

A Heterogeneous Perspective of Brand Community

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Abstract

Current view on brand community conceptualizes the construct as a collection of highly homogeneous members despite some recent evidence that community members might be heterogeneous. Extant scholars call for more research to establish sources of such heterogeneity. This article shows that members of a brand community e.g. fans of a sports club, can be meaningfully segmented into clusters based on relationships that consumers may have with a brand community e.g. with the product, brand, organization, and other consumers. Using data from a large survey, we apply cluster analysis techniques to meaningfully segment the fans of a sports club. Further, based on arguments from sports marketing literature, we establish that these clusters can vary significantly in terms of their psychological underpinnings like different motivations to consume sports.

Keywords: Brand community, motivation to consume sports, cluster analysis.

Introduction

Recent research in marketing focuses on how customers are becoming more endogenous to the firm by co creating value through building brand communities (Schau, Muniz & Arnold, 2009). Such an approach has been strongly endorsed by other researchers (Keller, 2003) who recommend that customers and brands are increasingly getting interconnected, achieved by a state of emotional attachment e.g. resonance with the brand. Indeed, such value creation activities are occurring within brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002); thereby motivating firms to increase collaboration with their customers. Hence, by proactively creating context for customer interaction, firms can cultivate customer relationship that can strengthen brand community which might in turn potentially translate into brand loyalty and other implied benefits to the marketers (Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007).

Marketing scholars (e.g., Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002) currently promote the view that brand communities are collections of highly homogeneous members marked by shared consciousness, rituals and traditions. Recent research has however challenge this notion of homogeneity (Ouwensloot & Odekerken-Schroder, 2008) thereby forewarning that treating brand community members as a single homogeneous group may be a mistake. A similar line of work (e.g., Schau et al., 2009; Sherry et al., 2001) also supports such notion of heterogeneity. We endorse this view and argue that the concept of brand is complex (Muehlbacher et al., 2006) and members can indeed differ in many respects (Schau et al., 2009). We completely agree with recent evidence provided by Ouwensloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2008) that members may have different motives to join a brand community and they can be clustered into different segments based on their attitudes towards the four relationship dimensions which connects a consumer within a brand community e.g. with the brand, product, company, and the other consumers, following customer centric model of McAlexander and his colleagues (2002). In the current work, we take the novel approach to extend the concept of brand community to the sports market (McAlexander et al., 2002). Following cluster analysis techniques, we show that fans of a sports club can be indeed categorized into multiple segments. We further establish heterogeneity of such segments based on different motivations to consume sports (Trail & James, 2001; Funk & James, 2001).

In doing so, we address several current gaps in the literature. First of all, we answer Ouwensloot and Odekerken-Schroder's (2008) call for future research to inquire into psychological aspects of heterogeneity (e. g., based on involvement) amongst brand community members. We note that such psychological underpinning of a

customer's perception towards brand community remains unexplored (Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008; McAlexander, Kim, & Roberts, 2003). Second, we study a community where consumers mentally admire a brand (e.g., a sporting club) but are not administratively connected to the organization; an issue again of paramount importance and worth investigating (Ouwensloot & Odekerken-Schroder, 2008). Finally, we also extend theory in brand community area by showing that notion of brand community applies to sports market; again following recommendation from Mc Alexander and his colleagues (2002) to extend its applicability beyond consumer market..

The rest of the article is organized as follows. We begin with review of extant literature on the research topic, followed by the development of hypotheses, explanation of research methodologies, analysis of results and the ensuing discussion, and finish off with a conclusion on the study's contributions, limitations, as well as future research directions.

Theory and hypotheses

Brand community heterogeneity

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 412) referred to brand community as a "specialized, non-geographically bound community that is based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand." This definition of brand community has been accepted by many field researchers (e.g., McAlexander et al., 2002, 2003; Andersen, 2005; Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Hermann, 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). The concept of brand community has been based on sociological premises of shared consciousness (Hickman & Ward, 2007; Carlson et al., 2008), shared rituals and traditions (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), and sense of moral responsibility (McAlexander et al., 2002), all these elements essentially denoting the strength of integration amongst the members in the community, which produces a shared or collective identity (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Recent proponents of brand community theory suggest communities may be conceived and nurtured in the physical world as well as the virtual world and consumption communities are no longer bound by spatial constraints (Devasagayam & Buff, 2008).

While the above body of research strongly suggests the notion of strong commonality amongst members of brand community, recent work suggests that brand community members can be heterogeneous. For example, Schau et al.'s (2009) work suggests that community engagement practices (e.g., members competing on brand devotion, knowledge etc) might act as the basis for individual differences. This notion of intra group distinction and similarity has also been supported through earlier works of scholars like Schouten and McAlexander (1995) and Sherry et al. (2001). In a similar notion, Ouwensloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2008) provide evidence that brand community members can be indeed meaningfully segmented based on their different motivations to join the community. Using relationship variables from the customer centric model of brand community (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), the researchers came up with six different types of brand community members e.g. enthusiasts, users, behind-the-scenes, not-me's, average, and socializers and further showed that they differed significantly on consumption motivation.

A few major concerns however underlie the work of Ouwensloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2008). Firstly, the researchers highlight that consumption characteristics alone cannot clearly and unequivocally define the characteristics of segments in a community and therefore recommended future research to scrutinize other sources of heterogeneity. Secondly, their work also neglected the role of involvement, especially its conceptualization as a multifaceted concept, in order to promote a deeper understanding of the characterizations of segments within a community. Finally, we answer their call on research with more brand communities to generalize conclusions drawn from their work. In the current research, we follow a similar procedure as followed by Ouwensloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2008) to segment brand community members e.g. Manchester United football club fans and argue that such segments can differ significantly on sports consumption motivation.

Motivation to consume sports and brand community members

Sport consumption, unlike consumption of traditional products, is one that involves experiential and hedonic dimensions of consumption. According to Schaaf (1995, p. 22), in the context of sports marketing, the

“product” is either the entertainment of competition (the uncertainty), or a product/service associated with the excitement of the event, or both”; a notion supported by other scholars e.g. Chadwick (2009, p. 192). Motivation to consume sports can have different underpinnings like psychological e.g. fulfilment of emotional and intellectual needs, experience of positive feelings and thought states (Smith & Stewart, 2007), socio-cultural e.g. strong family and social interaction, cultural connections, travelling together to see sport (Smith & Stewart, 2007; Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002) and social belongingness e.g. sense of identification with the team etc (Smith & Stewart, 2007). Recent work by researchers e.g. Trail and James (2001), tries to capture the many facets of motivation based on earlier work in the field (e.g., Wann, 1995; Milne & McDonald’s, 1999; Sloan, 1989). In fact, Trail and James (2001) develop Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption (MSSC) thereby capturing various motivations like vicarious achievement, knowledge acquisition, drama, aesthetic qualities of the game/sport, appreciation of athlete’s skills, physical attraction to athletes, escape, family, and social interaction.

Current scholarly works in this area show that sports consumers may indeed vary in terms of their motivation and involvement. Firstly, along the lines of Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2008), we argue that different motives to consume sports may lead to different levels of appreciations of the aspects of community life i.e. the four relationships consumers may have with a brand community –product, brand, organization, and other consumers. For example, social interaction motive e.g. desire to identify with something bigger than oneself (Wann, Brewer, & Royalty, 1999), to feel part of a tightly bound community (Cooke, 1994; Smith, Patterson, Williams, & Hogg, 1981) may lead one to emphasize on inter-customer relationships. Similarly, a focus on aesthetic quality of sports may warrant close ties with the product while vicarious achievement may demand closer ties with the organization. Given the exploratory nature of this study, we are not focussing on individual hypotheses but rather forward a general notion that the four relationships constructs of customer centric model of brand community will be evaluated in a relatively differentiated fashion based on the sports consumption motivation of an individual.

We therefore propose the following:

- H₁ Members in the brand community of a sports team can be classified into different clusters based on their attitudes toward the four relationship constructs depicted in the consumer-centric model of brand community.*
- H₂ Membership clusters in the brand community of a sports team will differ significantly in terms of their attitudes toward the motives for sport consumption.*

Methodology

Sample

A paper and pencil survey was conducted at a large Western Australian University. A total of 248 responses (28 females) completed the study. For a summary of the sample characteristics, please refer to Table 1.

Survey instrument

The survey instrument was divided into different sections. The first section consisted of 22 items related to the seven motives for sport consumption. In the second part, brand community was measured with 16 items that Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2008) used. Finally, participants answered demographic questions. More importantly, we used a screening question that read “Are you a fan of Manchester United Football Club” in order to select fans only to operationalize our brand community construct.

Scales and measurements

The MSSC as originally developed by Trail and James (2001) had nine motives, but the current study only included seven – vicarious achievement, aesthetics, drama, escape, knowledge, appreciation of physical skills, and social interaction. The motives of family and physical attraction to athletes were omitted from the study as they were found to be irrelevant (following current research e.g., Fink et al., 2002). Items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale – ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The reliability of the scale was found to be acceptable ($\alpha = 0.78$ to 0.88).

Brand community was measured with 16 items that Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2008) used for their study. These items were developed based on the original brand community scale developed by McAlexander et al. (2002). Items were slightly reworded to suit the context of this study. For example, items in the customer-brand relationship, the “brand” was Manchester United; the “product” was changed to “soccer games”. As such, some of the items which would originally be “I consider my (brand) as my number one choice of [product]”, “I love my (brand) [product]”, and “My (brand) [product] is fun to {consume}”, would read “I consider (Manchester United) as my number one choice of [soccer teams]”, “I love (Manchester United’s) [soccer games]”, and “(Manchester United’s) [soccer games] are fun to {watch}” respectively. The scale reported to have good internal consistency with $\alpha = 0.89$ to 0.93 .

Analysis and results

Cluster analysis

Following Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2008), we did a cluster analysis with the brand community scale. The four constructed relationship scores were used as a basis of segmentation. Ward’s method of hierarchical clustering technique was adopted with squared Euclidean distances as the dissimilarity measure. Following recommendations by Malhotra (2007, p. 646), an agglomeration table was constructed to determine the number of clusters. The table suggests that the sample is made up of either three or four clusters. In order to decide on the number of clusters extant recommendations (Funfgeld & Wang, 2008; Malhotra, 2007) along with study of dendrogram was undertaken. As such, a three-cluster solution was proposed with respect to the current sample of Manchester United fans in the soccer team’s brand community. This hierarchical clustering technique was then further refined by applying a *K*-means clustering procedure, a non-hierarchical clustering technique; thereby ensuring that the cluster-means are refined and cases are reallocated based on their similarity within cluster and dissimilarity between clusters.

In order to examine and study each of the clusters, Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2008) suggested that interpretation of the results of a cluster analysis is based on three inferences. First, the absolute scores on each of the relationships are taken into account. A score around the mid-point of the seven-point scale indicates that the relationship is neither important/relevant nor unimportant/irrelevant. High scores denote that the relationship is valuable or important, low scores mean the relationship is not regarded valuable or important. Second, the scores on each relationship for a given cluster are compared to the average of the whole sample. Third, the scores on the four relationships are compared within a cluster. This may lead to such inference as “for cluster 1, one type of relationship is more important than another relationship.” This interpretation of the cluster analysis is usually summarized by naming the identified clusters to capture their most distinctive characteristics and features (Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schroeder, 2008). The following section examines and studies each cluster with relation to their characteristics and features and names are given to a specific cluster. A finalized table consisting of the number of cluster cases, the four relationship scores and community average can be found in Table 2.

Clusters of Manchester United fans

Cluster one. The first cluster in the Manchester United brand community consists of members with a relatively high score in the relationship with the product (5.42), represented in this study by the games of soccer that Manchester United Football Club produce, average score in the relationship with the brand (4.81), being Manchester United, and low scores in the relationships with both the company (3.23) and other customers (3.49). This pattern of results are similar to the “not-me” cluster found in the Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder’s (2008) study. It can be assumed that this type of members are still fairly new in adopting Manchester United as their favourite team, thus explaining their slightly higher than average score in the relationship with the brand. However, these members are very much interested in the game of soccer, acknowledging their admiration for the product. It can also be noted that these members are fans of soccer in general, where they show an appreciation for the games of soccer that

Manchester United produce, but are not loyal fans of Manchester United, at least not in a very passionate and fanatic way.

Cluster two. The second cluster in the Manchester United brand community consists of members with high scores across all four relationships in the consumer-centric community model (McAlexander et al. 2002). Specifically, the members in this cluster have mean-scores of 6.64 on the relationship with the product, 6.53 on the relationship with the company, 6.62 on the relationship with the other consumers in the community, and 6.59 on the relationship with the brand. This is consistent with the findings of Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder's (2008) where they too found a cluster of members who had high scores on all four relationship constructs, of which they were labelled "enthusiasts". In comparison with the average mean-scores of the total sample, the members in this cluster have all four scores remarkably higher. In this particular cluster, members are highly interested in the soccer games that Manchester United play, the Manchester United brand itself, the other Manchester United fans, and the company behind Manchester United. These members assess all four relationships in the consumer-centric community model (McAlexander et al., 2002) as important, valuable, or appreciated (Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schroder, 2008). As this cluster is similar to the "enthusiasts" category found in Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder's (2008) study, it will therefore be referred to as the "enthusiasts".

Cluster three. Specifically, the members in this cluster have high scores on the relationships with the product (6.67) and the brand (6.44), but average scores on the relationships with the company (4.25) and other consumers (5.51) within the brand community. Relatively, in comparison with the average mean-scores of the total sample, the members in this cluster have higher scores on both relationships with the product and the brand, but have average and somewhat identical scores with the average means-scores of total sample on the relationships with the company and other consumers in the community. This is also consistent with the findings of Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder's (2008) where they found a cluster that was labelled as "average", of which the members had low to average scores on all constructs in comparison to the average of the whole sample, where the scores on the relationships with the product and the brand were quite high. As such, it could be inferred that the members in this community have high attitudes toward the product and the brand. That is, these members assess the relationships with the brand and the product as important, valuable, or appreciated (Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schroeder, 2008). Specifically, these members appreciate the soccer games that Manchester United produce and the Manchester United brand itself, but do not show as high of an appreciation for the company and the fellow Manchester United fans in the community. As this cluster is also similar to the "average" category of brand community members found in Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder's (2008) study, it will therefore be referred to as the "average".

Our results of cluster analysis thus produced three distinct clusters that we refer to as "not-me", "enthusiasts" and "average" following similar pattern of findings in Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder's (2008). Thus hypothesis 1 is supported.

Motivations for sport consumption

Results of one way ANOVA showed significant differences between the three clusters on the seven motives to consume sports.

Results of omnibus F test indicated that there is a significant difference between the three clusters of fans with relation to the motive of beauty ($F(2, 245) = 11.95, p < 0.001$). Results of contrast analysis further showed that there is significant difference between "not me" and "enthusiasts" (Ms of 5.47 vs. 6.11, $t(77.34) = 3.16, p < 0.01$), as well as between "average" and "not me" (Ms of 6.24 vs. 5.47, $t(63.79) = -4.06, p < 0.001$). No significant difference is observed between "enthusiasts" and "average" (Ms of 6.11 vs. 6.24, $t(168.29) = 1.10, p = 0.14$).

Results of F test again indicated that there is a significant difference between the three clusters in the motive of drama ($F(2, 245) = 5.36, p = 0.005$). Results of contrast analysis showed that there are significant differences between "not me" and "enthusiasts" (Ms of 5.46 vs. 6.04, $t(88.59) = 2.87, p < 0.01$) and between "not me" and "average" (Ms of 5.46 vs. 5.84, $t(68.95) = -2.04, p < 0.05$). However, difference between "enthusiasts" and "average" (Ms of 6.04 vs. 5.84, $t(164.13) = -1.45, p = 0.075$) was not significant.

Significant differences were found in the "escape" motive ($F(2, 245) = 13.65, p < 0.001$). Contrast results showed significant differences between "not me" and "enthusiasts" (Ms of 4.51 vs. 5.64, $t(245) = 4.82, p < 0.001$),

between “enthusiasts” and “average” (Ms of 5.64 vs. 4.91, $t(245) = -3.92$, $p < 0.001$), and also between “average” and “not me” (Ms of 4.91 vs. 4.52, $t(245) = -1.78$, $p = 0.04$).

With regard to the motive of knowledge acquisition, Omnibus F test revealed that there is a significant difference between the three clusters of fans ($F(2, 245) = 5.75$, $p < 0.01$). Contrast analysis signified that significant differences were found between “not me” and “enthusiasts” (Ms of 5.51 vs. 6.06, $t(245) = 3.38$, $p < 0.001$) and between “average” and “not me” (Ms of 5.90 vs. 5.51, $t(245) = -2.49$, $p < 0.001$). However, there was no significant difference between “enthusiasts” and “average” (Ms of 6.06 vs. 5.90, $t(245) = -1.24$, $p = 0.11$).

Results of F test again indicated that there is a significant difference between the three clusters in the motive of physical skills ($F(2, 245) = 14.94$, $p < 0.001$). Results of contrast analysis showed that there are significant differences between “not me” and “enthusiasts” (Ms of 5.59 vs. 6.25, $t(81.13) = 3.13$, $p < 0.01$), between “enthusiasts” and “average” (Ms of 6.25 vs. 6.46, $t(142.07) = 1.72$, $p < 0.05$), and between “average” and “not me” (Ms of 6.46 vs. 5.59, $t(58.51) = -4.57$, $p < 0.001$).

With regard to the motive of social interaction, there was a significant difference between the three groups ($F(2, 245) = 5.36$, $p = 0.005$). Contrast analysis revealed that there were significant differences between “not me” and “enthusiasts” (Ms of 5.08 vs. 5.81, $t(245) = 3.18$, $p < 0.01$) and between “average” and “not me” (Ms of 5.68 vs. 5.08, $t(245) = -2.72$, $p < 0.01$). However, there was no significant difference between “enthusiasts” and “average” (Ms of 5.81 vs. 5.68, $t(245) = -0.71$, $p = 0.24$).

Finally, members of the three clusters also differed significantly in relation to the motive of vicarious achievement ($F(2, 245) = 10.43$, $p < 0.001$). Results of contrast analysis again showed that there were significant differences between “not me” and “enthusiasts” (Ms of 5.48 vs. 6.19, $t(70.30) = 3.30$, $p < 0.01$) and between “average” and “not me” (Ms of 6.19 vs. 5.48, $t(62.71) = -3.40$, $p < 0.001$). There was no significant difference between “enthusiasts” and “average” (Ms of 6.19 vs. 6.19, $t(179.23) = -0.02$, $p = 0.49$).

In summary, we receive part support for our second hypothesis. A table summarising the means for the three clusters on the seven motives can be found in Table 3.

General discussion

This study set out to determine if within a brand community, there would be different types of members. In line with work by Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder (2008) we indeed found evidence of three clusters through the application of McAlexander et al.’s (2002) consumer-centric community model, which focuses on four relationships that a brand community member has: with the brand, the product, the company, and other consumers within the community. The three clusters of fans found in our study were referred to as not-me, enthusiasts, and average fans. The results of this cluster analysis were largely consistent with findings of Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schroder’s (2008).

We further extended the study and provided evidence that brand community clusters can indeed differ in terms of their motivation to consume sports. Evidence from our three clusters e.g. “not me,” “enthusiasts,” and “average” showed interesting findings. Enthusiasts differed significantly from “not me” across all the seven motivations to consume sports, showing that sports occupies central part of their lives, thereby showing deep psychological attachment to it. Significant differences across seven dimension of sports consumption motivation emerged between “average” and “not me” as well, with the former more interested in soccer and the club while the later showed only appreciation for the game. Interestingly, between “average” and “enthusiasts”, the former dominated the later on the appreciation of physical skills motive while the later dominated the former on escape motivation.

Results from our findings can be of practical relevance too. The major managerial contribution of this study is that within brand communities, marketing managers can adopt the application of cluster analysis to segment apparently homogeneous sports fans. The fact that all fans are not identical calls for differentiated segmentation and targeting strategies. Thus based on our results, it certainly makes sense if managers design tailor made marketing communications aimed at enthusiasts who are apparently the most important segment and the key reason to a brand’s survival and flourishing in the market. Next, a suitable strategy would be to convert “average” into

“enthusiasts”. Based on our cluster analysis results, it seems that “average” comprises of fans who are interested in the product and the brand and as such additional incentives e.g. a free ticket to a community gathering may motivate them to join the community. Finally, managers may like to note that there is a third small segment e.g. “not me” who are interested in the sports but have not quite developed psychological connections with other relationship dimensions of a brand community. As such judicious approach is required to see whether this group of people can be nurtured to help them develop more favourable attitude towards the brand in future.

A number of limitations can be identified in this study. Firstly, some of our results suggest that heterogeneity may be attributed to a fan’s psychological attachment which in turn may evolve over time. As such a longitudinal research is certainly warranted for future inquiry. Secondly, the current study is mainly an exploratory one, future studies should be structured in a way that explains the findings included in this study with more details and deliberation. For example, future studies should examine the reasons why enthusiasts and average fans differ in particular motives for sport consumption such as escape and skills appreciation, considering that both groups of fans have near-identical scores on the product dimension of McAlexander et al.’s (2002) consumer-centric model of brand community. Finally future research should replicate our findings in a different context e. g. product category and understand cross cultural implications on brand community membership.

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For a full list of reference please contact author(s).

Appendix**Table 1****Sample Characteristics**

Variables	Absolute Frequency (N = 248)	Relative Frequency (Percent)
Gender		
Male	220	88.7
Female	28	11.3
Nationality		
Australian	51	20.6
Non-Australian	197	79.4
Age Group		
Under 21	60	24.2
21 to 30	169	68.1
31 and above	19	7.7

Table 2**Relationship scores and community average**

Consumer relationship with	Cluster			Sample Average
	1 (Not-me)	2 (Enthusiasts)	3 (Average)	
Product	5.42	6.64	6.67	6.42
Company	3.23	6.53	4.25	4.86
Customer	3.49	6.62	5.51	5.51
Brand	4.81	6.59	6.44	6.18
Number of cases	48	88	112	248

Table 3
Means of three clusters of fans on seven motives of sport consumption

Motive	Cluster (Not Me)	One	Cluster (Enthusiasts)	Two	Cluster (Average)	Three
Beauty	5.47 (1.2123)		6.11 (0.9244)		6.24 (0.76877)	
Drama	5.46 (1.15776)		6.04 (1.04489)		5.84 (0.83693)	
Escape	4.51 (1.40744)		5.64 (1.31910)		4.91 (1.23896)	
Knowledge Acquisition	5.51 (0.86702)		6.06 (0.88821)		5.90 (0.96447)	
Appreciation Physical Skills	5.59 (1.25146)	of	6.25 (1.01490)		6.46 (0.65966)	
Social Interaction	5.08 (1.26136)		5.81 (1.30408)		5.68 (1.25792)	
Vicarious Achievement	5.48 (1.34552)		6.19 (0.89660)		6.19 (0.82590)	

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses.