

The use of branded communities in sport marketing as an alternative to brand communities: the case of a German football community

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Aim of paper

Brand communities which represent a "specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" have been of large interest in the last years (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Empirical studies revealed several positive aspects of brand communities including increases in brand involvement, brand loyalty and positive word-of-mouth behavior (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). However, not every brand has the potential to be the basis of enduring interaction among its customers, so several companies (e.g. E.ON, Deutsche Telekom) had to close brand communities shortly after having established them with great effort. For this reason, this paper introduces the concept of "branded communities" as an alternative to "brand communities". Other than brand communities, a branded community not necessarily builds around a specific brand, but any interest or need. However, a specific brand makes use of the community for marketing purposes by sponsoring or operating the community.

Theoretical background

Our research involves image transfer processes similar to issues in co-branding or branded entertainment (e.g. branding in digital games). However, there is no research on the sponsorship of communities on a topic which is not directly related to the sponsor's products or services. We therefore develop a structural model to explain the causal relationships in branded communities. Specifically, we identify the driving forces of branded communities that lead to loyalty towards community and towards the sponsoring brand. We study both the relationship between the community members and the community and the relationship between the community members and the sponsoring brand. For both the community and the brand we chose the loyalty of community members as our main objective, since it is a generally accepted and powerful indicator of corporate success (Oliver, 1999).

Methodology and data analysis

We use an online survey from a branded online community in which the members are interested in football. This community is operated by the leading German telecommunication corporation. The company unobtrusively

brands the community with its logo and the slogan "powered by", so community members can perceive the company's involvement, but are not necessarily aware of it. The German football association serves as a co-operation partner for providing the scorings and official information. The community further offers a widespread range of features, e.g. sharing football videos and pictures, message boards, user blogs and mailing functions. 501 community members responded to the questionnaire. The causal model is studied using PLS structural equation modeling (Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics, 2009).

Results and implications

Consistent to our hypothesis "identification with the topic" (football) significantly influences "identification with the community" ($\beta=0,428^{**}$). Simultaneously, a higher "involvement with the topic" (football) leads to a higher "involvement with the community" ($\beta=0,533^{**}$). Contrary to our assumption, there are no significant direct effects of "topic identification" or "topic involvement" on "community loyalty". This means that the interest in a topic is necessary, but not sufficient to reach community loyalty. According to the path coefficients the "identification of the members with the community" is the most important determinant of community loyalty ($\beta=0,353^{**}$), followed by the quality of the relationships within the community represented by the construct "community quality" ($\beta=0,212^{**}$) and the degree of "involvement with the community" ($\beta=0,158^{**}$). Other than expected, there are no significant direct effects of "football identification" ($\beta=0,053$) and "football involvement" ($\beta=0,063$) on "community loyalty".

As hypothesized the more loyal the community members are towards the community the more loyal they are towards the operating brand ($\beta=0,128^{**}$). Furthermore, the results revealed a significant positive influence of the "perceived support of the sponsoring brand" on the "loyalty to this brand" ($\beta=0,168^{**}$). Contrary to our assumption, the members' perceived support of the telecommunication provider had no significant negative influence on their "loyalty towards the community" ($\beta=0,047$). Thus, the anticipated negative effects on the sense of community among the members seem to be compensated by the benefits of the platform provided by the company.

Altogether, the results of our study clearly advocate the concept of branded communities. It is possible to operate a community of interest focused on a non-brand specific topic and transfer the members' positive emotions to the brand. The brand owner addresses the consumers in a non-commercial surrounding. Moreover, the consumers are highly involved and often interested in the co-creation of value by generating interesting website content which in turn increases visit frequency of the members. Consequently, marketers should integrate communities into their branding strategy and profit from the recent developments in web 2.0.

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