Chapter 1

Segmenting Fan Communities: Toward a Taxonomy for Researchers and Industry

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**ABSTRACT**

Extending decades of marketing and psychological research, industry and academic circles attempt to label brand community behaviours, borrowing analogies from subcultures such as religion (evangelists), slang (mavens, haters), technology and science fiction (fanboys), and other sciences (alpha, opinion leaders). Although sometimes used as generic terms, upon examination via an integrative literature review, these and other such commonly used fandom and brand community member labels, can define the spectrum of brand fandom in a specific way—through narrative, metaphor and cross-cultural labelling. Such labelling is happening already; this chapter parses out the meaning of one label from another into a proposed folk taxonomy, or classification system developed by those steeped in the culture. This segmentation enables theoretical research into specific fan types and possible opinion leaders, along with industry recommendations for approaching each segment based on the behavioural characteristic inherent in both the historic and common usage of the word.

**INTRODUCTION**

*Your job, if you want to explain a field, if you want to understand it, if you want to change it, is to begin with the taxonomy of how it’s explained and understood. Once you understand a taxonomy, you’ve got a chance to re-organize it in a way that is even more useful. Too often, we get lazy and put unrelated bullet points next to each other, or organize in order of invention. If you can’t build a taxonomy for your area of expertise, then you’re not an expert in it. – Seth Godin (2016)*

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-3220-0.ch001
Increasingly, businesses and organizations expect marketing professionals to leverage fan communities to promote the brand, identify opinion leaders and generate word of mouth (WOM) and sales (Gnambs & Batinic, 2012; Li & Bernoff, 2008; O’Sullivan, 2015; Thakur, Angriawan & Summey, 2016). WOM is peer to peer recommendation of a product, usually for no compensation to the WOM generator (Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991; Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2008). Although how to generate WOM is a source of constant conjecture, it is generally accepted that producer generated WOM is not true WOM. True WOM is peer-to-peer (P2P).

Producer-generated WOM can also seem hard selling and inauthentic compared to a fan base’s genuine and ardent enthusiasm (Herr et al., 1991; Li & Bernoff, 2008; Sweeney et al., 2008). Producers attempt to subvert this inauthenticity by posing as fans, covertly compensating fans for generating WOM or attempting to influence peer-to-peer messages. Thus marketers attempt to grow their fan base, and both influence and equip their fans to share brand content and messages. Although some fans clamor to be the vehicle of such messages, other fans find this shilling destroys their pure relationship with the brand. Getting fan communication wrong can have dire consequences for the products, fans and the brand in the marketplace (Li & Bernoff, 2008).

Furthermore, the internet, and social media have created a public marketplace of discourse about virtually every product and brand (Li & Bernoff, 2008). The expectations on marketers to craft messages for these groups, control as well as direct their behavior, and use them to generate more sales, usually assumes that somehow fans are in service to brands. Yet fans, like any groups of people, are a disparate group of individuals with their own motivations and reasons for everything they do (Doss & Carstens, 2014; Walsh & Mitchell, 2009).

In short, marketers are expected to be experts in the consumer communities, and of the fans who spread word of mouth about their product. Moreover, the marketers should influence and control these fans and communities.

Yet in the same way that the Vatican cannot control the lives of everyone who identifies as Catholic, some fans may not follow a product’s doctrine. At least three decades of academic and industry research confirms this argument across fan communities, also known as brand communities (Casalo, Flavian, & Guinaliu, 2007; Cova, Pace, & Park, 2007; Schau, Munniz, & Arnould, 2009; Zhou, Zhang, Su, & Zhou, 2012), brand cults (Nathalie Collins, Gläbe, Mizerski, & Murphy; Schlanger & Bhasin, 2013) and subcultures of consumption (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Chalmers & Arthur, 2008; Lewin, 2013; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

Most such fan community and subcultures of consumption research is qualitative, usually using methodologies common in anthropology, sociology, psychology and religious studies (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Belk, Fischer, & Kozinets, 2013). Few quantitative studies relate to fan communities, mostly on the psychological bonds to the brand or attempting to identify or quantify the income generation power of devoted fans (Doss & Carstens, 2014; O’Sullivan, 2015; Shoham, & Pesämaa, 2013; Walsh & Mitchell, 2009).

Marketers today may know their fans via face to face experience, big data gathering, social media and other means. They may even know how much their fans purchase, refer, attend events or visit websites. Yet how can most marketers in such product and brand-specific contexts, better understand and therefore leverage their fan bases? Just as importantly, how can marketers communicate to their own organizations what a reasonable investment in fan communities constitutes, as well as a reasonable return on that investment? How can marketers manage their organizations’ expectations on what successful fan management looks like? Finally, is fan management even possible?