# Customer engagement persuasion process in online brand communities: social influence theory perspective

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**Abstract**

**Customer engagement persuasion process in online brand communities: social influence theory perspective**

Customer engagement is becoming a more important area in online brand community management. There are a number of competing theories that underline the importance of different types of community members in order that these members can be positively influenced for the benefit of the brand.

This paper shares work in progress, which discusses a review of existing thinking – which indicates that there are a number of weaknesses and gaps in this area of research.

A conceptual framework is proposed for studying customer engagement based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) as well as a methodology and data collection tools. It also explores Amazon Mechanical Turk as a data collection tool for this kind of research.

***Word Count: 2148***

## Introduction

Online communities are rapidly expanding with some brands having millions of followers, but the main challenge that these brands now face is how to engage these people in the most appropriate way. This issue of customer engagement is the research problem addressed in this paper.

The dramatic developments in communication technology, particularly on the Internet, are reflected in the way companies interact with their customers. The many-to-many communication model which was conceptualised for the first time in the article by Hoffman and Novak (2000) enables customers and companies (1) to provide and access online content, and (2) to communicate through the medium.

The many-to-many communication model has enabled by the Web 2.0 technology and the next generations of this technology. Web 2.0 technology enables consumers to share information, knowledge and opinions about products with others and consequently, marketers have become more interested in building and managing virtual communities (De Valck et al., 2009, Dholakia et al., 2004). These rapid changes in online environment have compelled companies to embrace the online brand community (OBC) as a platform to interact with customers, and Manchanda et al. (2012) report that by 2012 fifty percent of the top 100 global brands had their own OBC.

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 412) define the concept of brand community (BC) as

*"A specialised, non-geographically bound community, based on a* ***structured set of social relationships*** *among admirers of a brand".*

That definition of OBC has been developed based on the definition of BC by De Valck (2009, p. 185) as

*"A specialised, non-geographically bound, online community, based on* ***social communications and relationships*** *among a brand's consumers".*

Both researchers and marketers have turned their attention to OBCs due to its practical advantages for both companies and customers. Despite a decade of marketing research effort to advance our understanding of consumer behaviour in online platforms, many knowledge gaps still exist. The Marketing Science Institute's 2010-2012 Research Priorities (MSI - Marketing Science Institute, 2010) underline the need for further research in terms of the concept of customer/consumer engagement.

This paper aims to address the shortcomings regarding the need for further empirical research on consumer behaviour in brand communities discussed by De Valck et al. (2009), Brodie et al. (2013) and Wirtz et al. (2013). De Valk et al. (2009) investigate the effect of the brand community on consumer behaviour in particular the decision making process. Their study has been developed in other recent study by Brodie et al. (2013) using netnographic methodology on online brand community. Brodie et al. (2013) propose a conceptual model illustrating the different aspects of customer engagement behaviour. At the same time Wirtz et al. (2013) suggest a conceptual framework for OBC, which encompasses the antecedents and outcomes of customer engagement.

This study addresses the shortcomings of prior studies through the development of a framework based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model and tests the model in larger brand

communities across different product categories and will consequently lead to more generalised findings.

The paper proceeds with a literature review addressing the theoretical foundation of customer engagement. Then, conceptualisation of social influence in an online context will be explained. It is then presents the theoretical framework and development of hypotheses. The discussion on the methodology and the research approach including the data collection method and research setting comes next. And finally, the preliminary conclusion arising from this research is presented.

**Customer Engagement**

At first, we introduce the similar terms to customer engagement that have been used in marketing literature. The terms "involvement", "participation" and "interaction" are similar words to "engagement" to address the same concept even though their meanings are not exactly the same.

Dholakia et al. (2004) define "participation" in a virtual community as a product of the frequency and duration of community visits while "engagement" extends beyond mere participation. De Valck et al. (2009) address the differences between "participation" and "engagement" and define "engagement" by adding some variables such as retrieve information, supply information and discuss information, in order to understand how participation is shaped. These differences between "involvement" and "engagement" have been addressed in a study by Mollen and Wilson (2010). They suggest that "engagement" involves *instrumental value* and also the individual's perceived *experiential value* that is obtained from interaction with a specific brand. Consequently, the authors define a consumer's brand engagement as

*"A cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website or other computer-mediated entities designed to communicate brand value"(Mollen and Wilson, 2010, p.923).*

The other term is "interaction" which is discussed in research by Hollebeek (2011) and Kuo & Feng (2013). The authors scrutinise how the concept of "engagement" differs from "interaction". Hollebeek (2011), states that "engagement" includes cognitive and emotional elements, in addition to merely behavioural activity of members of a brand community. So, Hollebeek (2011, p. 790) defines "customer brand engagement" as

*"The level of a customer's motivational, brand-related and context-dependent state of mind characterised by specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioural activity in brand interactions".*

This study adopts a working definition of "engagement" by Brodie et al. (2013, p. 109). They suggest:

*"Consumer engagement in a virtual brand community involves specific interactive experiences between consumers and the brand, and/or other members of the community. Consumer engagement is a context dependent, psychological state characterised by fluctuating intensity levels that occur within dynamic, iterative engagement processes. Consumer engagement is a multidimensional concept comprising cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioural dimensions, and plays a central role in the process of relational exchange, where other relational concepts are engagement antecedents and/or consequences in iterative engagement processes within the brand community".*

Based on this definition as Brodie et al. (2013) mention the customer engagement includes five sub-processes which is illustrated in the Figure 1: learning, sharing, co-developing, advocating, and socialising.

The sub-process of learning "characterises the vicarious acquisition of cognitive competencies that consumer apply to purchase and consumption decision-making" (Brodie et al., 2013). This step is similar to what De Valck et al. (2009) call "retrieving information" as a form of participation in virtual communities. In this stage, customers share their questions with others to be informed about their issue by other customers.

The other sub-process of customer engagement is known as sharing stage. It includes the "sharing of personal relevant information, knowledge and experiences through the process of active contributions to the co-creation of knowledge within the online community" (Brodie et al., 2013). The behavioural and cognitive dimension of customer engagement is reflected in this stage. One similar variable of customer engagement measurement in the study of De Valck et al. (2009) is "supplying information".

When customers actively encourage other member to buy a specific brand and recommend a services or product to them is known as advocating stage. Brodie et al. (2013) suggest that "advocating as an expression of customer engagement".

Socialising is the other sub-process of customer engagement which is defined by Brodie et al. (2013) as "two-way, non-functional interaction through which consumers acquire and/or develop attitudes, norm and/or community language". The other similar variables that De Valck et al. (2009) have included to indicate the total level of engagement is "discussing".

Finally, co-developing which is "a process where consumers contribute to organisations and/or organisational performance by assisting in the development of new products, services, brand or brand meaning" (Brodie et al., 2013). In the research of Brodie et al. (2013) on a community "health and fitness", the author shows how customers contribute to the development of a new product through the engagement process.

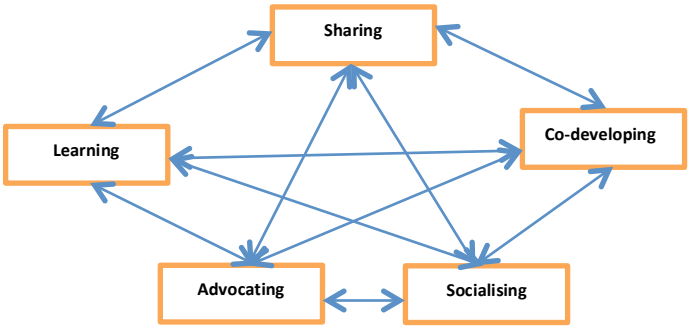


Figure 1 Customer engagement process in a virtual brand community. Adopted from Brodie et al. (2013)

## Conceptualisation of Social Influence in OBC

Kelman (1974) suggests the theory of Social Influence and Davis et al. (1989) have highlighted the role of this theory in information technology acceptance. According to this theory, there are three different processes involved when an attitude or behaviour is formed or changed which are: identification, compliance and internalisation.

**Identification** occurs when a person is believed to make a decision in order to maintain a satisfying relationship with another person or group. There are two different types of identification in the context of the online brand community: Identification with the brand and identification with the community. According to Carlson et al. (2008), "identification refers to the degree of overlap between the individuals' self-schema and the schema they hold for another target object, which can be a brand or a community.

Kelman (1974) explains that **compliance** occurs when an individual accepts influence to receive support or approval from another person or groups. Aleghesheimer et al. (2005) conceptualise the compliance in a brand community and define it as "the consumers' perceptions of the brand community's extrinsic demands on a person to interact and cooperate within the community.

Finally, the person attitude is changed through an **internalisation** process where the individual's goals and values are similar to those of other members of the group.

These three group-level influences are the key roles of a framework proposed by Dholakia et al. (2004) to explain consumer participation. There are different studies which test social influence as a driver of customer engagement in virtual communities (Dholakia et al., 2004, Zhou, 2011), a brand community (Alghesheimer et al., 2005) and in instant messaging (Shen et al., 2011). This study bridges the gap where research is lacking and has not been done to date, in order to examine the social influence theory in OBC.

## Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Our conceptual framework explains the motivations and consequences of customer engagement in OBC. The framework draws on marketing studies of OBC, the social influence model of participation and the model of the persuasion process and it adds to these ideas by explicitly including the customer and community characteristics as moderators.

This study adopts the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of Persuasion as the theoretical model by which to explain the persuasion process of the different behaviours of OBC users. ELM is a theory of persuasion and explains the persuasion processes which leads to attitude change. Petty and Wegener (1999) suggest that ELM provides a comprehensive framework in order to understand how individuals process information (Jones et al., 2006). According to this model, there are two distinct routes of persuasion: the Central Route and the Peripheral Route:

*"Central-route attitude changes are those that are based on relatively extensive and effortful information-processing activity, in contrast peripheral-route attitude changes are based on a variety of attitude change processes that typically require less cognitive effort"* (Petty and Wegener, 1999, p. 43).

Therefore, this study considers brand community identification, subjective norm and brand identification as peripheral routes of persuasion while information quality and group norms

are placed in central routes of persuasion. This approach for categorisation is in line with studies by Hamilton (1999), Yu et al. (2007), Zhou (2012) and Li (2013).

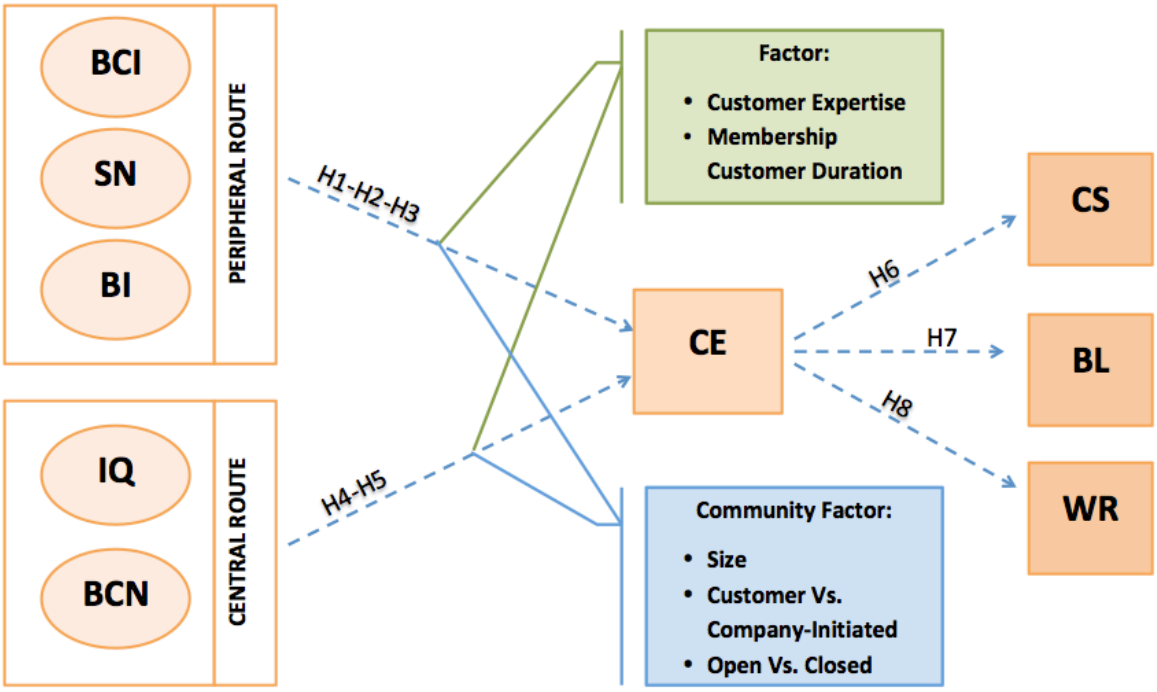


Figure 2 the customer engagement process model in online brand community. (BCI = Brand Community Identification, SN = Subjective Norm, BI = Brand Identification, IQ = Information Quality, BCN = Brand Community Norm, CE = Customer Engagement, CS = Customer Satisfaction, WR = Word of Mouth Recommendation)

The proposed framework as shown in the figure 2, adds to existing knowledge by distinguishing different routes of the persuasion process towards engagement in OBC. The Table 1, shows the developed hypothesis based on the proposed model.

| Hypotheses | Content |
|---|---|
| **H1: BCI → CE** | Stronger OBC identification leads to greater community engagement. |
| **H2: SN → CE** | Stronger subjective norm leads to greater community engagement. |
| **H3: BI → CE** | Stronger brand identification leads to greater community engagement. |
| **H4: IQ → CE** | Higher levels of information quality lead to greater community engagement. |
| **H5: GN → CE** | Stronger group norms lead to greater community engagement. |
| **H6: CE → WR** | Community engagement is positively related to customer satisfaction. |
| **H7: CE → BL** | Community engagement is positively related to brand loyalty. |
| **H8: CE → CS** | Community engagement is positively related to WOM recommendation. |

Table 1 the suggested hypotheses based on the proposed model.

## Methodology

Proper theories were established from literature and this thesis uses a deductive approach to construct hypotheses for data collection. A conceptual framework is developed in order to measure the relationship between variables. Data for this study will be collected by means of an online survey. The measures for several constructs in the framework are derived from existing scales in the literature. The pre-pilot study is done in order to make sure that the questionnaire is easily understandable. In order to conduct the pilot study, an online survey has been uploaded onto Amazon Mechanical Turk and it is expected that 110 members will complete the questionnaire. After doing the pilot study, the final version of the survey will be uploaded in Amazon Mechanical Turk again in order to conduct the main research.

Amazon Mechanical Turk is

*"An online labour market where requesters post jobs and workers choose which jobs to do for pay."* (Mason & Suri, 2012)

Currently, Amazon Mechanical Turk is widely used for conducting research regarding users behaviour. There are three main reasons for this: it enables researchers to access subjects to whom they would not otherwise have access. Secondly, it enables researchers to access subjects from a very diverse background, ethnicity, language, etc. Finally, low cost and a built-in payment mechanism is another advantage for researchers of using AMT. Although this tool is fully associated with the objective of this study but studies suggest it is best suited to random population sampling, but is less successful with studies that require more precisely defined populations (Berinsky et al., 2012, Paolacci et al., 2010).

## Preliminary conclusions

The proposed model has provided us with an insight into the way customers differ in their responses to persuasion to engage in OBC. Insight into these differences is helpful for marketers and community managers when they make strategic decisions about whom to target and how. This empirical-based study will develop our theoretical assumptions and develop existing knowledge on online customer behaviour.

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