

Facebook Virtual Brand Communities: Why I belong and you seek it? – Case of Ooredoo Telecom Brandpage-

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Abstract—Recently, marketers are trying to thoroughly exploit the online social networking industry, namely Facebook, via the virtual brand community built within it. Though, there has been plenty of research on brand community or virtual ones, only few and recent studies have studied the motives and outcomes of participating in the Facebook virtual brand community. Therefore, this subject requires a further investigation. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to expand the research sphere concerning the concept of Virtual Brand Communities particularly within Facebook. Ergo, we intend to apply and test the existing community participation's motives into a Facebook's virtual brand community (i.e. brandpage) while examining the interaction between the act of participation, the loyalty towards the brand around which the community is developed and the generation of a positive electronic word of mouth. To achieve results, it was deemed appropriate to use an online survey to reach members of Ooredoo Telecom's virtual brand community on Facebook and analyze them using the Structural Equation Modeling. By and large, the results revealed that the relationship between constructs such participation, brand loyalty and electronic word of mouth proved to be significant. Moreover, brand loyalty turned out to be a mediator between participation and electronic word of mouth. The results of the study should allow managers to comprehend more precisely why consumers adhere to a Facebook virtual brand community and what effects has the latter's participation on their brand loyalty, which should also give managers a first guess of the actual members' behavior once the community has been developed.

Keywords—Facebook Virtual Brand Communities (VBC), participation, participation motives, Brand loyalty, Electronic word of mouth (eWOM).

I. INTRODUCTION

Maintaining their actual clients while acquiring new ones are the major concerns in marketers' list of priorities. For this reason, companies employ many tools to acquire, process and exploit the valuable information that allow them to achieve this goal. However, the traditional knowledge gathering

means are both costly and geographically restrained. Hence, here comes the Internet as the answer to this predicament where it has granted a new and cheaper medium for promoting communication among consumers and organizations [24]. Among the tools bestowed by the Internet, online communities have emerged as a leading phenomenon. These virtual communities favor the blooming of "collaborative groups where marketers and consumers interact to instigate more engaging products and services" [9]. Using virtual brand communities, firms found a convenient and efficient way to contact and engage consumers while allowing interactions among them through forums, chats and other entities. In the same fashion, social networking sites specifically Facebook provide greater opportunities for firms to take more advantage of the communities built within. For instance, in 2014, top brands social media adoption is almost 100% for Facebook (99%) and it is estimated that social media marketing budgets mainly Facebook will double in the next five years (SocialTimes.com).

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

"A Virtual Brand Community (VBC) could be defined as a brand community developed online with the characteristics of a virtual community" [24], accordingly it can be assumed it maintains most of their characteristics. Hence, a virtual brand community (referred to as VBC) aims is the same as virtual community or brand ones, which is discussing general topics surrounding the brand in question. A type of virtual communities where a VBC can be developed are Social Networking Sites particularly Facebook which is the case of our study. They are frequently developed by a sole or a group of loyal customers, yet, the company might also create the set. Though the academic nomination of these is Virtual Brand Communities, VBC they are also called brand "brand pages", "fan pages", "groups" or "profile pages" etc. depending on

the social media chosen. From a customer-experiential perspective, the communication in these communities can head in four dissimilar directions as distinguished [19]. The latter has asserted the brand community as “a fabric of relationships in which the customer is situated. Crucial relationships include those between the customer and the brand, between the customer and the firm, between the customer and the product in use, and among fellow customers”. These interactions manifest themselves more often than not in Facebook, where a VBC is similar yet different from others.

It is obvious to state that Facebook is one of the most popular and fast-growing social media with remarkable marketing potential in the world. In Facebook, people can join groups based on a long list of common social interests, such as music, arts, sport, cinema, fashion etc. In these communities or groups, individuals are barely acquainted with each other, yet they are joined by that common interest, they use the network to look for new like-minded friends, trade knowledge, chat, share emotional support, and so on [24]. Virtual brand communities on Facebook are nowadays so trendy that they draw many users with the common interest of engaging in community activities. Companies like individuals can create their own account as a free fan page, where they can invite users to become a “fan” of their products, services or brands. Facebook statistics of 2015 revealed that worldwide, there are over 968 million daily active users on average [11]. Furthermore, 70% of brand marketers consider social media advertising as more valuable for building brand awareness than for driving direct response and reaching willing audience without any financial risk.

These numbers and many others can be explained by the fact that Facebook VBCs’ help lessen time and improve the results in elevating the general profitability comparing to usual communities. Besides, Facebook VBC help in cutting costs by including customers in the value creation process, thus adhering to the virtual relationship marketing standpoint. Finally, it is essential to remark that the relative doubtful overuse of the conventional cyberspace marketing tools has been overshadowed by the escalating trustful use in social media.

In this work, we adhere to the “uses and gratification” theory [16] which may provide an understanding of Facebook’s ultimate success since it has usually been used in media researches. As an “audience-based theory”, uses and gratification assumes that different consumers use the same media messages for different purposes, depending on their individual needs and goals” [25]. Therefore, in the context of social media, the uses and gratifications theory categorized the benefits derived from participation into four types: cognitive, social integrative, personal integrative and hedonic benefits [22].

We shall present the relationships between VBC participation, its motives, then brand loyalty and electronic Word-of-Mouth. Beginning with the participation’s antecedents: there are several motives that entice people to participate in a VBC. However, based on the work of

[10];[14];[26]; [3];[18], we have selected only four motives to be included in our study which are practical benefits, social benefits, entertainment benefits and economic benefits.

Starting with the same order, VBCs’ success depends, if not solely then mostly, on the members’ participation activity which means the generation and exchange of knowledge. Hence, this knowledge creation and exchange entice people to participate in a VBC [27]. Second, people participation in VBCs’ reflects the mutual feeling of solidarity fueled by the shared passion towards the brand in question. Those people are lured by the need of belonging and “*the feeling of togetherness*” [23]. Third, entertainment advantages entice people to participate as by doing that they are seeking fun, delightful experiences even virtually. Besides, [10] has already established the direct relationship between the entertainment value factor and participation behavior. Fourth, [14] has already established the economic gaining as a motive for community participation. By joining people are hoping to gain discounts, get into lotteries and raffles etc.

Hence, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1.a. Practical benefits have positive effect on consumer participation in a Facebook virtual brand community.

H1.b. Social benefits have positive effect on consumer’s participation in a Facebook virtual brand community.

H1.c. Entertainment benefits have positive effect on consumer’s participation in a Facebook virtual brand community.

H1.d. Economical benefits have positive effect on consumer’s participation in a Facebook virtual brand community.

Going through participation outcomes, it is essential to state loyalty as one of the most sought after outcomes. In fact and conventionally, participation in the activities occurring in a brand community may cultivate consumer’s loyalty toward the brand around which the community is built. For example, [19] proved that participation in events of the Jeep community favor consumer loyalty to the Jeep brand. In like manner, once consumers participate keenly in a brand community, “their commitment, identification and emotional ties with the brand or organization around which the virtual community is developed may increase [2]” [9]. Eventually, all of these may develop higher levels of consumer loyalty to the brand around which the virtual community is developed [17];[12].

Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. Consumer participation in a VBC has a positive effect on consumer loyalty to the brand around which the community is developed.

The second desirable outcome by VBCs’ administrators and marketers is Word of Mouth in its new virtual form i.e. Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM). According to [15] participants, in the electronic word of mouth spreading, exhibit a similar set of motivations as participants in traditional WOM. For that reason, in our hypotheses, we will not distinguish between WOM and eWOM, yet we will focus on the latter. According to [24], VBCs’ members not only post comments about the brand in question, they also discuss other issues which can be labeled as “just-for-fun” topics, such as

the members' frequency of purchase from the company, the level of addiction and so on. In relation to our case, we believe participants in a VBC may generate eWOM about the VBC or the brand in question by gossiping with their cyber friends in Facebook or any other type of virtual communities. This assumption was academically confirmed by [24], who have proved the existence of a positive relation between VBCs' participation or as they named it "*participative belonging*" and positive WOM and empirically by the Facebook statistics affirming that half of all social media users under age 35 follow their online friends' product and service recommendations.

Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed.

H3. Consumer participation in a Facebook VBC has a significant positive effect on eWOM activity.

In reality, a number of studies have proven that loyalty is an antecedent to WOM [13] which was justified by the fact that customers already loyal to a given provider tend to give positive recommendations of the company to the persons in their reference group (friends and relatives). Moreover the study conducted by [8] has shown a positive effect of loyalty on WOM in the context of a commercial website.

Thus, the hypothesis 4 is proposed:

H4. The level of consumer's loyalty has a significant positive effect on eWOM activity.

It has been already established that participation in a brand community leads to consumer's loyalty toward the brand around which the community is built [2];[20]. Since, [8] have demonstrated a positive effect of loyalty on WOM in the context of commercial website; hence, it is coherent to assume that a higher level participation leads to a greater brand loyalty, thus a positive eWOM. Hence, we put forward the following proposition:

P5. Brand loyalty acts as a mediator between participation and eWOM activity.

III. METHODOLOGY

A structured questionnaire of 33 items (Table I), translated in French and assessed on a five-point Likert scale, was distributed via Facebook to collect data from Ooredoo's brandpage of Tunisia.

TABLE I
VARIABLES MEASUREMENTS

Constructs	Authors
Practical benefits	Dholakia et al. (2004)
Entertainment benefits	Dholakia et al. (2004)
Economic benefits	Gwinner et al. (1998)
Social benefits	Dholakia et al. (2004)
Brand loyalty	De Ruyter et al., 1998
Participation	Woisetschläger et al. (2008)
eWOM	Dolen (2007)

Ooredoo is a brand name introduced by Qatar Telecom. This choice of brandpage was not abrupt as it was based on the popularity of the brand both off and online (more than 50 % of the population are subscribers and over a million and half

of Facebook brandpage member (Figure1). The population was limited to Ooredoo's Facebook page members, where we collected from 253 respondents. After going through a descriptive analysis of the data, it was concluded that it contains 125 male and 128 female. While the Crosstabs showed those who spend more than 3 hours on Facebook, leave between 30 mn and an hour to check on the fanpage. While the least Facebook addicts spend mostly their whole time on Facebook checking the page.



Fig. 1 A snapshot of Ooredoo Facebook brandpage (14/09/2015)

IV. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

An Exploratory factor analysis was conducted, followed by a confirmatory one.

After performing a descriptive analysis, a factor analysis was conducted via a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) and varimax rotation. Prior to PCA, we checked the suitability of the data mining by appraising the factorability, which is according to several authors, is the primer step in the EFA. This factorability is assessed by Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (KMO) and the Bartlett's test of sphericity. PCA when applied to brand loyalty, the latter being a three-dimensional, resulted in joining the conative and cognitive component. Having an excellent KMO of 0,920 and a significant Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p = 0.000$), a PCA applied to the attitudinal brand loyalty resulted in the extraction of 2 components with eigenvalues over 1, having 89,894 % of the total variance explained by them. As for the participation motives, a PCA resulted in combining the social with the entertainment benefits and the economical with the practical motives. To validate the measures, we proceeded with calculating the Cronbach's alpha, which revealed a satisfactory internal consistency (a threshold of 0.6).

Ending the EFA, we have proceeded with the confirmatory factor analysis to test the results born out of the EFA, using the Structural Equation Modeling. We opted for a two-step modeling approach beginning with a measurement model that allowed all latent constructs to correlate freely. It is relevant to mention that a partial CFA for the participation motives was

conducted to facilitate the work on the global measurement model. Since the EFA of the participation motives resulted in two factors, the specification, which was based on an assessment of the factor loadings and suggestions from modification indices, left only the Social-entertainment factor. Going through the global measurement model specification, the fit indices for the CFA model improved noticeably ($\chi^2 = 754,747$, $\chi^2/df = 4,965$, GFI = 0.901, TLI = 0.969, CFI = 0.916, RMSEA = 0.073) rendering our model fit enough to be accepted. As for the model validity conditions (i.e. convergent and discriminant validities), they were both verified.

Having satisfied the various measurement issues, the hypotheses were tested by testing of the structural model. For a hypothesis to be valid and confirmed, its p-value should be less than 0.05 (risk error of 5%) and its regression weight significantly non null. Plus, its critical ratio (c.r) should exceed $|1,96|$ [1]. According to this study, the participation's motives hypothesis was validated after obliterating the practical and economical incentives and combining the social with entertainment ones. This is commonsensical since Facebook is a social media; logging to it is in, the first and last place, about being socialized and having fun. Therefore, managers precisely brandpage administrators, ought to boost the number of activities and applications involving members, preferably with a shared objectives among them. Also, they should endeavor to create events and experiences relating the member to your brand while benefiting from their participation to create a productive and long termed relationship.

In addition, we have found that participation has a positive effect on the member/ consumer's brand loyalty and positive eWOM. While the latter is also influenced positively by brand loyalty. Hence, a member participation in a Facebook's VBC will lead to a higher level of brand loyalty and the latter is going to push for a greater positive eWOM activity. That's why, brand managers have to keep their brandpages up-to-date and active by responding to the members 'comments and links if not immediately then on a daily basis. They have to keep an open eye on the members 'needs, obstacles or feuds while try to compensate them (creating an offer for members only).

To conclude the CFA, we proceeded with the mediation testing. Based on the processing of [5] which leads to testing the separated relationships between each variable in the mediate d relationship. In other words, each of the three constructs must show evidence of a nonzero monotonic association with each other, and the relationship of X to Y must diminish significantly upon adding M as a predictor of Y. This led to the validation of the mediation proposition.

Hence, brand loyalty acts as a mediator between participation and eWOM. When participating, a member is ready to spread positive eWOM yet this willingness is better developed when they are already loyal to the brand. Thus, a member who participates in Ooredoo's brand page to the point of loyalty is more likely to become a source of eWOM advertising rather than those who are participating yet not out of loyalty. Those loyal customers will advise their friends or

family to use or buy that brand or just join that community. So, brand managers ought to create a more caring atmosphere in the VBC where more people can join, participate thus be more loyal and a promoter.

V. DISCUSSION

This study tried to figure out why people join or participate in a Facebook VBC by testing the existing participation motives, while highlighting the interactions between brand loyalty, that act of participation and positive eWOM. This aim was supported by an urge to give managers a better understanding of why consumers adhere to a Facebook VBC and if that participation can have a concrete effect on their business. However, this study presents some limitations; beginning with the product type chosen's results cannot be extended to other products. That's why we need to study other types of product fanpages as a redeeming suggestion. Also, the testing of the conceptual variables was instantaneous which calls for a longitudinal research to monitor the oscillation of the users' attitudes and behaviors.

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