THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BRAND COMMUNITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA OF THE DIGITAL CAMERA USER COMMUNITY IN THAILAND

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Abstract

Brand communities are a form of brand users gathering. They have a preference for the same brand and have a bonding with that brand and make acquaintance with each other. The small network gradually grows until it becomes a community. This research aimed to study the characteristics of the brand community of digital camera Facebook users in Thailand. The result from a preliminary analysis of Facebook of three digital camera brand users communities in Thailand revealed the following three components of the brand community; 1) the same feeling of brand users from their brand loyalty; 2) having a group culture and rules of community living, the form of tradition in both written and popular forms of practice, even if no provision has been made; and 3) having shared responsibility in the community such as generosity in community groups.

Keyword: brand communities, social media, digital camera

Background of the Study

Brand communities are a form of a gathering of several brand’s users who have the same liking for the brand and have a feeling of connection with that brand until it becomes a community. Unlike physical communities, this virtual brand community is a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand (Muniz & Oguinn, 2001). The original pattern of consumers and brands relationship arises from communication from brands to consumers. Still, the brand community has changed the communicator paradigm to one customer to communicate with other customers bypassing the brand's owner. The brand community is a communication venue set up by a group of customers to deliver the brand to other customers, without any involvement or support from the owner of the brand (Atkin, 2004; Kusumasondjaja, 2009). Within the community, the members are a loyal customer of the brand who is actively conducting brand-related activities that are not related to the operator (Atkin, 2004; Kusumasondjaja,

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The community’s members can share all kinds of information about the brand, such as emotion, impression, opinions, support, and encouragement, etc. (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). Likewise, camera users in Thailand also have come together as a community to discuss, exchange, share information, and well as ideas relating to products or brands. This camera brand virtual community is widely emerging because at the instant digital camera is used extensively. Photography or imaging technology is developing at full speed. The state-of-the-art imaging technology could meet the needs of photographers, taking photography more convenient and in line with the lifestyle of people in society. The contemporary consumer love to communicate and express their activities (work or leisure), identity, and way of life through online social networks. Easy to use and high-quality digital photography, therefore, corresponded with the consumer demand and resulting in a fierce market competition as well as other digital equipment markets.

It should be noted that while the digital camera market is growing, the number of camera brand communities is also increasing. Digital camera users gather in online communication resulting in a brand community establishment. This gathering starting from sharing their photographic problems of using the same brand and on various web boards, to chat and exchange views, including an exhibition platform for photographers who love photography.

In the age of social media, especially the popular social media like Facebook, the brand community of the digital camera users has changed from being a small group on a web board to becoming a social media community on Facebook.

Data from the researcher’s observation in the Facebook platform revealed that Facebook group integration of digital camera users in Thailand by each brand is characterized by a large community of users, such as the Nikon Club Thailand group, which is a community of the Nikon camera users. This community had 111,038 members. (as of 27 July 2019). Another important group is the Sony Alpha Club Thailand of the Sony camera, which has a registered member at 104,739 members (as of 27 Jul 2019).

**Brand community concept**

Thompson & Sinha (2008) states that online brand communities are special communities without geographic boundaries and is based on the structure of social relationships among the brand’s admirers who like the same brand voluntarily. This community could be said to be a community for a group of people who is a brand fan club of the members of the community.

Hur et al. (2011) explained that brand communities are groups of people who possess an individual brand or have a particular interest in that brand by actively responding to that brand whether online or offline. Social media has proven to be an effective channel for creating brand awareness consumer behavior (Marzocchi et al., 2013). Muniz and O’Guin (2001) indicated that the brand community consists of three essential characteristics:
1. Shared consciousness means members of the community have common knowledge, similar opinion, oneness, although never meeting each other before face-to-face.

2. Rituals and traditions, this characteristic is the pattern of behavior practiced among the members. The brand community practices and traditions is a map that is a symbol of the group that the brand community holds together and understands the meaning among the members.

3. A sense of moral responsibility is the feeling originate from mutual consciousness, care for each other, including supporting appropriate use of the brand, such as sharing information about product specifications. As a result, people are involved in the brand community for many reasons. Some people join the activities of the brand community to socialize with people who are interested in the same brand. In contrast, some people join the community because they see the brand community as an essential part of their self-concept (O'Donnell & Brown, 2012).

From the case studies and concepts enumerated, it is necessary to study the characteristics of the brand community of digital camera users in Thailand on social media. The finding could be preliminary information to further study the responsiveness of the brand as a result of members’ interaction in the brand community.

**Research question**

What is the characteristic of the digital camera user brand community in Thailand?

**Research methodology**

This research used a content analysis technique to study the community component of the brand community of three digital camera brands’ users in Thailand. The population is the content of the chat dialog of the members in three digital camera brand communities on Facebook: Nikon Club Thailand Facebook, Sony Alpha Club Thailand Facebook, and Canon Club Thailand, respectively.

The preliminary review in the Facebook community founded that most discussion topics in all 3 brand communities would be in the interest of the community members for about 1 day, and the oldest discussion topics that still have new people to interact with that topic are about 3 days. Therefore, the researcher used purposive sampling by counting from the latest discussion topics until it reached the one hundredth. The data collection started on the 27th of July 2019. The counting dated back to 3 days to reach one hundredth, each group of 100 topics.

Thus, the data collection was executed between 25-27 July 2019. Coding form was used to content analyze 100 hundred sets of conversations drawn from each Facebook Community of each community resulting in total 300 sets of conversation were content analyzed to determine the characteristics of the community of the digital camera brand based on three characteristics’ component of Muniz and O’Guin (2001) which include 1) shared consciousness, 2) rituals and traditions, and 3) a sense of moral responsibility.
Findings

result of the content analysis showed that the said brand community could classify the content of conversation or interaction that reflects the community in all three dimensions of being a community as follows.

From all the discussion contained in the group, the characteristics of the community as a brand can be analyzed following the framework of the brand community, based on the objectives of discussion and member interaction in the community as follows.

1. The oneness feeling of brand users. The results of the content analysis found that most of the characteristics of conversation and interaction showed the same feeling in the brand community in the Nikon Club Thailand Facebook, located in the content that represents the characteristics of 56.1 percent. The Sony Alpha Club Thailand Facebook found 52.4 percent, and the Canon Club Thailand Facebook group found 58.2 percent of the conversation among the camera users. All three digital camera brands had a similar form of brand’s user interaction as follows

1.1 Characteristics expressions as a member of a community in compliance with the membership regulations.

1.1.1 Introduction pattern can be the form of displaying the photography of any kind of product brands using their cameras or the photographs of any part of the camera such as lens or camera's body of the brand in which they are a member.

1.1.2 Display of photographic work resulting from the use of cameras from the brands in which they are members.

1.2 Characteristics of discussions related to the purpose of community integration.

1.2.1 Sharing information relating to the brands in which they are members and other competing brands.

1.2.2 Requesting to see the work of other fellow members created from the use of the brand's products, either to stimulate discussion or exchange for product information.

1.3 Protecting the brand and the brand community in which they are a member.

1.3.1 Showing positive opinions and confidence in the brands in which they are members of the opposition to brand policies can occur, but often in the form of commentary rather than violent brand attacks. If a dispute arises from the opinions of members arising from the arguments against the said brand. The brand community group moderator will be the discerning user in resolving the problem, such as requesting cooperation to act or not to do in a particular topic or issue, closing the comments, or even deleting the questionable topic of the conversation.

1.3.2 Members are not allowed to display work created from other brands within their brand communities.
1.3.3 Creating activities and participating in activities that only allow and grant rights to brand users.

All the features that appear in this brand community interaction demonstrating the sense of belongingness to the members of the community that arose from the loyalty of the brand of the group members by demonstrating in the form of interaction that connects members with the brand through the products.

2. The practice and tradition of being a group member. The results of the content analysis revealed that the characteristics of conversation and interaction that demonstrated the practice and tradition of being a second group member. This characteristic was found in the conversation among the members in the Nikon Club Thailand Facebook (23.6%), the Sony Alpha Club Thailand Facebook (21.3%), and the Canon Club Thailand Facebook (20.6%), respectively. All three digital brands had a similar form of branded user interaction as follows:

2.1 Written guidelines concerning general agreement which include:
   (1) Polite comments and no violating laws and morality.
   (2) Display only the works that are produced by the brand of which he is a member-only. That work must be lawful and not against morals or ethics in society.

2.2 Unwritten guidelines but members understand and willing to comply with such as
   (1) Thoughtful exchange of opinions and refrain from creating conflicts or disputes conversation.
   (2) Discussions must be related only to their product-brand content or brand-related information and avoid discussions on other unrelated issues.
   (3) Mutual encouragement among members such as liking and commenting to encourage fellow members to show their work in the group. These characteristic features demonstrate the pattern of being a community with rules of coexistence to create peace and smoothness caused by unity in the community.

3. The third characteristic found in the ordinary sense of responsibility in the community. This type of component was found in the Nikon Club Thailand Facebook, 19.1 percent, in the Sony Alpha Club Thailand Facebook, 24.0 percent, and the Canon Club Thailand Facebook, 20.1 percent, respectively.

3.1 Assisting fellow members such as providing information to solve problems related to product use technical issues, including photography advice.
3.2 Sharing knowledge of the brand and product usage.
3.3 Report of inappropriate behavior, errors, or abnormalities occurring in the community to the group administrators such as discussion topics that are different from the objectives of the group defamation in violation of laws, morals, or unreasonable exploitation.

These standard features demonstrate awareness of shared responsibility as members within the community, both in the form of generosity, help, share, and maintaining order in the community that they belong to. However, interesting findings from a survey of the content of the three brand communities indicated in the Sony Alpha Club Thailand Facebook often provide information to members in a way that is beneficial or supports the competitors' brand sporadically. This is because some of the product users in the brand community have prior experience from competitors' brands. They also want to maintain the dual membership status of the competing brand community, which makes them express have amicable value to competitors' brand rather than viewing them as an opponent or betraying the brand.

Discussion

The results found in this study concerning the content of the conversations in the three brand communities were in line with the concept of Muniz and O'Guin (2001)'s community branding. Each member of the community expressed the feeling of group belonging by discussing topics displaying the mutual interest with the brand as the center of attention. As well as the characteristics of cherishing and protecting the identity of the community which is clearly expressed in the form of rules or guidelines that are rules of coexistence in the community, or etiquette that most members practice until it becomes a tradition. Data from the content analysis revealed that the most critical factor that keeps the members in these three digital camera users community alive is the role of homogeneity and the need to socialize with other brand’s admirers. The fact that members see brand communities as a part of expressing themselves in that community consisted of the study of O'Donnell & Brown (2012), who indicated that sharing valuable information about the brand through the brand community was vital. Whether it was information concerning the thoughts and emotions to the feelings or the support and encouragement messages.

However, there are some interesting issues in the dimension of the common responsibility of the community in terms of assisting fellow members, such as helping to solve problems related to product use in the Brand community. In terms of providing information, it also includes product information of competitors’ brands. This is a special feature of digital camera brands that some users have experienced from other competing brands. Besides, digital camera products are unique products that allow the sharing of certain devices between competing brands. The interesting issue that should be studied in the future is about the differences between users of cameras, who use multiple brands together with those who use the same brand, both digital cameras and digital camera equipment, in response to the recognition of brand value from the brand.
References