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Online Communities: Influence on Members Brand Loyalty and Purchase Intent

Brian J. Wilimzig

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, willy1982@gmail.com

ONLINE COMMUNITIES: INFLUENCE ON MEMBERS BRAND LOYALTY AND
PURCHASE INTENT

By

Brian James Wilimzig

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A Research Report
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
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Narayanan Iyer, Chair

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH REPORT OF

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TITLE: ONLINE COMMUNITIES: INFLUENCE ON MEMBERS BRAND LOYALTY AND PURCHASE INTENT

MAJOR PROFESSORS: Dr. Narayanan Iyer

With the emergence of new media technologies it is becoming easier for brands to interact and engage with consumers in an attempt to build brand loyalty. One trend gaining popularity is the use of online branded communities, purpose-built social networks with focus (direct or indirect) on a brand. Branded communities tend to give more specific value to the brand owner and the members, allowing for greater communication and collaboration around the brand. Using the uses and gratification as a theoretical framework this study set out to explore the influence online brand communities have on members brand loyalty and intent to purchase. The method used was a survey administered in the form of an online questionnaire was administered to members of online brand communities.

     Keywords: Online community, brand community, virtual community, communities of consumption, brand loyalty, consumer behavior, intent to purchase

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The use of social media and social networking websites is just one form of new media advertising that is gaining popularity and changing the advertising landscape. Social media and networking websites can be easily distinguished by the ability of their users to interact with one another, exchanging information and engaging in discourse through electronic devices such as a computer or cell phone.

Qualman (2009) credits the popularity of social media by adjusting the 1992 James Carville quote "It's the economy stupid." Qualman modernizes the quote to: "It's a people-driven economy, stupid" (p. xvii). Qualman (2009) further describes the reason for the explosive growth of social media as "to its ability to help people avoid information indigestion" (p. 1). New media technologies are destabilizing the power marketers and advertisers once had over the consumer. Consumers now have the ability to engage in discourse with one another, and organize themselves into collective groups. This can be of great value to a brand, as members collectively can solve each other's problems at no additional expense to the brand itself (O'Guinn and Muniz, 2004).

The emergence of social media platforms has made it far easier for brands to interact and engage with consumers in an attempt to build brand loyalty. One trend gaining popularity is the use of online branded communities, "purpose-built social networks with focus (direct or indirect) on a brand. Branded communities tend to give more specific value to the brand owner and the members, allowing for greater communication and collaboration around the brand" (EPiSERVER, 2010).

The process of creating a brand loyal consumer is no easy task; rather loyalty is sought after like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, with brands scrambling in an attempt to capture consumer's patronage and keep it. A solid base of brand loyal customers can be the key to a company's success or failure. We can refer to the Pareto Principle when trying to understand the importance of brand loyal consumers to a company.

> Early in the 20th century, the economist Vilfredo Pareto stated that 20% of the population possesses 80% of the wealth. This basic 80/20 principle was then adopted in describing other realities … in which the ''A'' group (the ''vital few''), consisting of approximately 20% of the attributes (items), accounts for 80% of the phenomenon. (Grosfeld-Nir, 2007, p. 2317)

This suggests that in most cases 20% of consumers will account for approximately 80% of your business. If this is true it is easy to see the importance of creating a solid base of/and engaging with this 20% of brand loyal consumers. There are many ways to do this in today's cluttered and often hostile marketing environment; many marketers believe that online brand communities can be a both cost effective and powerful resource in gaining consumers attention (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005, p. 19).

Online branded communities serve two main purposes, they can increase brand loyalty by engaging the consumer in a positive environment controlled by the brand, and serve as a customer relationship management (CRM) system that allows a company to better understand and serve the consumer. Thompson & Sinha (2008) suggest;

Companies that succeed in getting customers to join and participate in their brand community can enjoy significant advantages over rivals. For example, the resultant increase in the likelihood of purchasing the company's new products would lead to faster rates of adoption among existing customers. (p. 65)

Using the uses and gratifications theoretical framework this research will help contribute to a better understanding of the effectiveness online brand communities have and how they influence member's brand loyalty, and purchase intent. Based on the literature review it has been identified that there is a lack of research into the area of how online communities influence brand loyalty and consumers/members purchase intent. The purpose of this study is to help identify how powerful online branded communities are in influencing intent to purchase, and brand loyalty among consumers/members. The Pew Internet & American Life Project has estimated that, in 2003, 10% of U.S.-based Internet users contributed content to online communities (Lenhart, Horrigan & Fallows 2004). "Unlike other marketing programs, online communities allow businesses to engage with customers through a combination of expert content and online community interactions" (Powered, 2008).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Brand Community

An online community can be best described as a collection of private individuals clustered online with similar others to anchor themselves, support each other, and exchange information (Bressler and Grantham, 2000). Companies such as Nike, and Suunto have taken notice of these online communities and have begun hosting their own company-managed online communities centered on their brands products and services. In addition consumers are creating their own consumer-initiated online communities around the brands they consume. These communities are providing companies and consumers with additional channels of communication with which they can interact with one another. Maybe more importantly these communities help companies in establishing connections to devoted users.

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) first introduced the idea of an online brand community in their 2001 research paper *Brand Community*. The authors define a branded community as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand" (p. 412). Brand communities are composed of people who possess a social identification with others who share their interest in a particular brand (Algesheimer et al. 2005; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002).

Additionally, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) identified three traditional markers of online communities shared with those offline: shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility. A shared consciousness refers to the

shared beliefs and attitudes a group of individuals maintain and act as a unifying bond that forms the community. The idea of a shared consciousness is often a term used by social scientists to describe how individuals identify with larger groups. The second markers of rituals and traditions refer to inherited or established practices, behaviors, and ceremonies adopted by a community. The final community marker of a sense of moral responsibility refers to the idea or belief that individuals believe they have moral obligations to their communities, disobeying ones responsibility could be grounds for punishment (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) believe,

> In large degree, brands transcend geography because media transcend geography. In fact, most of the rethinking of community has had to do with the rise of mass media. Mass media demonstrated that virtually all of the hallmarks of geographic community could be simulated, if not wholly or substantially replicated, in a mass-mediated world. The changes in computer-mediated communication currently under way are no different in this regard. (p. 413)

Jang, Olfman, Ko, Koh, & Kim (2008) discuss the advantages and disadvantages of both company-managed, and consumer-managed online brand communities. Company-managed online communities have the benefit of being able to provide detailed information regarding their products or services. Though because the website is managed by the company itself it is likely negative opinions and unfavorable product reviews will be blocked or removed. This can create the illusion to community members that consumers hold a brand in higher regard than they actually do.

A consumer-managed community has though has the ability to provide valuable and detailed information to community members as well. Consumer-managed communities provide a more objective view of the brand, consumers can share positive and negative product experiences and expose both strengths & weaknesses of a brand without fear of being screened or blocked (Jang, et al., 2008, p. 61).

Community Association

Association can be described as an individual's value-expression motives that focus on emotional or aesthetic appeals to express one's self-image An affectively involved person is very likely emotionally bonded with an object that stands for his/her actual or ideal self-image (Park and Young, 1983).

Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) research in online communities has several implications for the brand. First, it directly acknowledges the social nature of brands. It attempts to move thinking away from the traditional consumer-brand dyad to the consumer-brand-consumer triad. It argues that brands are social objects and socially constructed. Developing a strong brand community could be a critical step in truly actualizing the concept of relationship marketing. A strong brand community can lead to a socially embedded and entrenched loyalty, brand commitment, and even hyper-loyalty. Brand communities are collections of what Gruen and Ferguson call "active loyalists," users of a brand who are "committed, conscientious—almost passionate" about the brand.

Muniz and O'Guinns (2001) research attempts to provide a change in thinking about the traditional consumer-brand relationship. Their findings suggest that brands are both socially constructed and social objects, and that consumers actively engage in a brands social creation. More important perhaps to marketers and advertisers is the fact

that brand communities clearly have an affect on brand equity. "In this way, developing a strong brand community could be a critical step in truly actualizing the concept of relationship marketing. A strong brand community can lead to a socially embedded and entrenched loyalty, brand commitment" (p. 427).

Algesheimer et al. (2008) developed a conceptual model of how customers' relationships with the brand community influence their intentions and behaviors. The authors describe how identification with the brand community leads to positive consequences, such as greater community engagement, and negative consequences, such as normative community pressure and (ultimately) reactance. They examine the effects of customers' brand knowledge and the brand community's size and test their hypotheses with survey data from a sample of European car club members (p. 19).

The author's research found that the consumer's relationship with the car brand was an influential antecedent to his or her identification with the brand community. This finding provides useful insights into current practice. Specifically, when soliciting members for their brand communities, many firms tend to target new or potential customers. Additionally, the authors found that both the consumer's brand knowledge and the community size moderate the brand community's influence on its members. Consumers who are knowledgeable about the brand not only experience higher levels of identification, engagement, and pressure but also reveal stronger paths in the model than do novices. This further reinforces the importance of firms' recruiting seasoned customers rather than novices into brand communities if their goal is to influence customers. Thus the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Members are likely to display a high sense of association towards the associated brands of the online communities they visit.

Value of Information

Wiertz and de Ruyter (2007) conducted a study to identify why customers contribute to firm-hosted commercial online communities. In their study the authors focused on examining online service support communities, largely focusing on the exchange of information and peer-to-peer interaction (p. 349).

In addition to several interesting moderating effects, Wiertz and de Ruyter (2007) find that a customer's online interaction propensity, commitment to the community, and the informational value s/he perceives in the community are the strongest drivers of knowledge contribution. Contrary to expectations, reciprocity did not have a significant effect on quality or quantity of knowledge contribution. This finding is surprising, given the reported strength of the reciprocity norm in face-to-face contexts, and the fact that we did find a significant positive bivariate correlation between reciprocity and the quantity of knowledge contribution.

Furthermore, contrary to Wasko and Faraj's (2005) findings, customers who are committed to the firm-hosted online community contribute knowledge more frequently and provide more helpful answers. This indicates that even though members in firm-hosted online communities do not know each other offline, and the community operates in a commercial context, strong relationships between individual members and to the collective as a whole develop.

Based on the reviewed literature it is expected that the greater the perceived value of information an online brand community provides will create a more brand loyal and

active user within the online community. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

> **H2:** Members will likely find a high value in the information that an online brand community produces.

Third-Person Effect

The third-person effect is the theory that individuals feel that communications have a greater influence on others than they do ones self. Davison (1983), attributed with identifying this third-person effect describes that,

> In its broadest formulation, this hypothesis predicts that people will tend to overestimate the influence that mass communications have on the attitudes and behaviors of others. More specifically, individuals who are members of an audience that is exposed to a persuasive communication will expect the communication to have a greater effect on others than themselves. (p. 3).

This theory has primarily been applied in context of traditional communication media, such as television, print and radio. Research into the third-person effect has produced consistent results into Davison's initial hypothesis (Stravrositu & Lacayo, 2011).

Stravrositu & Lacayo (2011) have furthered research into the tested the third-person effect by testing Divisions theory within online social networks. In their study sixty students ages 19-22 were surveyed assessing their self-perceptions versus those of their peers. Data collected from their research indicate that the third-person effect is present within online social networks, thus it is proposed that:

H3: Online brand community members feel they are less likely to purchase the associated communities brand than other community members.

In addition, the following research question has been formulated:

RQ1: Do Brand community members have higher expectations of participation for other community members than they do themselves?

Brand Loyalty & Intent to Purchase

The uses and gratifications theory is built around the idea that audiences are active and goal oriented, not just passive recipients of information. The need to link gratification and media choice rests with the individual who ultimately has a variety of alternative options of need satisfaction available. Gratification can be described as a positive emotional response to having ones desires or goals fulfilled. Using gratification as measure of success while researching online communities it is possible to identify how members' use of online communities can influence their brand loyalty and intent to purchase. Gratification can be difficult to measure because it is in large part an emotion in which each user will experience at different levels (Sangwan, 2005).

Community engagement refers to the positive influences of identifying with the brand community, which are defined as the consumer's intrinsic motivation to interact and cooperate with community members. Community engagement suggests that members are interested in helping other members, participating in joint activities, and otherwise acting in ways that the community endorses and that enhance its value for themselves and others. Social Interaction/User-Participation is referred to as "Taking part," one

participates when one has contributed to something either directly or indirectly to the community (Vroom and Jago, 1988).

Thompson & Sinha (2008) examined the effects brand community participation and membership has on the adoption of competing brands. In their research they found that that members of a brand community avoid engaging in discourse about the strengths and weaknesses of competing brands in favor of products from the preferred brand. Alternately, members of brand communities focus on products and services from the preferred brand and tend to highlight negative information about competing brands. This result in members being receiving less exposure about the positive traits a competing product may present over the preferred brand (p.67).

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) find that long-term members tend to enjoy higher status within the brand community and that their claims to membership are regarded as more legitimate. Therefore, longer-term membership in a brand community should lead to a stronger social identification with that brand community.

Hagel and Armstrong (1997) stated that, "those businesses that capitalize on organizing virtual communities will be richly rewarded with both peerless customer loyalty and impressive economic returns" (p. 2). A site that supports an active "critical mass" of involved consumers can be a valuable information resource (Hanson, 2000).

Holland & Baker (2001) discovered that site users who became community members increased the length of time spent on the site, returned more often, and generated more activity (as measured by community postings) compared to users who were not community members. A survey of site users indicated that community members were more likely to visit the site daily and refer others to it.

Additionally, Holland & Baker (2001) refer to a Yankee Group Report in which a survey of companies implementing a community strategy showed an increase in brand loyalty. In addition to brand loyalty the survey indicated that across a variety of websites, online shoppers who are community members buy at a much higher rate than non-members (p. 43).

Luo (2002) examined the influences of information, entertainment, and irritation against online consumer behavior. Results indicated that the uses and gratification theory explains consumers attitudes' toward the Internet. Findings from the study showed that users who viewed the Internet as both informational and entertaining showed a positive attitude, whereas those users who were irritated with the Internet reported negative attitudes. This research further suggests that a more satisfied user is more likely to become a repeat visitor and have a higher click-through rates than less satisfied users (pp. 38-39).

Using the uses and gratification theory Sangwan (2005) explored the success of online communities. This research focused on identifying what factors motivate members to participate in an online community. Using an online community of knowledge Sangwan proposed five categories of uses gratifications cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative and tension release needs. Sangwan identified that,

> For virtual community users, spatial convenience of information gathering and sharing, reducing time in receiving information by choice, increased pleasure by ownership of actions and improved decision making, and by being part of a larger knowledgeable community can be seen as critical needs gratifications outputs. (p. 4)

With the help of community organizers Sangwan (2005) administered a survey to a randomly selected sample of 2000 members of an online community, with a total of 216 responses. Offering a selection of investment books as an incentive Sanwan achieved a response rate of 10.8 percent. Of the respondents who completed the online questionnaire, 87.2 percent were male and 12.8 percent were female.

Sangwans (2005) research ultimately identified three key motivating factors for participation in online communities: Functional, Emotive, and Contextual. Table 2 represents results of ANOVA regression analysis. Sangwans (2005) research though focused on communities of knowledge, whose operating principles tend to be different than online brand communities where the community is based upon consumption of a brands product or service. This has led to the development of following research questions:

RQ2: Does membership of an online brand community influence brand loyalty?

RQ3: Does membership of an online brand community influence consumer's intent to purchase?

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The method of research used in this stud was a survey. The survey was administered as a self-administered online questionnaire. In order to answer and test the proposed research questions and hypotheses participants completed a 42 item online questionnaire asking them to rate levels of agreement to statements based on a 7-point likert scale. A total of 48 respondents participated and completed the online questionnaire. The online questionnaire focused on identifying online community member's thoughts about community association, participation & engagement, value of information, brand loyalty and intent to purchase.

Table 1 indicates items participants were asked to respond to in the collection of demographic data.

Table 1
Demographics

Items
Demographics
Gender
Age group
*Race/Ethnicity
*Marital status
*Education
*Household income
*Family size
Civic/Community Involvement
Organization membership
Level of activity
Technology Use
Comfort using computer
Internet use rate

*Indicates decline to answer option

Table 2 outlines the research measures participants were asked to respond to.

Table 2
Research Measures
_____

Items
_____

Association/Involvement
      Pride
      Respect
      Commitment
      Satisfaction
Information Need
      Objective information
      Information of high value
      Information for my exact needs
      Expert information
      Information from opinion leaders
      Trust in information
Participation
      Enjoyment
      Expectation of members
      Member obligations
      Principle of give and take
Brand Loyalty
      Feelings towards online brand community
      Brand loyalty perception
      Obligation to brand
      Recommendation to others
Intent to purchase
      Influence on intent to purchase
      Influence on purchase
      Likelihood to repurchase
      Direct impact on purchase decision
      Third-person perception
      Influence of member suggestions

_____

Items for the online questionnaire were formed using Sangwans (2005) study into Virtual Community Success as a reference. With the help of online community administrators' datasets were obtained using a convenient sample of members belonging to the Facbook.com Nike+ Monitor's (7,083 members), and LinkedIn.com Nike+

Runners (835 members) group pages. Data were collected over the course of 10 days, starting on June 15 through June 24, 2011 and automatically entered into an excel document via Google.docs application, where simple descriptive statistics were generated and used in the results section.

The Nike+ brand was chosen because in preliminary research it presented itself as both an established online brand community with a large base of users and as a pure company-run online community where users membership was focused around the use and consumption of a specific product. In addition to the Nike+ online community the questionnaire was posted to the Suunto Movescount Facebook.com community page, and on the author of this studies Facebook.com page. Despite the academic nature of this study the online questionnaire was removed from the Suunto Movescount Facebook.com community page. Though the community manager offered to repost online questionnaire to the Suunto Movescount Twitter page no responses were generated.

The online questionnaire was required by the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services to undergo review by the Southern Illinois University Carbondale Human Subjects Committee. Insuring compliance that all subjects' that participated in this research were protected approval forms and associated documents were submitted for review on 13 June 2011. Approval from the Human Subjects Committee was received on 15 June 2011, after revisions were made in respect to ensuring the anonymity of participants. The following statement was posted along with a link to the online questionnaire in selected online brand communities soliciting for participants.

HELP REQUESTED

Hello Users:

I am a graduate student at Southern Illinois University Carbondale

completing my thesis. The linked survey will take 10 minutes to complete.

Be assured all responses are confidential and will not be traced back to

you. Your time and assistance would be greatly appreciated.

Additionally, the Facebook.com Nike+ Running Monitor group page manager reposted

the online questionnaire with the following statement soliciting for participants.

If you have a second, help out graduate student Brian Wilimzig with his

survey about Nike Running Online! I'm sure he'd appreciate it... (We have

no affiliation with Brian or the survey)

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The results have been broken down into various sections. The first section looks at the demographic makeup of survey respondents. The second section focuses on the community members' sense of association. The third section identifies community members' levels of participation and engagement. The fourth section focuses on community members' perception of the value of information provided from the online community. The fifth section identifies whether online community members feel there is a third-person effect within online brand communities. The final section will focus on community members' level of satisfaction and how it relates to brand loyalty and intent to purchase.

A total of forty-eight respondents completed the online questionnaire, 44 percent were male and 56 percent were female. The distribution is shown below in Table 3.

Table 3
Number of Respondents by Gender

Gender	Frequency	%
Male	21	44
Female	27	56
Total	48	100.0

Table 4 identifies the age distribution of survey respondents, of which8 percent were18-24, 38 percent were ages 25-34, 40 percent were ages 35-44, and 15 percent were ages 45-64.

Table 4
Representation of Respondents by Age

Age	Frequency	%
18 – 24	4	8
25 – 34	18	38
35 – 44	19	40
45 – 54	6	13
55 – 64	1	2
64+	0	0

Additional demographic data indicates 83 percent of respondents to be of White/Caucasian, 8 percent to be Native American, Asian or Pacific Islander, and 4 percent to be African-American/Black. 33 percent of survey respondents had completed a Bachelors degree, 29 percent reported completing some sort of post-graduate education, 17 percent completed a 2-year college degree, and 19 have completed some college. The distribution is shown below in table 5.

Table 5
Representation of Respondents by Level of Education

Level of Education	Frequency	%
High School/GED	1	2
Some College	9	19
2-Year College	8	17
4-Year College	16	33
Master's Degree	10	21
Doctoral Degree	2	4
Professional Degree	2	4

When asked how long they have been a member of an online brand community 19 percent indicated less than 6 months, 20 percent greater than 6 months but less than 1

year, 40 percent 1-2 years, 25 percent 3-4 years, and 6 percent 5 or more years. In addition when asked about how many times a day they access online brand communities 33 percent indicated visiting once or more a day, 40 percent indicated visiting online brand communities multiple times a week, 6 percent visit online brand communities once a week, and 19 percent reported visiting every couple weeks or on a monthly basis. Table 6 below indicates how long users spend in online brand communities.

Table 6
Time spent in online communities

Time	Frequency	%
Less than one hour	46	96
3 – 4 hours	1	2
4 – 5 hours	1	2
More than 5 hours	0	0

Association or involvement can be described as an individual's value-expression motives that focus on emotional or aesthetic appeals to express one's self-image. An affectively involved person is very likely emotionally bonded with an object that stands for his/her actual or ideal self-image. When asked if they feel proud to be a member of and online brand community 29 percent strongly agreed to the statement, with an additional 30 percent either agreeing or somewhat agreeing, 10 percent responded neutrally, and 22 percent disagreed on some level. Additionally, when asked if they had strong feelings to the online brand communities they visit respondents answers are distributed as shown below in table 7, thus supporting, **H1:** *Members are likely to display a high sense of association towards the associated brands of the online communities they visit.*

Table 7
Association and Brand Loyalty

Level of Agreement	Frequency	%
1 - Strongly Disagree	3	6
2 – Somewhat Disagree	4	8
3 - Disagree	6	13
4 - Neutral	3	6
5 – Somewhat Agree	11	23
6 - Agree	9	19
7 - Strongly Agree	12	25

When asked to rate the characteristics of the information derived from online brand communities 67 percent of respondents indicated the information as useful, 59 percent believe the information is objective, and 65 percent believe it is trustworthy. The majority of users having a positive perception of on the value of information that is generated from online brand communities further supports **H2:** *Members will likely find a high value in the information that an online brand community produces.*

Participants were asked to rate if they felt other members of online brand communities were more likely to purchase the brand associated with that community. 15 percent of respondents strongly agreed, 33 percent agreed or somewhat agreed, 29 percent responded neutral, and a total of 23 percent somewhat disagreed to strongly disagreed. With the majority of respondents either responding neutral or in disagreement has resulted in the dismissal of **H3:** *Online brand community members feel they are less likely to purchase the associated communities brand than other community members.* Table 8 below indicates the distribution of responses in regards to the third-person perception.

Table 8
Third-person perception

Level of Agreement	Frequency	%
1 - Strongly Disagree	3	6
2 – Somewhat Disagree	1	2
3 - Disagree	7	15
4 - Neutral	14	29
5 – Somewhat Agree	11	23
6 - Agree	5	10
7 - Strongly Agree	7	15

Participation or engagement can be described to as "Taking part," one participates when one has contributed to something either directly or indirectly to the community. Participation can be as simple as posting a comment, or as complex as leading a discussion about a brands product or service. When asked if they feel other online community members should contribute to when the online brand community is in need 13 percent strongly agreed, 44 percent either agreed or somewhat agreed, 25 percent were neutral, 19 percent somewhat disagreed to strongly disagreed. Alternately, when asked if they feel the need to contribute after receiving help from the online brand community 19 percent strongly agreed, 46 percent agreed or somewhat agreed, 27 percent were neutral, and 8 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. This provides some insight into ***RQ1: Do Brand community members have higher expectations of participation for other community members than they do themselves***; the majority of responses agreed on some level to both questions, 65 percent of respondents feel inclined to give back to the community, whereas 57 percent feel others should contribute when the community is in need. Additionally, table 9 indicates the distribution of responses when participants were asked if the principle of give and take was important in online brand communities.

Table 9
Perception of give and take

Level of Agreement	Frequency	%
1 - Strongly Disagree	1	2
2 – Somewhat Disagree	4	8
3 - Disagree	4	8
4 - Neutral	13	27
5 – Somewhat Agree	11	23
6 - Agree	6	13
7 - Strongly Agree	9	19

Attitudinal brand loyalty represents consumers' commitment or preferences when considering unique values associated with a brand. When asked whether if membership to an online brand community made them feel obligated/committed to the communities brand 6 percent strongly agreed, 25 percent agreed or somewhat agreed, 25 percent were neutral, 14 percent somewhat disagreed or disagreed, and 29 percent strongly disagree. Though when asked if online brand community membership made them more likely to purchase brands associated with the online community 29 percent strongly agreed, 19 percent agreed, 17 percent somewhat agreed, 8 percent were neutral, 12 percent disagreed or somewhat agreed, and 15 percent strongly disagreed, this data provides some insight into **RQ2: *Does membership of an online brand community influence brand loyalty?*** Though 68 percent of online brand community members do not have a sense of obligation or commitment to the brands of the communities they visit, 65 percent of online brand community members reported they are more likely to purchase the brands of the online communities they visit, suggesting at least some form of brand loyalty.

A consumer's intent to purchase is identified as a plan to purchase a particular good or service in the future. The following data answers and supports **RQ3: *Does***

membership of an online brand community influence consumer's intent to purchase?

When asked if interaction within an online brand community has led them to purchase the associated brands product or service 60 percent indicated that online brand community membership had led them to purchase the communities associated brand. In addition, 69 percent of respondents indicated that they are likely to repurchase products associated with the online brand communities they visit. Additionally, 72 percent of respondents indicated that they would recommend a product associated with the online brand communities they visit to a friend or associate. The distribution of responses is shown below in table 10.

Table 10
Recommendation of online brand community products

Level of Agreement	Frequency	%
1 - Strongly Disagree	1	2
2 – Somewhat Disagree	5	10
3 - Disagree	1	2
4 - Neutral	7	15
5 – Somewhat Agree	7	15
6 - Agree	8	17
7 - Strongly Agree	19	40

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to help establish a greater understanding of the influence online brand communities have on members' brand loyalty and intent to purchase. Consumers are bombarded with thousands of persuasive messages on a daily basis; new media technologies are making it easier day-by-day for marketers to communicate with consumers about the products and services they offer. No longer can companies rely on delivering one-way messages to consumers, competition is fierce and the name of the game is engagement.

From the demographic data gathered, the following characteristics of our respondents can be deducted: a) 84 percent of them are comfortable using a computer, b) 71 percent of them have been part of an online brand community for over one year, c) 62 percent of them have completed education at or above the undergraduate level, d) majority is female population e) 73 percent of them access online brand communities at least a couple times a week f) 55 percent of them are aged 35 and above, and g) 59 percent have annual household income of $65,000 or higher. This indicates that the members of online brand communities tend to be a bit older, well educated, and likely working in professional office settings. However, most of them only visit an online brand community a couple times a week staying for less than an hour at a time. It is possible that this demographic been a bit older does not have large amounts of time to spend within these brand communities, as would individuals in a younger demographic of college students and teenagers.

Online brand communities differ from other online communities because the focus of community is based around consumption of a product or service. Because of this there is less of a functional need that the brand must fulfill to encourage members to join, rather members join based on positive or in some cases negative feelings they have towards a brand. As table 5 indicates 67 percent of respondents reported having strong feelings to the online brand communities they visit, additionally, 69 percent of respondents reported feeling proud to be a member of an online brand community. This high sense of association with the online brand communities suggests that members are both brand loyal and be more likely to have a higher intent to purchase, thus supporting H1. The high sense of association online community members have within these online brand communities is providing advertisers/marketers an environment where they can engage with consumers who, have willingly decided to engage with the brand, this is likely to make online brand community members more open to the receipt of persuasive messages distributed by the brand. Thus creating a more efficient platform for message delivery, one where online brand community member can provide not only instant feedback, but take action immediately by making an online purchase.

This research shows the importance of the perceived value of information within online brand communities, which provides support for H2. The majority of survey respondents agreed that the information received from online brand community was not only objective, but also derived from opinion leaders, valuable, and trustworthy. Community members may be identified as opinion leaders within an online brand community based on several factors. These factors may include the frequency of postings, response rate to other members posts, or what position the individual holds

outside of the online brand community, for example a college track/cross-country athlete will likely be thought to have a greater degree of knowledge within the Nike+ running online brand community. The ability for users to create profiles of themselves including information about their career, hobbies, or other interests/activities thus helps other community members to place value on the information they are receiving.

It is interesting to see that members have such positive feelings towards the information contained within online brand communities. The reason for this may be based on the fact that online brand communities provide a forum where not only brands can communicate with consumers, but consumers can communicate with brands, and with each other. As such consumers will act as watchdogs over the brands, similar to the way journalists do over government, blowing the whistle on shortcomings that the brand may prefer to keep quiet. This could be something as simple as negative opinions or reviews about the brand, or something more substantial such as major defects with the brand. Trust in information is and will continue to remain an important factor in any form of online consumerism. Online brand communities appear to provide an avenue for brands to build trust with consumers. Gommans, Krishnan, & Scheffold (2001) believe,

> Trust plays a central role in augmenting both behavioral and attitudinal loyalty which in turn influences marketing outcome related factors like market share … Brand trust usually contributes to a reduction in uncertainty. In addition, trust is a component of the attitudinal component of loyalty. (pp. 47 & 50)

Online brand communities like other forms of new media differ from traditional media because of the interactivity between users and marketers. In attempting to identify if there is a third-person perception within online brand communities' data failed to produce significant results for H3. Though Zhang & Daugherty (2009) found for the first time evidence that the third-person effect is present in the context of social networking websites. This suggests that because online communities are based and founded in social networking websites that members should show signs of the third-person effect. Additionally, it should be noted that the third-person effect has traditionally been examined in media as it pertains to negative effects. This study focused more specifically on the benefits of online brand communities and did not delve into what negative effects occur from participation in online brand communities. Thus more extensive research should be conducted to determine the extent of its presence within online brand communities.

RQ1 was aimed at identifying whether online brand community members had higher expectations of participation from other members than they do themselves. The data collected does not seem to indicate that online brand community members have higher expectations of participation from other members than they do themselves. This may be due to members developing a sense of shared values and responsibilities within the online brand community, similar to those shared values and responsibilities that are present in physical communities.

RQ2 set out to determine if membership to an online brand community increased brand loyalty among members. Data indicated that the majority of members did not feel obligated or committed to the brand of online communities, though 57 percent of

respondents identified themselves as being brand loyal. It can be suggested that membership and participation to an online brand community in-itself suggests some form of brand loyalty. It is possible there are underlying factors that are responsible for online brand community members failing to identify an affinity towards the brands they engage with in online communities.

Ultimately online brand communities exist to establish a relationship with the consumer so that they will become a repeat customer. RQ3 attempted to identify if membership to an online brand community had an influence on members purchase intentions. Data collected strongly suggested that online brand community members have a greater likelihood of purchase. This result can be indication to brands that members of their online communities are and would be more receptive to marketing and advertising attempts. Additionally, RQ3 identified that 70 percent of online brand community members would recommend those brands to friends and associates. Brown, Broderick & Lee (2007) explored word of mouth communication within online communities, and believes that online brand communities should appeal to a wide range of interests to generate a sense of group mind-set (p.15). Additionally, the authors suggest that,

> Marketers should be aware of the risks involved in attempting to influence online WOM—dialogue should be open, honest, and authentic, or marketers risk a costly backlash. *Cillit Bang* created a fictional character that posted a comment to a blogger's story about his reconciliation with his father after a 30-year separation that contained an advertisement for bleach, prompting a massive wave of negative publicity both online and offline. (p. 16)

Further studies on the influence member recommendations have on the purchase intentions of others is suggested to better understand how online brand community's influence consumer action.

This study is limited in its scope because it was based off a convenient sample of Facebook.com and LinkedIn.com brand community user pages. The results and findings for this research thus may not be contain a representative sample of the population of online brand community members. Data from this research at best may only represent a casual influence an online brand community may have on members brand loyalty and purchase intentions.

In conclusion, this study set forth to identify the influence an online brand community has on member's brand loyalty and intent to purchase. It was identified that online brand community members have high feelings of association with the online brand communities they patronage. Members perceive the information within online brand communities as objective, trustworthy, and derived from opinion leaders. Members of online brand communities do not seem to feel obligated or committed to the associated brand, but have high purchase rates and are likely to recommend the brand to friends or associates. However, much more needs to be understood about online brand communities. Future research should focus on providing direct measures to the influence online brand communities exert over their members. Some specific research questions have been aroused based on this study. For example:

What are the motivating factors of membership to an online brand community?

What influence do online brand communities have on users of competing brands?

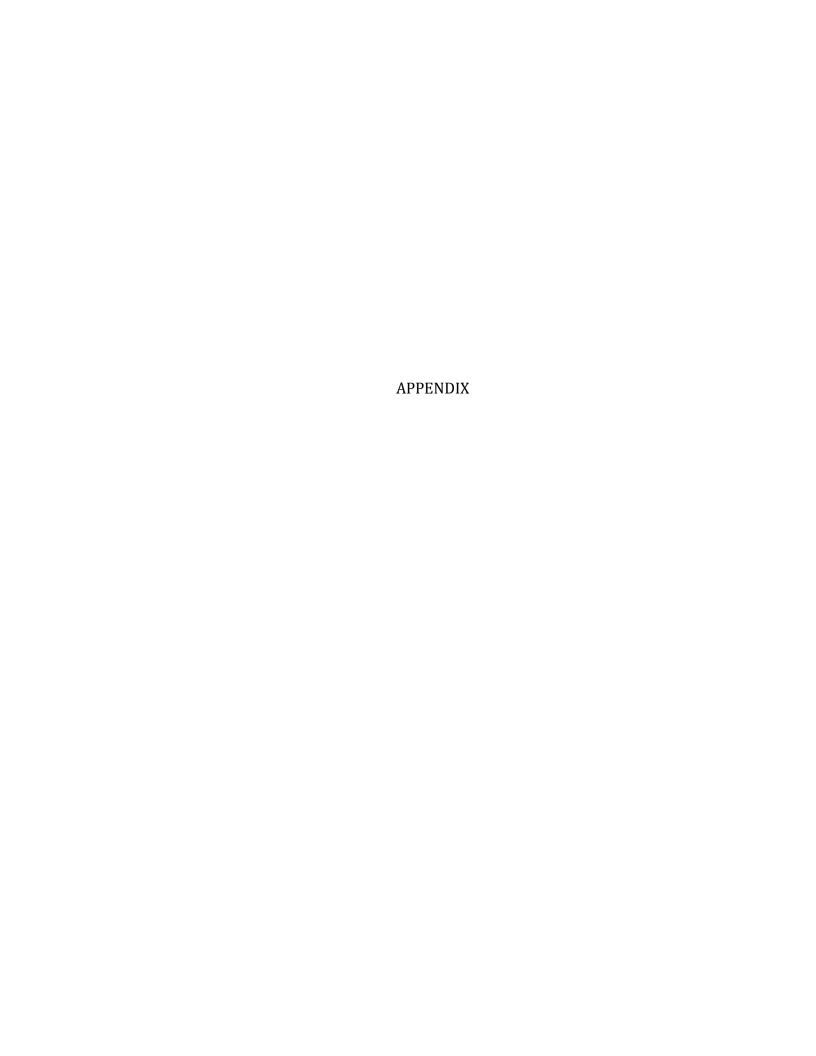How does brand perception change after joining an online brand community?

The data and findings from this study will hopefully be used in future research, helping to expand our knowledge of this important area of online brand communities.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

Brian J. Wilimzig/MCMA

Online Brand Community Usage Questionnaire

Dear survey respondent,

I am a graduate student of Southern Illinois University's College of Mass Communication and Media Arts program conducting a survey as part of my Masters thesis. The purpose of this study is to help identify how online branded communities are in creating brand experiences, intent to purchase, and brand loyalty among consumers. **Be assured all responses are confidential and will not be traced back to you**. Please indicate your responses by marking the options that are most appropriate for you. I am deeply appreciative for your time and support in helping me with this project.

1) Gender *What is your sex?

      Male – Female

2) Age *What is your age?

      18 -24
      25 – 34
      35 – 44
      45 – 54
      55 – 64
      65+

3) Race/Ethnicity *Would you describe yourself as:

      American Indian/Native American
      Asian
      Black/African American
      Hispanic/Latino
      White/Caucasian
      Pacific Islander
      Other

4) Marital Status *Are you?

      Single - never married
      Married
      Separated
      Divorced

Widowed

5) Education *What is the highest level of education you have completed?

    Less than high school
    High School/GED
    Some College
    2-year College Degree (Associates)
    4-year College Degree (BA, BS)
    Master's Degree
    Doctoral Degree
    Professional Degree (MD, JD)

6) Household Income *What is you average household income?

    Less than $20,000
    $20,000 - $34,000
    $35,000 - $49,000
    $50,000 - $64,000
    $65,000 - $79,000
    $80,000 - $100,000
    $100,000 or more
    Decline to answer

7) Family Size *How many children reside in your household?

    None
    One to two
    Three to four
    Five or more

Civic/Community Involvement

Definition: The sense of personal responsibility individuals should feel to uphold their obligations as part of any community.

8) Civic/Community Engagement *Not counting religious organizations, how many civic or community organizations—like the Kiwanis Club, PTA, or League of Women Voters—do you belong to?

    None
    One to two
    Three to four
    Five or more

9) Civic/Community Engagement *Please rate you level of activity within your community: (Note: 1=Not Active at all; 5=Very Active)

                        1   2   3   4   5

Not Active at all   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○   Very Active

Technology Usage

10) Technology Use *Generally speaking, how comfortable do you feel using a computer?

                        1   2   3   4   5

Not comfortable at all   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○   Very Comfortable

11) Technology Use *How often do you use the Internet?

        Once or more a day
        Few times a week
        Few times a month
        Every couple months
        Never

Online Brand Community

Definition: Brand communities are composed of people clustered online who possess a social identification with others, and who share their interest in a particular brand.

Examples of online brand communities: Facebook.com fan, like, or group pages of a specific brand; Websites of brands where users can go and engage with other users; Blogs or forums that are focused a specific brand; Movie, television show, or musician websites where users are able to leave comments and engage with one another.

12) Online Brand Community Usage *How long have you been a part of an online brand community?

        Less than 6 months
        6 months – 1 year
        1 -2 years
        3 – 4 years
        5 or more years

13) Online Brand Community Usage *How frequently do you visit online brand communities?

       Multiple times a day
       Once daily
       Couple times a week
       Once a week
       Every couple weeks
       Monthly
       Never

14) Online Brand Community Usage *On a daily basis, how much time do you spend interacting within online brand communities?

       Less than one hour
       2 – 3 hours
       4 – 5 hours
       5 or more hours

Informational Value

Definition: How much we invest or trust in the data we receive.

15) Informational Value *The information provided by online brand communities is useful: (Note: 1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)

             1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ Strongly Agree)

16) Informational Value *The information provided by online brand communities is valuable: (Note: 1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)

             1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ Strongly Agree)

17) Informational Value *The information provided by online brand communities is objective: (Note: 1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)

             1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ Strongly Agree)

18) Informational Value *The information provided by online brand communities is derived from experts: (Note: 1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)

             1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ Strongly Agree)

19) Informational Value *The information provided by online brand communities comes from opinion leaders: (Note: 1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)

              1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ Strongly Agree)

20) Informational Value *The information provided by online brand communities is trustworthy: (Note: 1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)

              1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ Strongly Agree)

21) Informational Value *Online brand communities are a great way to get answers about their brand: (Note: 1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)

              1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ Strongly Agree)

Social Interaction/Participation

Definition: "Taking part," one participates when one has contributed to something either direct or indirect to the community.

22) Social Interaction/Participation *I enjoy engaging/participating in online brand communities: (Note: 1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)

              1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ Strongly Agree

23) Social Interaction/Participation *I feel members should return favors to other members when the online brand community is in-need: (Note: 1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)

              1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ Strongly Agree

24) Social Interaction/Participation *When I receive help from within the online brand communities, I feel it is only right to give back and help others: (Note: 1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)

              1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ ⚪ Strongly Agree

25) Social Interaction/Participation *The principle of give and take is important in online brand communities: (Note: 1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)

              1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree ◯   ◯   ◯   ◯   ◯   Strongly Agree

Association/Involvement

Definition: Individual's value-expression motives that focus on emotional or aesthetic appeals to express one's self-image. An affectively involved person is very likely emotionally bonded with an object that stands for his/her actual or ideal self-image.

26) Association/Involvement *I feel proud to be a member of online brand communities: (Note: 1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)

              1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree ◯   ◯   ◯   ◯   ◯   Strongly Agree

27) Association/Involvement *Online brand communities treat customers/users with respect: (Note: 1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)

              1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree ◯   ◯   ◯   ◯   ◯   Strongly Agree

28) Association/Involvement *The relationship I have with online brand communities is something to which I am very committed: (Note: 1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)

              1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree ◯   ◯   ◯   ◯   ◯   Strongly Agree

29) Association/Involvement *Overall, I am satisfied with online brand communities: (Note: 1=Not Satisfied at all; 5=Very Satisfied)

              1   2   3   4   5

Not Satisfied at all ◯   ◯   ◯   ◯   ◯   Very Satisfied

Brand Loyalty

Definition: Attitudinal Brand Loyalty: Represents consumers' commitment or preferences when considering unique values associated with a brand.

30) Attitudinal Brand Loyalty *Brands that operate online communities are the perfect companies for people like me: (Note: 1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)

              1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ Strongly Agree

31) Attitudinal Brand Loyalty *I would say I have a strong feelings/ties to the online brand communities I visit: (Note: 1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)

                    1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ Strongly Agree

32) Attitudinal Brand Loyalty *I consider myself a brand-loyal individual (I prefer one brand over all others, and will only purchase an alternative brand as last resort)? (Note: 1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)

                    1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ Strongly Agree

33) Purchasing Behavior *My interaction within online brand communities has influenced/affected a decision to buy their product/service?

                    1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ Strongly Agree

34) Behavioral Brand Loyalty *My interaction within online brand communities led me to buy their product/service?

                    1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ Strongly Agree

35) Behavioral Brand Loyalty *When was the last time you purchased a product/service associated with the online brand communities you visit?

    Today
    One to two days ago
    Three to four days ago
    Five to six days ago
    A week or longer

36) Purchasing Behavior *How likely are you to continue to choose/repurchase products associated with the online brand communities you visit? (Note: 1=Never; 5=Very Likely)

                1   2   3   4   5

Never ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ Very Likely

37) Purchasing Behavior *How likely are you to recommend products associated with the online brand communities you visit to a friend/associate? (Note: 1=Never; 5=Very Likely)

      1   2   3   4   5

Never   ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯   Very Likely

Intent to Purchase

Definition: A plan to purchase a particular good or service in the future.

38) Intent to Purchase *Being a member of online brand communities makes me more likely to purchase their brand: (Note: 1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)

      1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree   ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯   Strongly Agree

39) Intent to Purchase *As a member of a online brand community I feel obligated/committed to buy their brand? (Note: 1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)

      1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree   ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯   Strongly Agree

40) Intent to Purchase *My participation within online brand communities has a direct affect on my intent to purchase X brand? (Note: 1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)

      1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree   ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯   Strongly Agree

41) Intent to Purchase *I feel other members of online brand communities are more likely to purchase X brand than am I? (Note: 1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)

      1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree   ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯   Strongly Agree

42) Intent to Purchase *Suggestions of online brand community members has more of an effect on my intentions to buy than does suggestions by X brand? (Note: 1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree)

      1   2   3   4   5

Strongly Disagree   ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯ ◯   Strongly Agree

The End

I would like to thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

VITA

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University

Brian James Wilimzig

Willy1982@gmail.com

Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Bachelor of Science, Journalism, May 2010

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