

Developing a deeper understanding of positive word of mouth (WOM) in virtual brand communities through the moderator effect of community participation

Desarrollando una comprensión de la recomendación positiva boca a boca en una comunidad de marca virtual a través del efecto moderador de la participación en la comunidad

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Abstract

Objectives: The present study examines the links between psychographic homogeneity, availability of communication avenues, and involvement with the community, emotional brand connection and positive word of mouth. In our research framework, we include these latent variables to understand if they are core positive drivers in their relationship with positive word of mouth (WOM) behavior as the core relationship outcome. All these was studied in the context of virtual brand communities foster by the company. **Methodology:** Using empirical data from an on-line survey sent by email, a sample of 400 members of the virtual community Apple México, manage by the company were analyzed. The members were selected randomly. The questionnaire was developed using measures from previous empirical research. The structural model was empirically tested using CFA and hypotheses tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using AMOS. **Contribution:** The results extend previous research by showing a strong positive relation between latent constructs proposed in the study and their relationship with positive word-of-mouth (WOM).

Positive word of mouth, Community participation, Virtual brand Community

Resumen

Objetivos: El presente estudio examina la relación entre homogeneidad psicográficas, disponibilidad de avenidas de comunicación virtuales, involucramiento con la marca, conexión emocional con la marca y la recomendación positiva de boca a boca. En el marco propuesto, se incluyó las variables latentes para comprender si son motivadores fundamentales positivos en su relación con la recomendación boca a boca positiva (WOM). Todo esto se estudió en el contexto de comunidades de marca virtuales patrocinadas por la compañía. **Metodología:** Usando datos empíricos de una encuesta on-line enviada por correo electrónico a una muestra de 400 miembros de la comunidad virtual de Apple, comunidad administrada por la compañía, fueron analizados. El cuestionario se desarrolló a partir del uso de medidas de estudios empíricos previos. El modelo estructural propuesto se probó usando CFA y las hipótesis fueron probadas a través del análisis de Modelo de ecuaciones estructurales (SEM) usando AMOS. **Contribución:** El estudio contribuye a extender estudios previos y encontrar una relación positiva entre las variables latentes estudiadas y su relación con la recomendación positiva de boca a boca.

Recomendación positiva de boca a boca, Participación comunidad, Comunidad de marca virtual

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Introduction

Engaging customers through online brand communities has become an important brand strategy (Kuo & Feng, 2013). The reason for this is that virtual brand community's favor the development of brand loyalty customers. Delivering a strong form of brand loyalty can strengthen a person's ties to a virtual brand community. A brand community includes all users of a brand that relate to each other, through similarities perceived by themselves, traditions, patterns of consumption, and a sense of responsibility of the wellbeing of the brand; this followers or brand fans, establish structure social relations. (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001).

The individual integration to a brand community is a form of customer loyalty (Schouten, J, Mc Alexander, J. & Koenig Harold, 2007). Brand communities may be considered as subcultures of consumption (Schouten, J. & Mc Alexander, J. 1995), due to this fact, brand communities have become relevant to develop communication linkages between the manufacturers and the consumers, as well as mechanisms of auto-expression and support. Today, companies have a clearer comprehension of the importance of brand communities in the marketing strategy. (Algheseimer & Dholokia, 2006; Li & Bernoff, 2008; Mc Alexander et al., 2002).

An examination of brand communities must start with a comprehensive understanding of brand communities and the difference between brand communities managed by the companies, and brand communities developed and managed by brand fans. Empirical studies have reviewed virtual brand communities from the theoretical, economic relevance (Mathwick, et.al. 2008; Dholokia, et.al, 2009), others have focus in the difference between brand communities managed by the company and brand communities managed by fans (Ordovas de Almeida, Mazzon, Muller, Dholokia, 2012). Porter and Donthu (2005) suggested that brand communities managed by fans are more susceptible to negative outcomes, than those managed by the company. These author's presented empirical evidence that brand communities managed by the company have the advantage of controlling the message.

Nevertheless, virtual brand communities managed by fans favor the interaction between members of the community, increases the affection to the brand and gathers members that have the strongest ties to the brand, who are identified as the most loyal of them all. This study proposes a theoretical framework that aims to explain the relationship between perceived homogeneity, availability of avenues of communication, emotional brand connection and the moderator effect of community participation and consumer intentions in Facebook brand community in Mexico. The study will place emphasis in a community sponsor by the company, this type of communities follows marketing objectives with a segment in mind.

The data collected from the virtual community will provide insight to brand managers and decision makers in the Mexican context. Through a survey (n=400), this study explored consumer intentions word of mouth (WOM), as a function of the three embeddedness constructs: perceived homogeneity (shared values, interests and hobbies of the members); availability of virtual avenues of communication (a number of available interactive avenues); relationship with the brand (emotional identification with the brand), mediated through one construct, involvement in the community (time spent in the community and the interaction with members). The goal of the current paper is to fill research gaps by addressing the following research questions:

1. How is consumer involvement in the community affecting positive word of mouth in brand communities?
2. How are availability of virtual avenues of communication, relationship with the brand, and perceived homogeneity contributing to positive word of mouth (WOM)

Literature review

In our research framework, we include psychographic homogeneity, availability of communication avenues, relationship with brand, involvement with the community as the core relationship drivers, as well as WOM behavior as the core relationship outcome.

Virtual brand communities fostered by fans, represent a connection between the members and the belief that they are different from others. Bagozzi and Dholokia (2006) explore the term *social identity*, as the feeling that being part of a virtual brand community gives members a feeling of belonging. Members assume they have the moral responsibility to show commitment to the community, in this sense, community members embark themselves in trying to influence, advice and help other members. Due to the fact that a virtual brand community is considered a rational form of community, in this line of thought, Cova and Pace (2006) define brand communities “as a set of individuals having a mutual interest in a specific brand and form of social life with its own values, traditions, rituals, hierarchy and vocabulary.”

To facilitate the procedure of creating a virtual brand community, one prerequisite is that a brand develops a strong image and be very well position in the market. Among the behaviors that virtual communities’ participation promote are: purchase intention, satisfaction and word of mouth. (Thompson & Sinha, 2008).

In this sense, we must understand that identity of brand community is an important consideration for development of psychological sense (Carlson et al. 2008). Every community has its own values and norms, so members have different behaviors toward different communities (Turner, 1987), but within the brand community, they share values, behaviors and attitudes. This concept is regarded as perceived psychographic homogeneity, define by Zellmer & Brunh (2008) as “the degree in which the members of a virtual brand community perceive to have small differences between them.” On the other hand, Dholokia et. al. (2009) define perceived psychographic homogeneity (PPH) as the member’s perception that they share values, interests and hobbies.

This explains the fact that as homogeneity is higher, differences within the group are smaller, and because of this, they share information and desire to interact more frequently showing a higher commitment with the brand community.

The strength of a customer integration and the brand therein lie in a web of relationships that customers perceive the virtual brand community developing for them, known as marketing facilitation activities (Schouten, J., Mc Alexander, J. & Koenig, H., 2007). These facilitators enable the brand members to increase their contribution and interaction in the brand community. There are different types of member’s characterization regarding this topic. First, Burnett (2000) identifies two different groups in relation to the type and behavior members show. The first group, the “enthusiasts” (Alghesheimer & Dholokia, 2006), are members who are more passive, the main purpose of their involvement in the brand community is to gather information related with the brand. The second group’s behavior is more active.

They not only participate in the community answering questions, posting etc., but also, they are responsible for generating new content; these members show a greater identification with the brand (Alghesheimer & Dholokia, 2006), resulting in an increase involvement with the brand IC (Involvement in the community). The members’ perceived psychographic homogeneity is strong; therefore, these members will be willing to interact more frequently in the virtual brand community, engaging in a diverse set of activities.

The sense of individual psychological ownership and CPO in a brand community can drive passive members’ participation in online brand communities. Moreover, participation intentions can have a positive influence in brand purchase intentions and a positive word of mouth (WOM) (Kumar & Nayak, 2019). Giving members a positive sense of psychological ownership in social media called engagement, which is the factor behind interactive participation. (Brodie et al., 2011)

We postulate the first hypotheses:

H1: There will be a positive relationship between perception of the psychographic homogeneity and involvement in the community.

The strength of a customer integration and the brand therein lie in a web of relationships that customers perceive the virtual brand community place at its disposal, such as marketing facilitation activities. Availability of virtual avenues (AVA) refers to all the virtual avenues that the company place at the disposal of their members; technical infrastructure responsible for the low or high interactivity between members is a relation of how many avenues they have (Bagozzi et. al., 2007).

Delivery of high interaction virtual avenues such as virtual games, multiple domains etc. increases the level of interaction between members, because it increases the possibility of communication, the level of information shared in the virtual community, and has a direct influence with the IC (Involvement in the Community). Therefore, communities managed by companies usually have more virtual avenues that those managed by the members of the community.

H2: There will be a positive relationship between availability of virtual avenues and the involvement in the community.

Alghesheimer, Utpal, Dholokia & Hermann (2005) defined relationship with the brand (RWB), as the quality of relationship in which the member of the community pictures the brand as a companion with whom relating will be very satisfactory. This definition stresses the belief that the brand image has a direct relation with the consumer's self-image, thus the emotional connection is strong. Therefore, these consumers are more likely to enroll in a virtual brand community, because they have good experience, a strong emotional connection with the brand, resulting in an increased possibility of integration to a virtual brand community, this process became natural IC (involvement in the community).

Involvement and knowledge are moderator factors between brand engagement with self-concept; members of a community with high involvement and knowledge demonstrate a positive relationship with brand love and advocacy (Samala & Singh, 2019). Sanz-Blas, Bigné and Buzova (2019) found that brand community involvement positively contributes to brand community attachment, which in turn, increases brand recommendation.

Supporting the findings of Hutter et al. (2013) that revealed that a positive brand page commitment had a positive influence in brand-related word of mouth intentions (WOM).

H3. There will be a positive relationship between relationship with brand and involvement in the community.

Involvement with the community (IC) is a result of the degree of participation and the consumer identification, this means that a virtual brand community member, who identifies with its community peers, believes he or she has more influence within the community members, therefore ties with community members are stronger, this translates in longer periods interacting in the community. (Mathwick et.al. 2008). The longer the interaction in the community, the greater the identification with the community members.

More involvement with the brand increases loyalty and, as a result, increases the consumer intention to buy products manufactured by the company. According to Algesheimer et. al., 2005, a long satisfying relationship with the brand becomes the pillar of consumer behavior related with behavioral intentions, evaluation, and consumer repurchase of brand products. Long lasting ties with the consumers of a brand community also increases the intention to purchase, repurchase of products, and better evaluations of the virtual brand community.

A means of gaining new customers, besides an individual's loyalty towards a brand or brand community, is a positive worth of mouth (WOM). Existing literature places great importance to positive WOM as an effective means of gaining new customers (von Wangenheim and Bayón, 2007). WOM has been studied as a separate construct, instead of considering it as an integral part of customer loyalty (Jones and Taylor, 2007). Considering it as a different construct is explained because the fact that a person recommends a product, not necessarily means he or she stays as a customer (Blodgett et al., 1993; Dick and Basu, 1994). Coelho, Bairrada and Peres (2019) found empirical evidence related to the role of brand love on WOM. The results show that the identification dimension of brand communities has an important effect on brand love, WOM, advocacy and brand loyalty.

To be successful, brand communities owned by a firm (OBCs) must guarantee participation (Kumar, 2019). In this sense, the type of membership in which the participants interact constitutes a moderating factor in the participation intentions in the brand community. This author explores OBC activity using psychological ownership theory by modeling participation intentions (brand purchase intentions and positive WOM) as a function of two factors: first, the members' sense of individual psychological ownership (IPO) and second, collective psychological ownership (CPO) experienced in the community. Findings revealed differences between active members and the so-called *lurkers* that supports the moderating role of membership type.

H4. There will be a positive relationship between involvement in the community and positive WOM.

The conceptual model outlines the relationships between psychographic homogeneity, availability of virtual avenues, relationship with the brand, involvement in the community and behavioral intentions (WOM). It is summarized in Figure 1

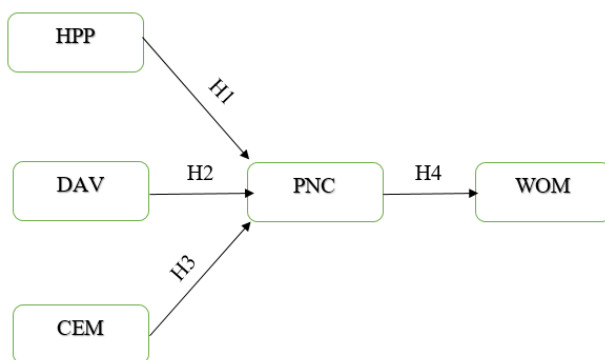


Figure 1 Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Methodology

For any study, constructs should be based on theory and the operationalization of these constructs through measures with high validity and reliability (Churchill, 1979). A well-validated instrument developed by Almeida et.al. (2011) was used. This instrument has been used in other studies (Algheseimer, et.al.2005). All constructs in the study were measured using 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree.

Psychographic homogeneity was measured by 3 items (Algheseimer et.al.2005). Availability of virtual avenues by 4 items (Dholokia, et.al.2009). Involvement with the community with 8 items (Algheseimer, et.al. 2005)and positive WOM community with 3 items (Algheseimer, et. al. 2,2005). The questionnaire was constructed from prior empirical sources (Almeida, et.al. 2011). The scales of the constructs and their respective reliabilities are provided in table 1.

The questionnaire was sent via email to 631 members of the virtual community Apple México. <https://communities.apple.com/mx./welcome>. We received 450 responses (initial response 71.30%), but only 400 were usable (final response rate 63.39%). The questionnaire was pretested before it was sent to the participants, five marketing academics with several years in marketing research were asked to comment on the readability and clarity of the questions. Their feedback was used to modify unclear questions.

Results

The reliability of scales was measured through Cronbach's alpha. Cronbach's alpha measures the reliability with cut-off point of 0.70, which shows the internal consistency. For all constructs, its value ranges from 0.72 to 0.84, thus confirming reliability of individual construct scale. Then, we assessed confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) using AMOS to analyze the data, in order to measure the validity as well as to ensure individual model constructs adequately fit to the data (Iacobucci & Duhacheck, 2003). Factor loadings more than 0.60 are acceptable (Hair et al., 2006), whereas poor factors loading, i.e. less than 0.60, were also found for some items of construct. The results for the 3-item psychographic homogeneity scale, 3-item availability of virtual avenues suggested good factor loadings.

Factor loading for 'involvement with the community' scale, provided inadequate loading for one item, thus the removal of item CEM_2. The reduced, seven-item involvement with the community scale was used in further analyses. Table 1 shows the construct items and standardized loadings.

Construct and items loadings	Standardized
Psychographic Homogeneity (adapted from Algheseimer,et.al. 2005)	
HPP_1 All the members of the community (name of the community) has the same values	0.769
HPP_2 The fact that we belong to the same community make us similar in interests and hobbies	0.722
HPP_3 I have the same world vision of the members of the community	0.670
Availability of virtual avenues of communication (adapted from Algheseimer,et.al. 2005)	
DAV_1 (Name of the community) has multiple virtual interactive avenues and less interactive avenues that facilitate communication with others	0.758
DAV_2 The community has multiple interactive avenues such as email lists, forum that facilitate communication with others.	0.778
DAV_3 I have an adequate place to communicate in my community.	0.833
Emotional brand connection (adapted from Algheseimer, et.al. 2005)	
CEM_1 I fill emotionally connected with Apple	0.635
CEM_2 Apple has an important part in my life	(0.556)
CEM_3 The image of Apple and my image have similarities in many aspects	0.776
CEM_4 I fill a strong sense of identity with the brand	0.805
CEM_5 This brand says a lot about what type of person I am	0.844
CEM_6 I fill a part of the community because I have a strong identification with the brand	0.772
Community Participation (adapted from Algheseimer,et.al. 2005)	
PNC_1 I help other members of the community answering their questions and supporting them	0.771
PNC_2 I interact a lot of time during the week communicating with other members	0.759
PNC_3 I fill motivated to take part of a number of community activities	0.803
PNC_4 I usually contribute in the generation of interesting content for other members of the community	0.808
Positive Word of mouth WOM (Algheseimer, et.al, 2005)	
WOM_1 I will hardly miss an opportunity to tell others positive things about the brand	0.870
WOM_2 I will actively encourage friends and relatives to buy this brand	0.840
WOM_3 If friends or relatives were to search for a smartphone, I will recommend them to buy this brand.	0.830
Notes. All items used a 7-point likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7); $\chi^2 = 808.96$, $\chi^2/df=3.30$ comparative fix index(CFI)=0.96,NNFI=0.98,SRMR=0.05, RMSEA=0.08	

Table 1 Construct items and standardized loadings

CFA measurement model comprising all models' constructs. The proposed five-factor model provided a reasonable fit to the data by yielding the following results: CMIN/df= 3.30, GFI= 0.951, AGFI= 0.934, CFI= 0.952, NFI= 0.950, RMSEA= 0.060. Convergent validity was evident because the factor loadings for all items are above the threshold of 0.50, as suggested by Steenkamp and Van Trijp (1991). Furthermore, the square root of the average variance extracted for each factor was greater than its Pearson correlations with other factors, supporting discriminant validity for all pairs of constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), as shown in Table 2. AVEs of all constructs were well above the 0.50 threshold (Fornell and Larcker, 1981), as shown in table 2, thus demonstrating construct reliability (CR) as well.

Construct	α	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5
1. Psychographic Homogeneity	0.92	0.82	0.70	0.83				
2. Availability of virtual avenues of communication	0.86	0.86	0.79	0.77	0.89			
3.Emotional brand connection	0.71	0.71	0.54	0.90	0.78	0.95		
4.Community Participation	0.85	0.86	0.67	0.73	0.72	0.86	0.88	
5.Positive Word of Mouth	0.91	0.91	0.78	0.53	0.50	0.81	0.91	0.95

Notes: α =Cronbach's Alpha; CR=composite reliability; AVE=average variance extracted; the diagonal (in italics) shows the square root of the AVE for each construct; the off-diagonal numbers represent the correlations among constructs.

Table 2 Constructs and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) results

Test of Structural Equation Modeling. The structural equation model acceptably fits the empirical data, ($\chi^2=915.62$, $p = 0.005$, CMIN/df= 3.2 (Hair et al., 2006). All other statistics are within the acceptable/suitable ranges including RMSEA = 0.068, CFI = .93, GFI = 0.94 and NFI = 0.95 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Results of hypothesis are given in Table 3. The standardized path coefficient between the psychographic homogeneity and community participation is statistically significant, in support of H1 (0.32, $t=4.59$, $p<0.05$). H2, which indicated that there should be a positive relationship between availability of virtual avenues of communication and community participation, was also supported (0.69, $t=7.66$, $p<0.05$).

H3, was also supported, the standardized path between two constructs is statistically significant, a positive relationship between emotional brand connection and community participation. Finally, H4 was supported (0.60, $t=5.13$, $p<0.05$) which stated that as community participation increases, behavioral intentions, positive WOM should increase. This was not a surprise, given the fact that the hypotheses have been established in previous research. However, the structural model contributes to existing knowledge incorporating WOM as a behavioral intention and the moderator effect of psychographic homogeneity, availability of virtual avenues of communication and emotional brand connection as mediators in community participation and its effects in a positive WOM.

Hypotheses and standardized coefficients of structural model estimation	Standardized coefficient	t-value
H1: Psychographic homogeneity-Community Participation	0.32	4.59*
H2: Availability of virtual avenues-Community participation	0.69	7.66*
H3: Emotional brand Connection-Community participation	0.41	6.02*
H4: Community participation-positive word of mouth	0.60	5.13*
*($p<0.05$) (n=400)		

Discussion

The present study examines the links between psychographic homogeneity, availability of communication avenues, and involvement with the community, emotional brand connection and positive word of mouth. The model was particularly useful for examining the influences of community participation and behavioral intentions. By understanding how virtual community members develop the intention of word of mouth recommendation, managers can develop strategies to increase the probability that community members will recommend the brand community.

Managers should focus on providing virtual avenues of communication in all their types that will increase participation, offering choices to community members of different types of communication avenues. We did not include a comprehensive set of antecedent and consequent variables. Omitted variables need to be addressed in future research.

This study provides a clear link between de emotional brand connections as a means to increase community participation, which will improve the probability of positive word of mouth. In this study, we only focused on to positive word of mouth; however, the influence of negative word of mouth is equally important and sometimes even more influential in affecting attitudes (Bone, 1995).

Conclusions and recommendations

Brand communities inserted in social media are emerging as a suitable platform where companies can build strong relationships with its customer, as well as promote their products, presenting multiple means of communication among members (Chen et al., 2011). This research contributes to demonstrate the moderating role of community participation in consumer recommendation word of mouth. It seems that members who actively participate and collaborate in a brand community are more likely to recommend the brand or the community to other participants (Sanz-Blas, et al., 2019).

Also, findings support the idea that those members who actively participate in a brand community find themselves to be psychographic homogeneous, this idea increases their desire to participate more actively in the community (Almeida, et al., 2011). The availability of virtual avenues as well as positive brand connection increase the desire to participate in a brand community. Practical implications of the study are: companies should strengthen the connection with the brand, increase the availability of communication avenues encouraging members to actively participate in the brand community, so that the members feel incentives that stimulate positive association feelings and emotional attachment.

The current framework could be applied in other contexts and extended with the objective to incorporate more independent variables. One of the variables that can be included in new research is customer referral programs, virtual brand communities managed by the sponsor, offer different types of incentives with the intention to recruit new members; also, including the moderator effect of customer satisfaction-WOM-referrals will provide insight to the subject.

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