Like it or not? Customer brand engagement on online social media platforms

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Social networking is currently the most popular online activity among consumers worldwide accounting for almost one in every five minutes spent online, and reaching 82% of the entire world’s online population, which represents an audience of nearly 1.2 billion internet users (comScore, 2011). For those firms who pursue their presence in social media, the issue of consumer engagement and how it further contributes in creating deeper and more lasting customer brand relationships has emerged (Kumar et al., 2010). Despite the increasing interest on customer engagement through social media, anecdotal research shows that the resulting levels of engagement are rather low. A study of the most popular brands on Facebook shows that less than 5% of brands are able to attract repeated fan visits to their page within a 30 day period, meaning that less than one in 20 fans choses to return to the brand page more than once in a month (WARC, 2012). The aim of this paper is therefore to contribute to the knowledge of customer engagement with brands in the context of online social media platforms and fill a widening gap between marketing practitioners, who have been actively pioneering the field, and academic research, which mostly remains conceptual to date. More specifically it focuses on answering two important research questions: (1) what drives the customer to engage with brands on social media and (2) what are the outcomes of such engagement?

While the concept of engagement is not new in other disciplines, it has only emerged in the field of marketing relatively recently. Brodie et al. (2011) suggest that customer engagement is a process of dynamic and iterative nature characterized by interactive experiences between a focal engagement subject (customer) and object (brand); it is a multidimensional concept comprising context-specific expressions of emotional, behavioral and cognitive engagement, and, it plays the central role in a broader nomological network of other relational constructs serving as the antecedents and the consequences of engagement. Based on this definition, a conceptual model of customer brand engagement on online social media platforms was established by identifying the potential drivers and outcomes of the three-dimensional engagement construct in this specific context. It is proposed that customer-brand relationship quality together with online social media platform related factors will influence the overall level of customer brand engagement, which in turn will affect the levels of behavioral brand loyalty and intention to recommend the brand.

In order to test the proposed relationships an online survey was conducted using a convenience sample of Facebook account holders (N=112), who were also fans of at least one brand in the selected focus category – food and drink brands. Partial Least Squares path modeling was applied when estimating the model, as the more appropriate approach due to a relatively small sample size, skewed observations and a lack of prior theoretical background (Henseler et al., 2009). The study shows that customer engagement is influenced by customer brand relationship related factors, whereas social media related factors have an impact only when additional resources are provided to the fans. Moreover, customer engagement influences brand performance, and more specific the behavioural form of customer engagement drives brand loyalty, while the emotional drives word-of-mouth. This paper is an important contribution to academic marketing literature in the field of customer engagement, which still remains mostly conceptual, and provides useful managerial insights for marketing practitioners.

References


