COMPREHENDING AND CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT IN VIRTUAL BRAND COMMUNITIES

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Abstract: Congruity theory is used in this study to examine the dynamics of customer participation in online brand communities (OBCs). It specifically looks at how important aspects that drive customer engagement are self-brand image congruity and value congruity. As a natural byproduct of customer interaction, brand loyalty is also closely examined. The paper provides a conceptual model that shows the connections between various components that are theoretically proposed.

Keywords: Brand Loyalty, Digital Marketing, Social Media, Consumer Behavior, Gender Moderation, Online Surveys, Online Brand Communities (OBCs), Congruity Theory, Self-Brand Image Congruity, Value Congruity, Brand Engagement.

Overview

The way that customers connect with goods, brands, and companies in Lebanon has changed significantly in the last few years due to the widespread impact of developing technologies, especially social networking sites. Online brand communities (OBCs) are a growing tool used by businesses to interact with Lebanese customers, who are becoming proficient users of social networking sites. (Albert M. Muñiz, 2001). an OBC is defined as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand."

OBCs have become rather popular over the last ten years; around half of the top 100 worldwide companies have created their own communities. Consumer opinions and brand experiences are exchanged in Lebanon through OBCs. Brands may use these communities to spread brand-related material, build a large following, foster connections with customers, and allow for real-time communication. (a, 2017; Francisco J. Martínez-López, 2017)

According to studies, social media is used by both small and large firms (80% and 70%, respectively) in Lebanon to improve company performance. Interestingly, 88% of Lebanese consumers polled in can enhance the online purchasing experience, hasten the production of user-generated content, and establish and preserve connections between consumers and brands. Scholars and organizations have expressed great interest in learning more about Lebanese consumers' engagement in OBCs due to the benefits that have been reported, including improved brand trust, positive word-of-mouth, purchase intentions, and loyalty. (Ramadan, 2016)

Although studies on consumer involvement in OBCs have progressed, there are still few empirical studies conducted in Lebanon. (Chalfoun, 2019) This study uses congruity theory to investigate the relationship between value congruity, self-brand image, and customer engagement among Lebanese OBCs in order to close these gaps. According to congruity theory, clients have upbeat attitudes and The paper's next sections comprise a thorough literature review, the conceptual model's development, an outline of the empirical study that was done, a summary of the findings, and a discussion of the findings with important theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and recommendations for additional research. (Lee, 2014)

Theoretical Development

Congruity Theory

Relationship marketing and S-D logic are in line with the interactive character of consumer engagement, since they both see consumers as active participants in brand interactions. But theories of consumer behavior that take into account social and individual identity can also offer insightful viewpoints on comprehending customer participation. Congruity theory is used in this study to investigate customer involvement in OBCs. Congruity theory fits in nicely with the goals of OBCs, which include the dissemination of pertinent brand-related material, the building of brand-related trust, and the potential to boost sales income. Congruity theory places a clear emphasis on encouraging communication and persuasion. According to congruity theory, customers indicate a desire to reduce cognitive dissonance by Brodie and associates (2013), Chathoth and associates (2014), and Hollebeek (2011a, 2016c). Relationship marketing and S-D logic are in line with the interactive character of consumer engagement, since they both see consumers as active participants in brand interactions. But theories of consumer behavior that take into account social and individual identity can also offer insightful viewpoints on comprehending

customer participation. Congruity theory is used in this study to investigate customer involvement in OBCs. Congruity theory fits very nicely with the goals of OBCs, such as the dissemination of pertinent brand-related material, the building of brand-related trust, and the commitment to communication and persuasion. (Brodie, 2011)

Because consumer engagement with OBCs depends on past exposure to and experiences with particular OBCs, congruency effects are important (Bowden et al., 2017). People participate in activities that provide positive experiences and are consistent with their idealized self-images. According to the congruity hypothesis, when customers have pleasant experiences, they will show congruence between the OBC and their own values, which will increase their intrinsic desire for involvement and make them feel rewarded. Good OBC experiences match customers' ideal selves, self-images, and sense of worth.

Customers compare their values to those they see in a focus item in order to determine value congruity. Positive consumer reactions occur when products validate or represent their own ideals. Value congruity theory suggests that businesses use OBC-based marketing tactics that highlight the congruity between customers. Congruity theory, in conclusion, provides a solid foundation for comprehending customer involvement in OBCs. It discusses how customers' attitudes and their interactions within OBCs align, offering insights into the variables affecting engagement and the actions that follow. (Wilson Ozuem, 2024)

Consumer Engagement and Online Brand Communities

Marketers are paying attention to the new platforms that the development of digital technology has brought out for communication and information exchange. With 1.72 billion of them regularly using Facebook, the number of Internet users worldwide has increased to 3.5 billion. Because of this increased worldwide connectedness, marketers now have more options than ever to interact and connect with customers. Online brand communities (OBCs) have grown significantly in the last ten years. OBCs provide a forum for consumers to join online groups related to brands, exchange brand-related experiences or information, and express their opinions about particular brands. Regarding customers, OBCs There are ongoing discussions on how to define consumer involvement, with different academics coming up with different definitions. For example, Hollebeek et al. (2016) see it as a consumer's "volitional investment" of resources into brand interactions, while Brodie et al. (2011) define it as a "psychological state" emerging from

interactive customer experiences. Consumer engagement is defined as a "positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activity" that occurs during or is connected to consumer/brand interactions. This study uses the definition proposed by Hollebeek et al. (2014).

Scholarly discussion also revolves around aspects of consumer engagement. Some scholars have put forth one-dimensional perspectives on engagement behaviors, whereas others support a three-dimensional construct that includes cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects.

As "pseudo-marketers" or "co-producers," modern customers actively participate in a variety of marketing initiatives, acting as reliable sources for other consumers and cutting expenses for businesses. Organizations are now heavily investing in the development of consumer involvement due to this participative approach. Researchers are looking more closely at how businesses might take advantage of consumer involvement in online communities as a result of the expanding usage of OBCs on social media sites like Facebook. Understanding the dynamics of customers' involvement in OBCs becomes increasingly important as they spend a significant amount of time interacting with these environments. Thus, this research suggests that self-brand image congruity and value congruity are essential drivers of customer engagement, in line with congruity theory. Concurrently, brand loyalty is integrated as a natural consequence of the anticipated increased level of customer interaction, as Figure I illustrate. The next section goes into great detail on the main research variables and how they are expected to interact. (Roy Bhattacharjee, 2023)
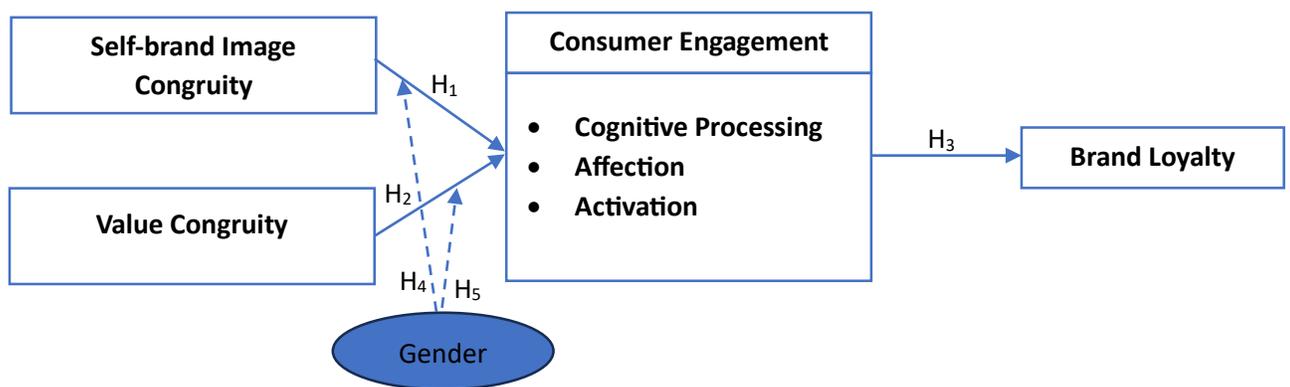

Figure 1: Relationship Model

Self-Brand Image Congruity's Effect on Customer Engagement

Although other studies have examined the effect of self-congruity on customer-brand connections, little is known about how it affects consumer engagement. Consumers have particular

views about how they perceive themselves, frequently enhancing their self-concept or bringing them closer to their ideal selves, according to the self-congruity hypothesis. As such, participation in Online Brand Communities (OBCs) provides a platform for self-expression, which may influence consumer behavior, satisfaction, and purchase decisions. The impact of value congruity and self-brand image congruency on customer involvement is examined in this study (Lee and Jeong, 2014). When customers notice a greater degree of alignment between their ideal

H1. *Self-Brand Image Congruity positively influences consumer engagement.*

Value Congruity's Effect on Customer Engagement

Value congruity has been suggested by academics as a crucial strategy for creating and maintaining long-term customer connections. Values are important because they shape consumer behavior and function as a bridge between consumers and brands. Customers are more likely to interact with brands that share their values, as they consider OBCs that validate their views to be more engaging. According to Kristof et al. (2005), value congruity in this sense refers to how well customers perceive a brand's values to align with their own, which might be demonstrated by the brand's goods and the OBC. Value congruity is used in this study to investigate how well the values of the firm and its customers correspond. OBCs as participatory

H2. *Value congruity positively influences consumer engagement.*

How Customer Engagement Affects Brand Loyalty

It is acknowledged that models investigating the connection between consumer involvement and other pertinent nomological network ideas need to be developed and empirically tested. To be more precise, determining how customer involvement affects brand loyalty is essential to comprehending the actual marketing impact of engagement. Positive engagement effects have been theoretically linked to brand loyalty, which is defined as a consumer's positive attitude toward a product/website/brand combined with repeat purchase behavior.

It is suggested that OBC-based interactions affect customer attitudes toward a brand, preferences, and eventually brand loyalty. As customers interact

H3. *Consumer engagement positively influences brand loyalty.*

The Moderator's Gender

When looking at gender as a demographic variable, earlier studies have shown how important it is in influencing consumers' online usage habits. Though marketing research has examined gender impacts, little is known about how gender may affect customer participation,

particularly among OBCs. According to the varied uses and gratifications of theoretical reasons across genders, men and women generally exhibit diverse attitudes and behaviors regarding internet-based interactions. According to research, men and women behave differently when it comes to the perceived costs and advantages of particular purchases while they are online. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that consumers' self-image and value congruency are significantly influenced by their gender.

> H4. The effect of self-brand image congruity on consumer engagement varies by gender.

> H5. The effect of value congruity on consumer engagement varies by gender.

Research Methodology

Sample and Information Gathering

An online poll aimed at Lebanon's customers was used to gather data for the project. Before the survey was sent out, participants received a quick synopsis of online brand communities (OBCs). Only those who participated in at least one OBC on well-known social media sites, including Facebook, were eligible for consideration. In addition to answering survey questions on their experiences in that specific neighborhood, participants were asked to indicate on Facebook which OBC they favored. After a thorough evaluation procedure by experts, a pre-test with fifty people was conducted to guarantee preliminary validity. The distribution of questionnaires was done via email targeting students enrolled in different courses around Lebanon with 500 replies received.

The decision to focus on Lebanon aligns with the country's collective cultural orientation, as emphasized by Hofstede's (1980) "individualism/collectivism" value system. In collectivist cultures like Lebanon, where group harmony and interdependence are paramount, individuals are more likely to form stronger and more intimate social relationships within OBCs. Given the interactive nature of OBCs, Lebanese consumers are expected to actively engage on these platforms, emphasizing their relational focus.

Among the 500 respondents, 57% were male and 43% were female, with an age range of 20-35 years. Respondents were enrolled in various courses, reflecting a diverse educational background. The average reported annual family income was 1,000$ and participants were engaged in OBCs related to retail, fashion, and electronics. The results indicated that 69% of respondents visited their preferred OBCs two to three times a week, with 38% checking daily. Over 55% reported spending one to two hours per week on their preferred OBCs, engaging in

activities such as sharing brand-related experiences, participating in discussions, playing games, and taking surveys.

Measures

All of the study's components were measured using published scales, with a little amount of contextual modification done for each one. A seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("totally disagree") to 7 ("totally agree"), was used in the multi-item assessments. The six sections of the questionnaire addressed the following topics: demographic data, consumer involvement, brand loyalty, self-brand image congruity, value congruity, and the favorite OBCs of the respondents.

Analysis of Data and Outcomes

An analytical method including two steps was used to examine the effect of congruity types on customer involvement in online brand communities (OBCs) and the results that follow. The methods included confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM). The suggested conceptual framework was examined using the AMOS 20 SEM program; the first phase was using CFA to evaluate the validity and reliability of the variables.

The factor loadings, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Composite Reliability (CR), and Cronbach's α for each construct are shown in Table I. Every factor loading was more than 0.5, satisfying the convergent validity requirements. The constructs had satisfactory inter-item reliability, with Cronbach's α values varying between 0.4 and 0.6. Furthermore, adequate levels were indicated by CR values ranging from 0.75 to 0.87 and AVE values ranging from 0.55 to 0.70.

The possibility of common method bias was noted because multi-item self-report scales were used for all components. Respondents were guaranteed the privacy of their replies in order to allay this worry, and it was emphasized that there were no right or incorrect answers. The common method bias was evaluated using Harman's single-factor test.

Assessment of Structural Models

Several fit indices were used to evaluate the model's goodness-of-fit: $\chi 2$, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), Incremental Fit Index (IFI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Goodness-of-fit Index (GFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (GFI), and Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation (RMSEA). According to Hair et al. (2010), the following model fit parameters are acceptable. With gender removed as a moderating factor, the model shown had an acceptable overall fit.

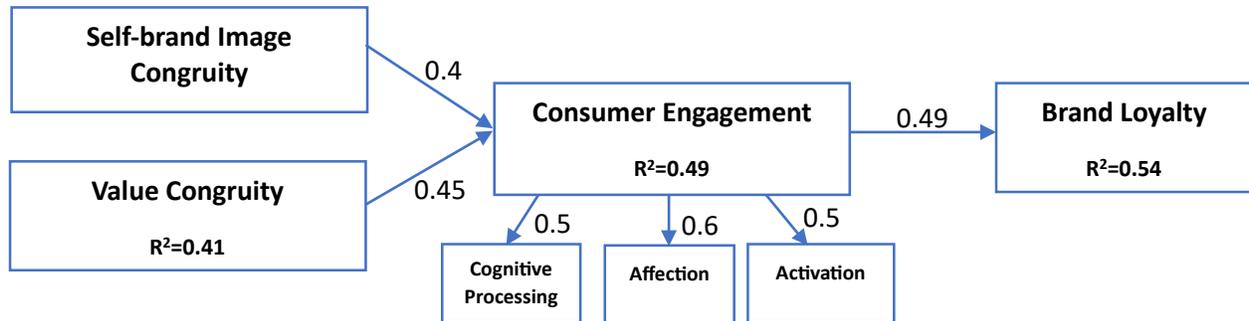The structural model's findings, as shown in the below figure (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Path Diagram

Factors Influencing Consumer Participation in Follow-Up Conversations

This study investigated the effect of brand loyalty on customer engagement by delving into an alternative model in an effort to better understand the elements driving consumer involvement in subsequent encounters (Van Doorn et al., 2010; Islam and Rahman, 2016c). With a $p<0.05$, the alternative model showed a reasonable overall fit.

The relationship findings of the alternative model shows that consumer involvement in OBCs is favorably impacted by self-brand image congruity ($p <0.05$). Additionally, the findings indicate that brand loyalty has a favorable impact on customer involvement ($p <0.05$). But in contrast, this impact is less pronounced than the impact of consumer engagement on brand loyalty.

Examining the Moderation of Gender in Path Relationships

As a last phase, the study looked at how gender affected the route linkages between value congruity and self-brand image congruency on OBC-based customer engagement. Two separate groups were created from the sample: a male group (n = 285) and a female group (n = 215). With gender included as a moderating component, the model showed an acceptable overall fit.

To examine variations in the path coefficients of the relevant structural routes for the male and female sample groups, a multi-group analysis was carried out. The results show that the significant impact of self-brand image congruity on customer involvement was not gender-specific, leading to a lack of support for H5.

This study's main goal was to demonstrate how congruity theory may be used to understand how self-brand image congruity and value congruity affect consumer participation in online brand communities (OBCs). With the validation of three of the five hypotheses put forth, our results

provide important new information. The findings highlight how self-brand image congruity and value congruity affect customer engagement, which is a key indicator of brand loyalty in the setting of OBCs. As a result, marketers in Lebanon are urged to create OBC characteristics that closely reflect the beliefs and self-image of their target audience. It is hoped that this congruity will lead to stronger and more positive consumer interaction with OBCs, laying the groundwork for the development of a loyal client base.

Implications for Lebanon

This study holds significance for Lebanon's context by:

1.   Advancing understanding: Furthering comprehension of self-brand image and value congruity effects as key drivers of consumer engagement in OBCs in Lebanon.

2.   Practical recommendations: Offering actionable insights for marketing practitioners in Lebanon, emphasizing the importance of congruity effects in fostering consumer motivations to join and stay with specific OBCs.

3.   Exploring non-Western settings: Contributing to engagement literature by conducting empirical research in a collectivist, emerging economy context, providing initial insights into OBC-based consumer engagement in Lebanon.

4.   Strategic guidance for marketers: Recommending tailored OBC-based engagement tactics for Lebanon, including personalized benefits, interactive chatrooms, and customized content, all aligned with individual consumers' values.

5.   ROI improvement: Aiding Lebanese organizations in enhancing the return on investment.

Limitations and Future Directions for Consumer Engagement in Lebanon

While this study contributes valuable insights, several limitations provide opportunities for further research, specifically tailored to the context of Lebanon.

1.   Cultural Generalization: The study is confined to a single cultural and economic context (Lebanon). Conducting a cross-cultural study in Lebanon could empirically examine how cultural nuances impact consumer engagement, considering Lebanon's unique socio-cultural landscape.

2.   Cross-Sectional Nature: Given the dynamic nature of consumer engagement, longitudinal research is recommended to explore the evolution of OBC-based consumer engagement over time, capturing the changing trends and patterns specific to Lebanon.

3.   Platform-Specific Dynamics: The focus on Facebook-based OBCs limits the generalizability of findings to other social networking sites prevalent in Lebanon, such as Twitter. Understanding platform-specific dynamics is crucial, especially considering variations in the nature and purpose of different social networking sites.

4.   Industry and Brand Context: The study's applicability across diverse industries or brand-related OBC contexts in Lebanon (e.g., consumer electronics, fashion) needs validation to ensure external validity and offer industry-specific insights.

5.   Broader Nomological Network: To deepen our understanding, future research in Lebanon may explore additional constructs within the broader nomological network of consumer engagement. Including variables like brand experience, commitment, and trust can enrich the conceptual framework.

6.   Cultural Variations: As this study was conducted in a collectivist culture, future research in Lebanon may investigate the conceptual model in different cultural settings, including more individualistic contexts.

7.   Alternate Theoretical Perspectives: Exploring alternate theoretical frameworks beyond congruity theory, such as resource exchange theory or social practice theory, may yield unique findings specific to Lebanon. Comparing and contrasting these perspectives can provide a richer understanding of consumer engagement. (TABIAAT, 2023).

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