

Consumers' perceived benefits of participating in ethical Facebook communities, and their effect on community loyalty and commitment to ethical consumption

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ABSTRACT

Many organisations have established online communities in the social networking site Facebook, including organisations promoting ethical consumption, such as Fairtrade. Social media are proposed to be suited for building communities and strengthening customer relationships, but we know little to what extent Facebook communities have positive outcomes in terms of consumer responses, i.e. whether consumers perceive benefits from participating, and whether those benefits influence consumer commitment to the activity promoted (in our case ethical consumption). The results of an online survey reveal that functional benefits are the main driver of commitment to ethical consumption, as well as community loyalty. However, the perceived benefits are on a relatively low level, which is worrying. It must be said, though, that the respondents were relatively committed to ethical consumption, even when their community participation seemed to result in little benefits.

CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Consumer participation in and benefits derived from ethical online communities.....	2
Commitment to ethical consumption driven by perceived benefits	3
Empirical Study	4
Findings	5
Discussion.....	7
Managerial implications, Limitations and Further research.....	7
REFERENCES	9

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Final Scales	12
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TABLES

Table 1 Pearson correlation and mean values of constructs.....	5
Table 2 Results of regression analyse.....	6

Introduction

Organizations are increasingly establishing presence in social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), among them organizations such as Fairtrade that promote ethical consumption. Facebook communities can be broadly defined in terms of online communities, i.e. as “affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon a shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities” (Kozinets, 1999: 254). They are proposed to be particularly suitable for relationships building (Kane, Fichman, Gallagher, & Glaser, 2009). What makes Facebook communities special is that they become embedded in the users’ social networks, so that the users can by liking and sharing posts communicate their support for an organization, cause, or brand.

It is generally agreed that consumers use online communities, as well as other media, to receive benefits (Grace-Farfaglia et al, 2006). However, to date, the benefits that consumers derive from online communities have received limited attention (Rokka and Moisander 2009, Casalo et al. 2008). In particular within ethical consumption, researchers have identified the need to study formal, organized ethical spaces, such as Facebook communities (Papaoikonomou, Valverde & Ryan, 2011). Thus, by examining the benefits individual consumers receive from the ethical community participation, rather than the benefits of ethical consumerism per se, our study answers the call for a more collective approach to ethical consumerism (e.g. Harrison et al. 2005, Papaoikonomou et al. 2011).

Consequently, this study aims to contribute to the existing online community research by investigating the benefits that consumers obtain from online community participation. Additionally, this study proposes that the benefits gained from participation influence consumer loyalty to the online community, as well as commitment to ethical consumption. Such outcomes of online community use remain under-researched (Casalo et al. 2010). Given that the lack of commitment is one of the major issues hindering the rise of ethical consumption (Carrigan and Attalla 2001), understanding whether and what types of online community benefits enhance commitment is essential.

Consumer participation in and benefits derived from ethical online communities

The basic assumption is that consumer participation in online community activities is volitional (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002), and that consumers are driven by benefits received from their (social) media usage (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch, 1974). In the context of online ethical communities, two types of benefits that consumers derive can be distinguished: those benefits related to the ethicality of the community, and those related to participating in the community in general.

Online communities may assist ethical consumers and organizations in acquiring and sharing information and thus taking collective action (Hoffmann and Hutter 2011). In ethical communities in general, be they offline or online, consumers may share their concern about the effects of purchasing choices with others (Harrison et al. 2005). Ethical consumption may also relate to constructing personal identity (e.g. Cherrier and Murray 2002, Shaw and Shiu 2002) or expressing one's moral self (Barnett et al. 2005b). Consumers with ethical concerns feel responsible for the society and express their concern towards the ethical behavior of companies, social justice, human rights and environmental sustainability by means of ethical buying and consumer behavior (Pelsmacker et al. 2005, Barnett et al. 2011). Whilst studying offline ethical consumption, Papaoikonemou et al. (2011) came up with two types of outcomes of community participation: collective and ethical meanings (the term "meaning" was defined as "what does participation [in the community] mean for the participants once they have joined and taken part in the activities", and thus, they are outcomes of participation in the same manner as benefits are, and will be treated as such). The identified collective meanings contain learning and new experiences, social interaction, and greater effectiveness of collective action. Ethical meanings refer to realizing the ethical self, reviving lifestyles of the past, utility, and protesting against society.

These aspirations are well aligned with the strengths of online communities, since consumers are able to share information with each other, and thus reduce ambiguity and the power imbalance traditionally existing between consumers and firms (Kucuk & Krishnamurthy, 2007). Also, consumers may wish to manage the impressions that other people form of them (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). These goals indicate that customers may gain information and social benefits (Dholakia et al, 2004) from online community participation. Previous research has also revealed that in Facebook communities, users receive entertainment benefits (Gummerus, Weman, Liljander and

Pihlström, 2012). Economic benefits (Gwinner et al, 1998) that are often seen as important for customer-firm relationship formation were not considered relevant in this study, since they refer to discounts and competitions, and none of the studied online communities include these kinds of aspects.

Based on previous research discussed above, we identified the following relevant benefits: functional benefits, social benefits, entertainment benefits, learning and behavioural benefits, and ethical consumption benefits. Functional benefits involve informational and instrumental benefits (Dholakia et al, 2004) that are often achievable through participation in Facebook communities. Social benefits may be derived from interaction between people (Dholakia et al. 2009), and they relate to recognition or even friendship (Gwinner et al, 1998). In online communities, several sources of social benefits may exist, such as discussions with peers, giving and receiving help (Gummerus et al. 2012). Customers may also have a desire to feel recognized and needed in the community (Nambisan and Baron, 2010). Entertainment benefits relate to fun and relaxation (Dholakia et al, 2004). Next, we will discuss the importance of commitment to ethical consumption, and why we believe benefits perceived from online ethical community participation leads to commitment to ethical consumption, and loyalty towards the online community.

Commitment to ethical consumption driven by perceived benefits

Commitment has been defined as an intention to persist in a course of action (Meyer and Allen 2004). It is a psychological state (Meyer and Allen 1991) with multiple dimensions: calculative, normative, and affective commitment. Calculative commitment reflects a need to stay committed and is caused by individual wishing to avoid switching based on a cost-benefit analysis. Normative commitment is concerned with a sense of obligation as the main driver to remain with the organization. That is, one is committed since one “ought to” be. (Meyer and Allen 1991, 2004). Affective commitment refers to a person’s emotional attachment to, identification with and involvement in an organization and emerges owing to the emotions and perceived closeness. (Meyer and Allen 1991). Belonging to an online community has been found to have positive effects on affective commitment towards the interest around which the community is developed, because of strengthened emotional ties with other community members (Royo-Vela and Casamassima 2011, Casalo et al. 2008, Kavanaugh et al. 2005). Shared values i.e. common behaviors, goals and policies directly have a positive

influence on commitment (Morgan and Hunt 1994). We propose that affective commitment to ethical consumption can derive from or be reinforced by the benefits derived from online community participation. In other words, through interactions, shared values, common behaviors, goals and policies a consumer may desire to consume more ethically. Furthermore, collective efficacy i.e. perceived collective power through shared beliefs in the power to produce effects can foster community's motivational commitment to its mission (Bandura 2000). Normative commitment to ethical consumption may also be reinforced via obtaining benefits out of ethical consumer online community participation. Meyer and Allen (2004) argue that the normative commitment, in general, can arise from two primary sources: socialization experiences and getting "benefits" from the organization. Similarly, a sense of moral responsibility or a sense of duty towards the community and to other members is one of the key markers of the community (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Thus, we propose that the benefits gained influence commitment to ethical consumption. In addition, the benefits derived are also suggested to in general lead to relationship outcomes such as loyalty (Gwinner, Gremler and Bitner, 1998), and we therefore suggest that the perceived benefits also enhance loyalty towards the online community.

Empirical Study

Multiple items were constructed to measure benefits, commitment to ethical consumption and loyalty towards the online community. The statements were taken from previous studies (e.g. Nambisan and Baron, 2007; Papaoikonemou et al. 2011) and modified to fit the studied context. In order to increase the reliability of the study, it was administered to four ethical consumer online communities established in Facebook. Two of the communities are run by nonprofit organizations, one by a non-organized voluntary group, and one as a joint effort of several nonprofit organizations. These communities are among the most influential ones in their market in terms of the number of readers and the activity level. All chosen online communities are open for the public, i.e. consumers do not have to be members of the organization to join the site. All the studied communities have moved their online communities to Facebook.

First, respondents were asked to provide background data (age, education). After that, the survey included questions on consumer perceived benefits, community loyalty, and commitment towards ethical consumption. These were measured on a Likert-type

scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). The data collection took place in March – April 2012. Links to the survey were posted on each of the online community walls, with reminders within one week. The data collection resulted in 205 responses, out of which 6 responses were non-usable due to missing values, resulting in a sample of 199 usable responses. The majority of respondents were female (87.4%, 10.6% male), which is in line with the community member profile and the profile of ethical consumers in the studied market (e.g. Isenhour and Ardenfors 2009, Bateman and Valentine 2010). Most of the respondents (43.7 per cent) belonged to an age group of 25-34 years and almost half (47.2 per cent) of them had a university degree.

Findings

The items measuring benefits, commitment towards the community and commitment to ethical consumption were first subjected to factor analyses. In comparison to the expected factor structure, three major changes were identified. First of all, social benefits were divided into two groups: social benefits that reflect reciprocity, i.e. helping others and receiving help, and ego benefits, that refer to strengthening one's identity. Secondly, learning and behavioral benefits merged with functional benefits. Thirdly, affective and normative commitment formed a single construct. Consequently, five types of benefits were employed in further analyses: functional, entertainment, social, ego benefits, and ethical consumption benefits. The final scales are exhibited in the Appendix. Table I shows the mean values of the constructs, and correlations between them.

Table 1 Pearson correlation and mean values of constructs

N=199	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	
Mean									
(1) Functional benefits	3.67	1							
(2) Social benefits	1.71	.268**	1						
(3) Entertainment benefits	3.05	.496**	.367**	.1					
(4) Ego Benefits	2.88	.316**	.436**	.238**	1				
(5) Ethical benefits	2.43	.196**	.462**	.456**	.393**	1			
(6) Loyalty_FBCommunity	3.67	.575**	.288**	.401**	.374**	.439**	1		
(7) Commitment_Aff/Norm	4.05	.336**	.070	.036	.182*	.172*	.256**	1	
(8) Commitment_Calculative	3.01	.106	.075	-.027	.104	.097	.136	.509**	1

* p<.05, **p<.01

Based on the results, we can see that the respondents rated the social benefits rather low (1.71/5), whereas the functional benefits received the highest mark (3.67/5), followed by entertainment benefits (3.05); ego benefits (2.88), and ethical benefits

(2.43). The loyalty towards the community was however on a higher level (3.67). Also, affective commitment to ethical consumption was relatively high (4.05), whereas calculative commitment (3.01) was slightly lower. To test whether the benefits received by consumers influence loyalty towards the online commitment and commitment to ethical consumption, three separate regression analyses were run. The regression testing the relationship between benefits and the loyalty towards the community was significant ($p < 0.00$), with an adjusted R^2 of 0.372 as was the relationship between benefits and affective commitment to ethical consumption (Adj. $R^2 = 0.125$) (see Table II). The third regression with calculative commitment was not significant, and is therefore not reported.

Table 2 Results of regression analyse

Dependent variable	Independent variables	β -value	t -value
Loyalty _FBCcommunity	Functional Benefits**	.109	5.627
	Social Benefits	.109	1.576
	Entertainment benefits	.177	2.678
	Ego Benefits**	.073	.945
	Ethical Benefits		
Commitment _Aff/Nor	Functional Benefits**	.354	3.743
	Social Benefits	-.019	-.228
	Entertainment Benefits**	-.190	-2.304
	Ego Benefits	.079	-2.304
	Ethical Benefits	-.015	-.162

** $p < .01$

It seems clear that the loyalty to the online community is driven by functional and ego benefits, whereas commitment to ethical consumption is mostly driven by functional benefits. Intriguingly, perceived entertainment benefits seem to decrease affective commitment.

Discussion

The main aim of this study was to find out what kind of benefits online community users gain from ethical Facebook community participation, and how those benefits influence loyalty towards the community as well as commitment towards ethical consumption. According to the results the primary benefits obtained were functional benefits, in line with Dholakia et al. (2009). Since limited information has been noted to be the key issue in making ethical consumption choices (e.g. Uusitalo and Oksanen 2004) it seems logical that the primary benefits gained by ethical consumer community members are related to obtaining information. Thus, this result is encouraging for ethical consumer communities; the communities play a significant role in informing the consumers' ethical choices. At the same time, social benefits were rated extremely low in this study, which is in line with Gummerus et al. (2012), but contrary to Dholakia et al. (2009; 2004). This may be due to the differing natures of the online communities, as Dholakia et al. studied specialized communities focusing on problem solving, where social aspects apparently play a far more important role. This result may also be due to Facebook - while Facebook can help consumers in creating and maintaining larger, diffuse networks of relationships, it can still be thought to serve as a platform of formation of only weak social ties (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe 2007).

This study additionally showed that although consumers perceived rather low levels of benefits from community participation, they nevertheless felt committed to consuming ethically. The members were primarily using online communities to accomplish individualistic goals i.e. informing themselves on ethical consumption. This is an interesting finding since an online community is by nature a collective practice, which would suggest collective benefits. Strong belief in their collective power could help ethical consumers in producing desired results (Bandura 2000). Hence, collective nature of an ethical consumer online community could diminish cynicism that exists in terms of an impact an individual only can have. However, regardless of the collective nature of the communities, based on our findings the ethical consumer online community participation seemed to be surprisingly private project in this study.

Managerial implications, Limitations and Further research

Online communities could build enormous collective expertise (Hagel and Armstrong 1997:30) when used efficiently. Therefore, the organizers of ethical

consumer communities should encourage interest to interactions and social aspects and therefore nurture collective actions instead of individual effort only. Currently the commitment was only directed to the purpose of the online community, not to the peer members in the community. By being successful in making the online community a vivid hangout spot they might make the members of the community more committed to the community as well which in turn, mediated by the collective power of influence, might make the members more active ethical consumption ambassadors.

This study has several limitations. Since ethical consumer online communities as such have not been studied previously further research in other countries and other settings would be required. Furthermore, it would be interesting to study whether ethical consumer online communities existing on Facebook differ from other types of ethical consumer online communities. Additionally, further research would be needed in order to evaluate whether Facebook as a medium influences the way consumers communicate. Hence, it could be studied whether communication and interaction in Facebook online communities differ from communication and interaction in other types of online communities. Moreover, the possible evolution of interaction in online communities and how the time online communities have existed possibly affects interaction mode could be another interesting topic for further research. Finally, since this study suggests that ethical consumer online communities primarily cater for individual needs, future studies could investigate how ethical consumer online communities could better make ethical consumption a collective project instead of only individual one: how collectivity could be used to help the rise of ethical consumption.

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APPENDIX 1 FINAL SCALES

Construct	Question in English	Adapted from	Original Construct
Functional benefits Alpha=.89	The information provided by the online community is useful.	Dholakia et al. 2009	Informational
	The issues posted on the online community are valuable.		Informational
	I have obtained ideas through the online community.		Instrumental
	The online community has affected my purchase decisions.		Learning and behavioural benefits
	My ethical consumption choices have been reinforced through the online		Learning and behavioral benefits
	My opinion on the importance of the ethical consumption has been reinforced through the online community.		Learning and behavioral benefits
	The online community has enhanced my knowledge about ethical consumption.	Nambisan and Baron 2007	Learning and behavioral benefits
Entertainment benefits	I have entertained and stimulated my mind by reading the topics of the	Nambisan and Baron 2007	Entertainment
	I have used the online community site	Nambisan and Baron 2007	Relaxation
	I have spent some enjoyable time browsing the Facebook community site.	Nambisan and Baron 2007	Spending time, process gratification
Ethical consumption benefits Alpha=.840	My self-perception as ethical consumer has been reinforced through the online community.	Papaoikonemou et al. 2011	Self-discovery/ethical self
	I feel that my influence and impact to the society has been increased	Papaoikonemou et al. 2011	Effectiveness
	I feel closer to the nature due to my participation in the online	Papaoikonemou et al. 2011	Revive more natural lifestyle
Ego Benefits Alpha=.738	I derive satisfaction from influencing other consumers in this online	**Nambisan and Baron 2007	Influencing others
	I feel useful when sharing		Sense of self-worth
	I aim at presenting a good image of myself to others in the online community.		Impression management
	I like the social aspects and the interactions with people sharing my values in this online community.	Dholakia et al. 2009	Networking
Social Benefits Alpha=.806	I have gotten to know other members of the online community.	*Dholakia et al. 2009	Forming social relationships

	I have been helped by the other members of the online community (e.g. obtained	*Dholakia et al. 2009	Getting help
Construct	Question in English	Adapted from	Original Construct
	I have helped other members of the online community (e.g. given	*Dholakia et al. 2009	Helping others
Community Loyalty	In the future, I will be loyal to this community	You and Donthu 2001	
	I will visit the community in the future	You and Donthu 2001	
	I will recommend this community to others	You and Donthu 2001	
Commitment (Aff/Norm) Alpha=.831	I would feel guilty if I gave up consuming ethically	Allen and Meyer	Normative
	I feel obliged to consume ethically.	Allen and Meyer	Normative
	I feel emotionally attached to ethical consumption.	Allen and Meyer	Affective
	Ethical consumption has a great deal of personal meaning for me.	Allen and Meyer	Affective
	I really feel that ethical consumption problems are my own.	Allen and Meyer	Affective