

ANALYZING BRAND COMMUNITIES: STRUCTURE AND BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

Brand communities (BCs) are nowadays an omnipresent phenomenon. One can find them amongst others in the context of motorbikes (Harley Davidson), paddles (PlayStation), food (Nutella), sportbrands (Nike), toys (Lego), computers (Apple) and cars (Jeep). Especially in the latter there is hardly any automobile brand without a fan club or brand community. The variety of these communities with respect to structure and objectives of the community, backgrounds and motives of members to join the community is high. Existing literature on how these communities form and which different kinds exist is rare. What kind of motives does a private person (customer) have, to be part of or to build up a BC and are their differences between the various communities around one brand?

To answer these research questions, Social Identity Theory (SIT) and the concept of Psychological Sense of Community (PSOC) Theory are used to realize the Brand Community phenomenon on a theoretical level at first. Because the SIT suits well for the analysis of larger groups and pools, it is discussed intensively in BC research as well. Obst, Zinkiewicz and Smith (2002) especially stress in their conceptualization of the PSOC the aspect of identification with the community and therefore they link the PSOC with the SIT. They elaborate five dimensions which represent the PSOC: friendship and support, belonging, cooperative behavior and shared values, leadership and influence as well as conscious identification.

Secondly, a qualitative research approach was selected, which seems appropriate for the explorative character of the study. In-depth interviews with several community members were conducted to analyze the structure of BCs and social interactions within the communities. In doing so the focus of the interview partners' sample lies on founders and presidents of BCs in the automotive industry.

Overall, the analysis of the qualitative data revealed four categories: "structure", "intensity of activities", "motives", and "social behavior". Findings were reflected against the background of the five PSOC categories. The first category, "structure", answers the research question concerning the differences between the various types of communities and different communities around one brand. They differ for example in terms of membership-fee, independence and support by the company. The second one, "intensity of activities", represents offered activities of a BC and sheds light on user options as well as on membership structures and behavior like online traffic, offline meeting and BC-core. Members who have a high activity degree are for example frequently asked to be moderators of a forum. This enables them to especially influence the community. This aspect can be associated with the categories leadership and influence by PSOC. The third and fourth category "motives" and "social behavior" are also closely linked to the PSOC categories. Thereby exchange and support can be associated with the category of cooperative behavior and shared values and a sense of belonging to the categories belonging and conscious identification. Corresponding to the number of nominations one can conclude that friendship and helpfulness are the key elements of membership in a BC. They can be equated with friendship and support of the PSOC.

For management implications it is important to be aware of the different types of brand community and their respective needs. Moreover one has to distinguish between reasons for the creation of a BC and reasons for continuity of membership in a BC. While the reasons for creation are difficult to influence by a company (e. g. the high interest in a brand and the search for like-minded people) the continuity of a BC can be supported by companies through the development of social contacts and a sense of belonging („Sense of Community“).

References Available on Request.