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Consumer Activism and the Advent of Online Anti-brand Communities: A Netnographic Analysis

Punam Mishra*, Ajay Chandel**

Abstract

Today, the consumers are not afraid of expressing their concerns and resistance to brands for their questionable quality and corporate practices. A brand that resonates with consumers helps create a loyal community base that trusts and supports the brand by acting as unofficial spokespersons as well. Arrival and growth of the Internet has led to the development of online brand communities, which are an effective medium for influencing the customer's buying behavior, and also a way to enhance the capability of firms to understand the ideologies and opinions of their customers through the information exchanged in these online social settings. The objective of this paper is to examine the reasons for anti-brand community formation. The content shared by the anti-brand community was categorized into various post categories. Posts having the same notion were coded similarly so that they formed one category. One of the categories found was spreading negative brand knowledge by creating and sharing sarcastic jokes/memes and facts signalling the negative elements of the brand. Loyalty for the competing brand also made people to join the anti-brand communities and participate in various anti-brand interactions. The reasons to form anti-brand communities were found to be the inability of these brands to satisfy the customers on the parameters like functional, ethical, identity mismatch and value deficiency issues, to name a few.

Keywords: *Brand hate pages, Sarcastic Jokes, Functional dissatisfaction, Self-Brand distance, Negative Brand Knowledge repositories*

Introduction

The web 2.0 to exchange product information (Lee, Park and Han, 2008) has transformed traditional word-of-mouth into electronic word-of-mouth. Since electronic word of mouth is independent of marketers' selling intents (Lee & Youn, 2009), it is considered to be more trustworthy and credible (Bone 1995; Bickart & Schindler, 2001). Consumer activism has paved in its way and consumers are not afraid of expressing their concerns and resistance to brands for their questionable quality and corporate practices. Building

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brand communities is a vital task in constructing a Brand. A clear brand that resonates with consumers helps create a loyal community base that trusts and supports the brand via acting as unofficial spokesperson as well.

While there are many definitions of community, a review of the sociology literature reveals that there are three core components of community: consciousness of kind (Guseld, 1978), shared values (Marshall, 1994) and a sense of moral responsibility. These three basic components of communities can be applied to the brand communities as well. Similar to brand communities (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), anti-brand communities are social movements that concentrate on one mainstream brand. The term social movement refers to "the coming together of a large number of people around a common set of values or beliefs in order to bring about a social transformation" (Dykstra and Law, 1994).

Review of Literature

Developing and providing the desired product to customers thereby satisfying their unmet needs can result into brand loyalty (McAlexander et al., 2002). However, as consumers expect more from brands, customer satisfaction is not enough and may not necessarily lead to brand loyalty (Oliver, 1999). In realization to this fact, the concept of brand communities has come into existence (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander, 2002). Hence, creating and managing brand communities can be extremely important not only to gain new but to retain old customers (Prykop & Heitmann, 2006).

Arrival and growth of the Internet has led to the development of online brand communities (OBCs) (Fernandez, 2011). Online brand communities can be an effective medium for influencing the customer's buying behavior (Adjei, Noble and Noble, 2010) and also a way to enhance the capability of a firm to understand the ideologies and opinions of their customers through the observations of the information exchanged in these online social settings (Kozinets, 2007). Realizing that brand communities can play a vital role in marketing for a company by analyzing the ways in which customers join these communities, and express their feelings for the same, can play an important role to capture the consumer insights for the organizations (Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder, 2008).

Customers share their information and ideas about a brand, positive or negative depending on their experiences, which impacts the decision making of the other customers and also significantly influences the brand identity and image (Karakaya

and Barnes, 2010). Consumers use such online anti-brand forums for two purposes, first to express their grievances and anger against the brand and second to facilitate customer to customer communication (Bailey, 2004). The main aim of the anti-brand communities is to gather people to voice their dissatisfaction, anger, hatred and also facilitate the exchange of anti-brand information which leads to organized boycotts (Krishnamurthy and Kucuk, 2009).

Need and Purpose of the Study

As discussed in review of literature, consumer activism and advent of web 2.0 has empowered the customers to come together regardless of geographical boundaries and gear up their voices against the irresponsible brands, calls for an investigation of the structure of online anti-brand communities to better understand what goes on in these virtual social spaces. Despite the kind of attention this topic has received lately in the marketing literature, there is a dearth of studies that can help marketers have a peep into social dynamics of these anti-brand communities to devise antidotes against anti-brand movements.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims at conducting a netnographic content analysis of selected anti-brand communities (brand hate pages) to:

1. investigate the reasons of anti-brand community formation
2. understand the modus operandi of anti-brand communities

Research Method

Anti-brand Facebook pages of three brands (Apple, Walmart and McDonald's) were identified. These brands were selected on the basis of the presence of strong online anti-brand communities, number of likes on the anti-brand community page/website, regularity of posting the content and members' activism in terms of comments, shares and likes. A netnographic analysis of these anti-brand pages was conducted for duration of one year through content analysis. Netnography is the scientific study of people and culture with their customs, habits, and mutual differences adapted to study online communities (Kozinets, 2002).

The results of content analysis were grouped into distinct categories leading to the development of theoretical understanding of the concept of anti-brand communities and their modus operandi. ATLAS.ti was used to uncover and systematically analyze complex phenomena hidden in unstructured content.

Results and Discussion

Content analysis

The content shared by the members on anti-brand communities of selected brands was studied and categorized using ATLAS.ti. Data related to frequency of post categories along with the number of likes, shares and comments. The data was collected to find out the most popular categories. Content analysis of selected anti-brand communities (Facebook pages) is presented below:

Table 1: Category-wise content analysis of anti-brand communities

Sr. No	Post Category		I hate Apple (286)				I hate Walmart (196)				I hate McDonald's (210)			
			No of posts	AL	AC	AS	No of posts	AL	AC	AS	No of posts	AL	AC	AS
1	Negative Brand Knowledge	Jokes	43	171	53	209	29	126	72	191	33	51	98	109
		Facts	12	109	27	51	9	37	14	17	21	57	27	23
3	Loyalty for competing brand		11	51	22	21	7	11	11	19	9	24	21	12
4	Value deficiency		51	123	97	78	71	93	89	81	55	57	78	112
5	Experiential and functional dissatisfaction		74	157	107	112	58	88	83	107	59	89	63	97
6	Ethical Disagreement		33	97	52	19	19	78	33	39	27	48	31	39
7	Support to achieve the stated goal		18	73	57	24	19	69	23	13	21	33	19	28
8	Self-brand distance		18	53	27	12	13	42	11	17	15	22	29	33
9	Emotional Support		26	101	63	61	11	19	17	10	14	19	18	39

*AL – Average Likes, *AC – Average Comments, *AS – Average Shares

(Source: Anti-brand 'Hate pages' on Facebook)

The content shared on the anti-brand community was categorized into 9 post categories. Posts were coded considering the notion of the post. Posts having the same notion were coded similarly so that they formed one category. As mentioned in the table 1, one of the categories found was spreading negative brand knowledge via creating and sharing sarcastic jokes/memes and facts signalling the negative elements of the brand. These posts were quite witty and full of humour. Loyalty for the competing brand also made people come join the anti-brand communities and participate in various anti-brand discussions. Members were seen criticizing the selected brand for

it was competing with their favourite brand. These posts were comparative where the hated brand was compared and demeaned against some other liked brand in the same category. Some posts were related to the value deficiency aspect of the hated brands. People brought their opinions on how these brands are deficient in value. These posts were some of the well liked, commented and shared posts.

On the same notes, posts related to bad experiences and dysfunctional aspects of the brands in question formed another category. Discussions were heated and a lot of disgust for these brands could be seen. These brands were also hated for being unethical or immoral and this formed the other post category. Another interesting category of posts was to invite people to join hands in the anti-brand movement by expressing their views on various aspects. Not only people were motivated to discuss but also to share the content with their peers so that a negative word of mouth could be created and many more people could be added in the fight against these brands. The idea was to channelize people for the accomplishment of stated objective of forming the community and to promote it to the members outside the community. Some posts were related to how these brands do not represent who and what consumers are. The category was labelled as self-brand distance depicting self-brand incongruence. Some of the posts used to generate discussion were via sharing some emotional outburst towards the brand. As the nature of the community, other members who faced the same predicament would come and join thereby offering an emotional support.

Content analysis revealed that spreading negative word of mouth via sarcastic jokes appeared to be the most liked post category (total of 348 average likes for all three brands combined) followed by experiential and functional dissatisfaction (total of 334 average likes for all three brands combined) and value deficiency (total of 273 average likes for all the three brands combined). Posts related to value deficiency appeared to be the most commented post category (total of 264 average comments for all three brands combined) followed by experiential and functional dissatisfaction (total of 253 average comments for all three brands combined) and jokes (total of 223 average comments for all three brands combined). Sarcastic jokes appeared to be the most liked post category (total of 509 average shares for all three brands combined) followed by experiential and functional dissatisfaction (total of 316 average shares for all three brands combined) and value deficiency (total of 271 average shares for all three brands combined).

Table 2: Total average likes, comments and shares on combined post categories

Sr. No	Post Category		TAL	TAC	TAS
1	Negative Brand Knowledge	Jokes	348	223	509
		Facts	203	68	91
3	Loyalty for competing brand		86	54	52
4	Value deficiency		273	264	271
5	Experiential and functional dissatisfaction		334	253	316
6	Ethical Disagreement		223	116	97
7	Support to achieve the stated goal		175	99	65
8	Self-brand distance		117	67	62
9	Emotional Support		139	98	110

*TAL-Total average likes (Three brands combined), TAC-Total average comments (Three brands combined), TAS-Total average shares (Three anti-brand communities combined)

(Source: Anti-brand 'Hate pages' on Facebook)

Netnographic analysis of anti-brand communities

Key Themes

The most obvious reason of forming an anti-brand community on the web was found to be the inability of the brand to satisfy the customers on various parameters listed below:

Table 3: Key Reasons of Anti-Brand Community Formation

Sr. No	Parameter
1.	Functional/Experiential dissatisfaction
2.	Self-Brand distance
3.	Ethical disagreement
4.	Hatred for competing brand
5.	Value deficiency

(Source: Anti brand 'Hate pages' on Facebook)

1. Functional/Experiential dissatisfaction

The product is at the heart of brand. Designing and delivering a product that satisfies the customers' needs and wants is at the zenith of a successful marketing. Hence to please the customers and to create a loyal customer base, a brand needs to meet the customers' needs if not delight them (Lee, 2007). Undesirable experience that the customers have with the product or service makes them create and be a member of anti-brand online communities (Hempel, 2013).

2. Self-Brand distance

The psychological self of an individual is a person's unique identity. Consumers buy and own brands which they believe bridge in the gap between their real self and the desired self (Aaker, 1997; Parker, 2009). On the other hand, people also select brands to avoid undesired stereotypes. Put in other words consumers might more likely judge their well-being in relation to how distant they are from their most undesired self. Hence, undesired self can be considered to explain the anti-brand community formation related attitudes (Bosnjak and Brand, 2008).

3. Ethical disagreement

Of the many themes, some suggest that some members join the anti-brand communities for they believe in the brand being morally irresponsible and unethical. However, distinct these themes might be, the common defining artifacts in all of these themes were found to be that these brands were perceived as being

oppressive, unethical, and potentially harmful to the wider world; as a result, the consumer wished not only to avoid these brands and but also showed their disconfirmation with the brands by creating or joining anti-brand community for moral reasons (Bhattacharya and Elsbach, 2002).

4. *Hatred for competing brand*

Brand loyalty can be referred to as a consumer's attachment or devotion to a brand (Aaker, 1991). Consumers express their loyalty to a brand through a variety of ways. Consumers might express their loyalty in social settings by actively defending and promoting their brand as superior to a particular competitive brand. Hence, loyal users of a brand may express their brand loyalty by consciously opposing competing brands. Some themes were identified on the same lines while analyzing the selected anti-brand communities.

5. *Value deficiency*

Value deficiency can also be a reason for forming anti-brand community. Feeling of value deficiency is motivated by a perception that the brand promise is simply inadequate in terms of the individual's utilitarian requirements. Simply put, the brand is perceived to be deficient in value (Parasuraman and Grewal, 2000).

Modus operandi of anti-brand communities

Support function to achieve shared purpose/goal: One of the many reasons why anti-brand communities are formed was found to be to create a social platform, where members could channelize their actions and energies towards the accomplishment of the stated objectives/goal. With the main objective being able to contribute towards the betterment of society, moral obligations of the members stay the top priority (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Community members collectively address matters of right and wrong in regard to how a brand should act as a responsible citizen. Within each of the three anti-brand communities studied, a common entity challenged community members' view of how a corporation should function in the market place. In response, moral systems were challenged and a common call to action was felt amongst members.

Moral/emotional support: Members of the community share some experiences in common that motivates them to create/join anti-brand communities. Community members comment on the posts they feel connected with while explaining their own experiences thereby emotionally supporting the other community members. This also transforms the community to a large family operating on the internet. People seek comfort by discussing what they went through and get emotional support in turn. Members

receiving emotional support in the community are more likely to remain in the community for a longer period of time as compared to members receiving just informational support (Gilbert and Karahalios, 2009).

Entertainment: The members participating in the various activities on anti-brand communities can be segmented into influencers, active and passive members. There were members who influence other members in the community. These members can be called as leaders. High activity may not be an indicator of high influence in the blogosphere (Agarwal et al., 2008) and high popularity does not necessarily imply influence in Twitter (Romero et al., 2011). Bringing positivity in the community, answering members' concerns effectively by posting messages that contain certain type of support (informational or emotional) may be rather an indicator of influence. Somewhere there just to keep themselves informed and updated by visiting the communities once in a while or to like and share the content posted. This might be because of the interesting and informational content shared on these anti-brand communities by the active users and administrators which can be categorized in the forms like:

1. Jokes

These are the funny sarcastic jokes crafted around various situations the brand is facing. People enjoy reading these jokes and also contribute to make the conversation interesting. While others simply keep liking the content without actually participating in the conversation for they find this content interesting and likeable.

2. Memes

A meme is "an idea, behavior, or style that spreads from person to person within a culture" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). An Internet meme may take the form of an image, hyperlink, video, website, or hash tag. It may be just a word or phrase, including an intentional misspelling. They essentially are interesting and witty and have a huge pass along value.

3. Interesting facts/figures- Negative Brand Knowledge repositories

Since the anti-brand community and its members keep posting interesting facts and figures about the brand, the community catches many eye balls. This way the anti-brand community works as a negative brand knowledge repository which is shared amongst the members to make it viral.

Conclusion and Implications

The reasons to form anti-brand communities were found to be the inability of these brands to satisfy the customers on the parameters like functional, ethical, identity mismatch and value deficiency issues. There is not much of literature available that concludes why such communities are formed and what goes on in them. Close monitoring of these anti-brand communities helps to understand the dynamics of online brand communities and why are they formed at the first place. These communities can help managers to reach out to disgruntled consumers and turn the negativity and emotional outburst shown in these communities into learning experiences that in turn can protect themselves against brand misrepresentation.

Since consumers resist their products or brands not only individually but also collectively creating online anti-brand communities on internet, ignoring 'electronic negative word of mouth' might negatively affect their sustainability in the long run. Thus, not only on operational level, but they should integrate their concern for personnel relations, society's health, sustainable resources, environment, company culture into their main policies and convey their social and environmental consciousness through several media means such as their websites, internet advertisements and brand fan page. This integration of the values related to society, environment and health could provide positive outcomes both for the companies themselves and the society at large. Furthermore, in order to avert possible negative reactions of consumers supporting anti-branding, global MNCs should also consider their consumers' attitudes and define their brand management strategies in accordance with consumers' sensitivities for environment, health and ethnocentrism.

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