Why do children join online brand communities? An exegesis of social, interpersonal and familial motivations

Robert Thomas
University of South Wales
Gareth White
University of South Wales
Anthony Samuel
Cardiff University

Cite as:
Thomas Robert, White Gareth , Samuel Anthony (2020), Why do children join online brand communities? An exegesis of social, interpersonal and familial motivations. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 49th, (59246)

Paper from the 49th Annual EMAC Conference, Budapest, May 26-29, 2020.

Why do children join online brand communities? An exegesis of social, interpersonal and familial motivations

Research on the motivation of 7–11-year-olds to engage with online brand communities (OBCs) is limited. Prior studies focus on prescriptive product categories (games and gaming), adolescent groups and behaviour within OBCs rather than motivations to join OBCs. To fill this gap an interpretive approach was used, with 261 children completing event-based diaries over 12 months. Data indicates that children join OBCs to support and ameliorate pre-purchase anxieties, resolve interpersonal conflicts, exact social dominance in terms of product ownership/knowledge and engage in digitalised pester power. Certain motivational aspects, such as conflict resolution and exacting dominance, are shown to be gender specific. The unique and unconventional behaviours identified will assist brand managers to understand further the relationships children have with brands and OBCs. Four new behavioural categories of community engagement are posited: Dependers, Defusers, Demanders and Dominators.

Keywords: Children, Online Brand Community, Event Diaries.

Track: Consumer Behaviour

1. Introduction

Brands have been conceptualised as living entities (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar, & Sen, 2012) as they reflect individual values and personal needs (Chahal & Rani, 2017), and have evolved to offer consumers greater opportunity for social exchange (Dessart, Aldás-Manzano, & Veloutsou, 2019; Helme-Guizon & Magnoni, 2019). Of interest in this nascent field has been the development of brand communities (BCs) and, in the virtual environment, the creation of online brand communities (OBCs). OBCs, like BCs, offer the opportunity for communication and facilitate feedback, but, importantly, foster real-time participation (Lupineck, 2019). A substantive body of literature centres on the motivations to engage with OBCs; with these motivations said to be multi-faceted (Lupineck, 2019) and dynamic (Brodie, Ilic, and Hollebeek (2011) in their orientation. Research has centred on adult motivations, limiting what is known about children and their OBC interactions. This gap is significant, as the extant literature indicates that children are important as consumers (Folkvord, Bevelander, Rozendaal, & Hermans, 2019) and are active in seeking out brand relationships (Jones & Glynn, 2019); several key empirical contributions have highlighted that children manifest clear brand knowledge (Daems, De Keyzer, De Pelsmacker, & Moons, 2019), but despite this, little is known about the motivation to join OBCs. Thus, the question remains as to what motivates children, specifically 7–11-year-olds, to join an OBC.

2. Literature review

2.1 Community

This work focuses on OBCs, as these communities are becoming increasingly relevant to marketing practice (Dessart et al., 2019). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 412) were the first to define an OBC as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand". OBCs are categorised by their capacity to facilitate interaction, provide and perpetuate 'quality relationships' (Brogi, 2014), allow high levels of personal and interpersonal identification, and perpetuate timely, relevant, frequent and longitudinal communication (Adjei, Noble, & Noble, 2010). The motivations for engaging with a BC are ostensibly two-fold: personal and emotional (Alonso-Dos-Santos, Guardia, Campos, Calabuig-Morenod, & Ko, 2018). However, despite brand engagement being conceptualised as 'idiosyncratic' (Essamri, McKechnie, & Winklhofer, 2019) three broad motivational/engagement behaviours – affective, behavioural and cognitive (Dessart et al., 2019) – have emerged.

2.2 Affective, behavioural and cognitive dimensions

Affective motivation is said to be intrinsic, stemming from an individual's identification with a given brand and its symbolic value (Baldus et al., 2015), and the individual's 'enthusiasm' for the brand (Dessart et al., 2019). Personal pleasure is gleaned from this engagement and happiness derived from the interaction with like-minded others (Lupineck, 2019). Consequently, this dimension captures the 'joy' people feel when interacting with a given brand (Dessart et al., 2019). The behavioural dimension is categorised by the need for active sharing, (Dessart et al., 2019), learning (Dessart et al., 2019) and the articulation of both positive and negative brand experiences (Baldus et al., 2015). Learning is a key paradigm, with this need for information posited as perhaps the major motivation for engaging with a community (Brodie et al., 2011). The cognitive dimension is driven by brand passion (Baldus et al., 2015). The more passionate an individual is about their brand choice, the more likely they are to engage with an OBC. These three dimensions have been empirically substantiated exclusively with adult participants; the most recent work by Dessart et al. (2019) used participants with a mean age of 35+. This is an identifiable trend within the literature; thus, there is something of a paucity when it comes to children, BCs and OBCs.

2.3 Children, brands and communities

This lack of research is somewhat anomalous as it is clear that "children worldwide have become an important and unique market segment for practically every product category" (Lopez & Rodriguez, 2018, p.131) and that they "differ from adults in many marketing phenomena" (ibid.). The work of Flurry, Swimberghe, and Parker (2014) is predicated on the notion that adolescents, like adults, engage with a community "in order to enhance his or her self-image" (p. 105). Hook, Baxter, and Kaczynski (2016) establish in an OBC context that 'member similarity' and the salience of 'individual characteristics' is a motivator to join a community, but that common brand preference is not a particularly strong motivational factor; offering a degree of separation from the adult-based literature, and the current work builds on that.

3. Methodology

A qualitative framework was deemed the most appropriate way to conduct the study, as Cook (2009, p. 276) suggests that such an approach with children has "taken hold as an integral part of marketing practice", given its capacity to conceptualise the child "as a knowing, active being in the here and now" (ibid.). Event diaries were utilised as the main data collection tool since "they permit the examination of reported events and experiences in

their natural, spontaneous context," (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003, p. 580). An 'electronic' approach was implemented because such approaches "offer major advantages in terms of data entry, management, and accuracy" (Bolger et al., 2003, p. 596–597). The diary aspect of the research involved 261 children (113 male and 148 female). Parents, guardians or other responsible adults were fully informed about the research prior to commencement and, building on the work of Alderson and Morrow (2011), an information pack was provided detailing the purpose of the research. Over a 12-month period, 2,224 meaningful entries were generated. A content analysis was chosen for its ability to reveal "detail and depth, rather than measurement" (Forman & Damschroder, 2007, p. 41). Through this process, 62 codes were established, and all were authenticated by an expert faculty member.

4. Findings

The findings present highly nuanced, idiosyncratic and gender-specific behaviours through the development of four discrete subgroups: Dependers, Defusers, Demanders and Dominators.

4.1 Dependers

OBCs were used to query, verify and qualify potential purchases prior to actual consumption or engagement with parents to buy the product. Children who engaged in this behaviour were categorised as Dependers. For them, the motivation to join and engage in an OBC stemmed from the need to establish the authenticity of a product and gain an in-depth understanding of its potential fit. A total of 337 entries suggested that detailed information was gathered during this process, indicated by both the number of 'likes' and the comments on a given site. The following extract from India (aged 10) captures this:

> *Catherine and me (sic) were checking on Instagram today to make up our minds if we should ask for Fila Disruptors II. There was (sic) 12,348 likes in one day, so that made up our minds and we'll ask for them.* [India]

This has a strong thematic link with Dessart et al's. (2019) 'behavioural paradigm', although the communities are joined not in order to express advice, but purely to receive it. However, this extract and others like it did not express formal requests. These almost clandestine visits have more in kind with what Özbölük and Dursun (2018) refer to as a 'learner' in the context of OBCs. Learners have limited knowledge of a brand and weak ties to a given community. However, unlike this learner conceptualisation, none of the extracts indicated that any direct questioning took place in the OBC. Özbölük and Dursun (2018) suggest that direct

questioning, particularly of 'lead users' in OBCs, is a defining characteristic of learners, but for these 7–11-year-olds, advice was gleaned purely through the evaluation of likes and comments rather than through interaction with like-minded individuals.

4.2 Defusers

One type of motivation articulated saw individuals joining online communities to reconcile social differences. Exclusively female, this group were categorised as Defusers. The essence of this group was that they joined a community in order to manage external relationships rather than foster new relationships with current members. The utilisation of communities as a vehicle to resolve complex scenarios has not previously been revealed in the literature. Weijo and Rintamäki (2014, p. 119) considered that these social environments take on a far more prominent role in children's complicated social lives, suggesting that the "emergence of the internet has also enabled not only new forms of communality, but also provides a new avenue for coping". The current analysis concluded that this was very much a coping behaviour, with 344 entries capturing this phenomenon. It was fascinating to read that the reciprocal nature of a community had been encoded and seen as a platform to ameliorate tension, and the reading of these diary entries suggested that the nature of community would negate criticism and escalation. The following extract is taken from Astrid (aged 9) and is representative of this behaviour:

> *Alex is my best friend, and me and my other friend had a row with her, and we made up by being nice on Adidas on Instagram because she likes that and football.* [Astrid]

4.3 Demanders

Children were joining communities to convey to their parents the depth of feeling they have for a product and the desire to own it. This group were named Demanders. Thematically this group offered synergy with the notion of Taghavi and Seyedsalehi (2015) that when children reach the age of 7 they start to "adopt more advanced persuasion strategies" (p. 2023). This represents a whole new dimension to the somewhat trite notion of 'pester power' and has obvious implications for marketers in terms of furthering influence and gleaning information from those in this group. There were 458 instances of this behaviour over the course of the data collection. The following extract is from Lily (aged 10):

> *Dad is away, so I want to show him how much I care about getting a pair of Adidas Nemeziz 17+ 360Agility. I know they're expensive, so I'm showing everybody at home how much* [I want them] *by joining Facebook.* [Lily]

What was prevalent in this and other diary entries was the children's adaptive capacity. Participants were clearly creating what might be considered 'crisis' communication because

potentially traditional pester power had not worked. Pester power has been described as "repetitive asking/requesting for a specific item and/or service" (Quinn, 2002, p. 7), but the above extracts add theoretically to what has been described as "pester tactics" (Nash & Basini, 2012). Rather than wear down or simply nag parents, there was evidence of a controlled, systematic and logical representation of potential commitment to a product via children's commitment to engage with it. The following extract is from Jessica (aged 11):

> *Dad will be able to see I've been online chatting about Puma's fierce rope trainers. He'll know I like them and will see the price and think that £54.99 is OK and will get them for me. I'm OK to wait and I'll leave something again.* [Jessica]

4.4 Dominators

The analyses revealed that a distinct motivation to join a community was in order to establish dominance over a friend or sibling. This group were categories as Dominators. This behavioural pattern saw a gendered identity developing, and a degree of gender polarisation, with this behaviour an exclusive approach for male for male participants. Of the 113 male participants, 34% (38 individuals) indicated joining an OBC for the above reasons. A total of 217 entries denoted that this was a normative behaviour, captured in the extract below from Noah (aged 9):

> *Feed (sic) up with Jake saying that he knows more about Forza* [Forza Motorsport 7 is a racing video game for Xbox] *than me, so I've been posting loads of stuff on the Forzatography Forums and Drivers lounge, so its (sic) obvious I know more and I'm in charge of this*. [Noah]

Dominators also indicated that the act of joining a community forbade others from joining that OBC. What was considered in the analysis was how this behaviour might have been learnt or, indeed, instigated because of external interaction, possibly emanating from more experienced community users within the individual's social group.

5. Discussion

The main findings indicate that children's personal motivations to join an OBC do differ from the adults. The data set indicates that, far from being passive in their interactions, children are "powerful and actively engaged players" (Tregua, Russo-Spena, & Casbarra, 2015, p. 200), but somewhat unique in their approach to community. Regarding the behavioural dimension, brand 'influence' is posited as a significant element in the frameworks of Dessart et al. (2019) and Baldus et al. (2015) and categorised broadly as a desire to influence a given brand. However, there was limited evidence in the data set of children wanting to influence online discussion or products, or to control direction. Despite

the breadth of the brands discussed in the entries and accounts of significant usage, there was not a single entry relating to 'improvement', 'influence' or personal 'expression' that could be analysed as a distinct motivational factor. In relation to the cognitive dimension, there were no revelations of a profound personal absorption within the myriad of brands that were mentioned, other than ensuring that the brand needed to have enough popularity or 'likes' to warrant buying it. Dominators perhaps captured some degree of this absorptive behaviour, but the motives for this engagement were not based on a love of the brand itself. Evidence of the affective dimension was apparent, but this was not born out of a brand connection, or the desire to feel more connected with other brand users. Connection, as articulated by Defusers, was to further strengthen pre-existing, well-established external relationships. In this instance, online communities represented little more than extensions or additions to the use social media sites.

6. Managerial implications

The most obvious practical consideration here is that participants joined OBCs to influence parental purchasing decisions. There were 458 instances of these Demander interactions and this offers potential for marketing practitioners. Participants were joining communities for pre-purchase evaluations, with this seen in the Dependers taxonomy. This very much falls into the parameters of function and offers some synergy with the extant literature, but participants indicated that they joined a community to glean pertinent information on a product, with a decision to buy or engage in pester power dependent on likes and positive comments. Purely male phenomenon, the data revealed children using communities to regulate external relationships, with this witnessed in the Dominator group. The community itself and the interaction of joining, rather than identification with in-group members, drove this behaviour. Despite being a perceptibly atypical motivation for joining a community, it does suggest that there is the opportunity to develop or foster "strong, deep, stable and enduring ties" (Marzocchi, Morandin, & Bergami, 2013, p. 95) with Dominators. Defusers were motivated to join a community to mitigate personal tension and it is of managerial interest that for this group potential social jeopardy can be ameliorated by joining, and this positivity could be transferred onto the brand in the long term.

7. Limitations, future research and conclusion

The paper has limitations. It is situated in the UK and has more female than male participants. Future research should isolate the behaviours described and explore them

extensively with larger samples. A gendered evaluation of children and OBC engagement could also be of worth. Additionally, this new pester power should be investigated.

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