, including relations to the firm and the physical branded product, as well as to a small friendship group and virtual community, where both connect to the organization in a chain of relationships (Bagozzi et al., 2012). Similarly in the context of embedded brand communities, individuals' social exchanges with other social network members, and certainly also group membership and participation in the corresponding brand community influence members' identity. Thus, the investigation of members' multiple social identities in embedded consumer communities and their multilevel interactions represent interesting fields for future research.

Furthermore, these findings represent a contribution to brand community research as different types of brand communities have thus far only been considered based on the size of the group or the initiation (e.g., Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006a). The findings of this study present the strengths of main brand community characteristics as distinctive criteria, instead. Furthermore, the characteristic of embeddedness describes a new form of brand community. Finally, this study validates the Muniz and O'Guinn (2001)) brand community conceptualization in a completely different setting, namely in a social network environment.

With regard to social network research, this study demonstrates the partitioning of social networks' users into further sub-groups. This finding also adds to prior research, which showed that many networks feature the property of community structure, "in which network nodes are joined together in tightly knit groups, between which there are only looser connections" (Girvan & Newman, 2002). Individuals satisfy several needs by participating in specialized, embedded communities; thereby, the social network offers its members additional benefits and consequently, users' loyalty towards the social network rises. Furthermore, brand communities embedded in social networks also represent an environment in which marketers can leverage identity synergy. Consumers' involvement with a community facilitates their pursuit of other important social identities. To the extent that individuals perceive identity synergy they, in turn, identify with the enabling entity (Fombelle, Jarvis, Ward, & Ostrom, 2012).

5.2. Managerial implications

For marketers the results of this research demonstrate the possibility to create brand communities without the enormous effort of building and owning online platforms, or promoting independent websites, etc. Instead, using social networks offers brand management benefits: the access to unbelievable numbers of consumers, at low costs, high speed and ease of applicability. In addition, the findings help marketers choose which tools are more suitable to build brand communities within social network environments, and under which circumstances these tools should be used. As groups state true brand communities, they are more appropriate to build long-term relationships between and with groups of members. Furthermore, they appear to be more efficient in customer-to-customer based information exchange and learning. In contrast, fan pages offer enormous communicational means and the possibility to reach a large audience fast. Finally, being aware of the reasons for participation, marketers have the possibility to directly correspond to the social network and enable customer to satisfy their need by the means of brand community membership.

In accordance to the findings of this study, Facebook independently further highlighted the differences of group and fan pages. The company changed the name of the latter into 'Facebook page', which they now define as "a public profile that enables you to share your business and products with Facebook users. Create one in a few minutes with our simple interface" (Facebook.com, 2011f). In contrast, Facebook groups offer users to share things privately or publicly with a certain group of people (Facebook.com, 2011g). Consequently, Facebook pages and groups are comparable to marketer-generated and consumer-generated brand communities (Sung et al., 2010).

5.3. Limitations and future research

One possible topic of sub-groups embedded in a social network, is a certain brand. People declare themselves as a member or devotee of such a sub-group by joining. This study presents individuals who conduct a social categorization and become a member of a brand-related group or a fan page, being brand devotees. However, probably also other sub-groups within Facebook exist that are brand-related but not true brand communities; their participants lack in, for example, brand emotions and affective social identity; instead, they might only be superficially interested in the branded products, and consequently do not embody real brand community members.

The community under study has the highest degree of interactivity of all compared groups based on the Interbrand ranking. Although this study demonstrates the existence of brand communities embedded in social networks, future research should conduct additional studies in order to allow generalization statements; further studies should also investigate the impact of such brand communities on social network members' behavior, as well as explore the reciprocal influence of the social network and the community. Finally, the processes of building a brand community within a social network represent an interesting field for future research, and could be approached by conducting a long term empirical study including different stages of such a community.

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