Brand Loyalty and Online Brand Communities:
Is Brand Loyalty Being Strengthened Through Social Media?

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the use of the online social media network Pinterest in brand-to-consumer engagement and brand loyalty. The basis of the study was formed upon previous research on brand loyalty, online brand communities, brand experiences, and emotional connections to brands. Brand loyalty is defined in this study as pins, likes, or comments on a post by one of three food brands: Cooking Light, Food Network, and Kraft Foods. Content analyses were conducted over a two-week period to observe the number and types of posts by the three brands and the interaction with their Pinterest followers. It was found that consumers who engage with brands on social networks sites, such as Pinterest, do have positive brand experiences, which has been previously linked to increased brand loyalty.

KEYWORDS

Brand Community, Brand Loyalty, Cooking, Likes, Pins, Pinterest, Recipes

INTRODUCTION

Some of the most common, and important, questions that brand marketers ask today are in regards to brand loyalty. How do I make my customers’ brand loyal? What should I consider when evaluating brand loyalty? What are my competitors doing to increase brand loyalty among their customers? What marketing tactics should I utilize that may help increase brand loyalty to my product or brand? To address these questions, brand loyalty has been researched by scholars across a variety of disciplines for some time. Researchers have found that brand loyalty can be formed or enhanced through positive brand experiences (Iglesias, Singh, & Batista-Foguet, 2011), targeted and effective communication (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Vinerean, Cetina, Dumitrescu & Tichindelean, 2013), affective commitment or emotional connections (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Iglesias et al., 2011), and the use of online brand communities (Kim, Choi, Qualls, and Han, 2008; Naveed, 2012). Now, if marketers incorporate these aforementioned findings in marketing or promotional tactics, will brands or products be able to reach consumers on a higher level and impact brand loyalty?

In today’s over-stimulated and over-saturated consumer marketplace, it is up to the marketers to sell more than just the physical attributes or capabilities of a product or brand – it is about selling the emotional or personal experiences that come with connecting with a brand. Pine and Gilmore (1998) state that companies have realized over the last several decades that consumers are looking for more than just a product or a brand; they are seeking a brand experience. They also identified two parts of
such an experience: customer participation and connection. Studies have found that consumers today are engaging with not only a brand or a product, but also companies, other customers, marketers, and communities (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009). This paper will examine how utilizing certain online brand communities, specifically social media, can help a brand or company to foster positive brand experiences and emotional relationships and how those relationships can affect brand loyalty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brands are a pervasive entity in our world today. Everywhere we look, we are inundated with countless brands and brand choices. From the cars we drive to the food we eat to the electronics we use and the paper this is printed on, everything that we use and consume today is tied to a brand. Marketers and researchers alike have studied how people choose brands and what factors influence brand choices. The idea that consumers form relationships with certain brands (Fournier, 1998) and that positive, or negative, brand experiences influence brand relationships (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005), can then lead to the holy grail of marketing: brand loyalty. Loyalty or commitment to a brand is a result of the decision made by a consumer that a specific brand is better than its competitors and is reinforced through repeated purchases (Day, 1969; Naveed, 2012; Oliver, 1999). Furthermore, Oliver (1999) notes that loyalty occurs “despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior” (p. 34). Marketers realize that true brand loyalty and a connection with a brand will be more valuable than any other marketing, advertising or promotional tactics.

As there are countless brands for every item in our marketplace, fostering relationships and encouraging brand loyalty, particularly when connecting through brand experiences, is vital for brands to stand out from the competition. One important aspect of both brand experiences and brand loyalty is affective commitment, or the emotional connection between a consumer and a brand. Allen and Meyer’s 1990 study (as cited in Iglesias et al., 2011) defined affective commitment as “the customers’ emotional attachment to a particular brand or store based on their identification with that store or brand” (p. 572). Additionally, affective commitment is vital for both brand experience and brand loyalty (Iglesias et al., 2011) and brand love (Albert & Merunka, 2013), which can then lead to increased buying behaviors and greater brand advocacy (Turri, Smith, & Kemp, 2013, p. 209). Greater brand advocacy, or word-of-mouth marketing, has been easier for consumers to engage in through the formation and openness of brand communities.

The idea that brand communities contribute to brand loyalty is a relatively new concept, discussed in-depth by Muñiz and O’Guinn in 2001. Hur, Ahn, and Kim (2011) take the concept of brand community one step further and explored online brand communities. They found that “well-managed brand community communication leading commitment toward a brand community will most likely enhance various types of brand loyalty” (p. 1206). Hur et al.’s definition of a brand community will be used as the basis in this study. They note that a brand community is “a group of people who possess a particular brand or who have a strong interest in a brand, and who are active both online and offline” (2011, p. 1196). One area that has become a minefield for companies, brands, and marketers interested in brand communities and brand loyalty is social media.

Social Media and Brand Communities

Over the last several years, our society has seen a great influx of social media sites and channels. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) provide a definition for social networking sites that will be the basis
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