

Conceptualizing the Role of Online Sport Brand Community Quality in Cultivating Consumer Brand Loyalty

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Brand community was defined by Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) as the "specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" (p. 412). With the rapid development of web technology and online business, online brand community (OBC) has become a major research topic in brand community studies. Based on the classification schemes of social media developed by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), OBC can be considered as a subcategory of social media. As a low-cost and high-efficacy marketing program, the positive aspects of OBC have been empirically identified, including the increase in brand involvement, brand loyalty, and word-of-mouth behavior (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). Although research findings of previous studies have shed light on understanding the influence of online sport brand community (OSBC) quality on consumer brand loyalty, they fail to explain some vital aspects that are associated with the role of OSBC quality in cultivating sport consumer brand loyalty. These aspects may include antecedents of participation in OSBC, psychological factors of OSBC consumers, and their facilitating or mediating effect in the relationship between OSBC quality and brand loyalty. Absence of empirical evidence for OSBC may be in part because few of previous studies have focused on OSBC. Considering the unique characteristics of the sport industry (e.g., simultaneous production and consumption, drama, unpredictability, and competitive balance) and the importance of social facilitation in the consumption process, it would very constructive to have a theoretical framework to guide the study of OSBC and its associated issues; yet, such a framework is currently not available. Conducting a comprehensive literature review as the primary methodology of research inquiry, the purpose of this study was to develop a conceptual framework outlining key factors that are associated with the assessment of OSBC quality and their impact on consumer brand loyalty.

OBC is not limited to mere business transactions; it is often used to provide an avenue for social interaction and information exchange among consumers (Hagel & Armstrong 1997). These interactions, information exchange, or resulted behaviors among community members could be described in terms of perceived delivery process and outcome quality (Van Riel, Liljander, & Jurriëns, 2001). Essentially, consumer behavior in OSBC is largely depended on the quality of OSBC. Based on the Uses and Gratifications theory (Sherry, Lucas, Greenberg, & Lachlan, 2006), it can be interpreted that consumers use the media to fulfill specific gratifications. As a crucial evaluation indicator, media quality would influence an user's gratification to the service provider. This interpretation is supported by the research findings of Hur, Ko, and Valacich (2011), who identified the quality of sport online media to be significantly influential in consumer satisfaction. The quality of sport online media consists of the following four facets: (a) information quality, (b) interaction quality, (c) aesthetic quality, (d) functional quality. As OSBC is one kind of media forms, it is reasonable to infer that the quality of services offered by an OSBC would influence its consumer satisfaction.

Consumer satisfaction is defined as "the summary psychological state resulting when the emotion surrounding disconfirmed expectations is coupled with a consumer's prior feelings about the consumer experience" (Oliver, 1981, p. 27). In Bhattacharjee's view (2001), consumer satisfaction is the outcome of an evaluative process, where consumers examine the results of their prior service use and decide whether or not to continue using the service. Likely, an overall satisfaction of the online media consumer would reflect his/her general experiences, which would be the OSBC satisfaction in the current case (Hur et al., 2011; Jones & Sasser, 1995). According to Oliver (1999), consumer loyalty is "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same-brand set purchases" (p. 34). Previous studies revealed that consumer satisfaction had a strong impact on consumer loyalty toward information technologies, which would include both the commitment to the media and the loyalty toward content provided by the media (Klenke, 1992). It appears that consumer satisfaction derived from OSBC would positively influence an individual's commitment to OSBC and also loyalty toward the brand favored by OSBC.

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According to the social identification theory, individuals who are committed to an organization will likely commit themselves to actions that support the organization (Dutton & Dukerich 1991). When individuals have a strong desire to commit to the service provided by the organization, such as OSBC, they would become vested in the successes or failures of the organization and be more likely to develop positive attitude toward the products and brands favored by the community (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Kim, Choi, Qualls, & Han, 2008). In other words, a consumer's OSBC commitment can have a positive impact on his/her loyalty toward brands favored by the OSBC. Hence, it can be inferred that OSBC commitment positively mediates the relationship between consumer satisfaction and brand loyalty. As a result of these inquiries and analyses, a structural model specifying both the measurement and relationship aspects of OSBC was formed in this study, in which the perceived OSBC quality would influence consumer satisfaction, consumer satisfaction would positively influence their OSBC commitment and brand loyalty, respectively, and OSBC commitment would positively mediate the relationship between satisfaction and brand loyalty.

The conceptual framework developed in this study helps to fill the gap of OBC studies in the context of sport settings. The conceptual model may be adopted by scholars to conduct empirical studies. It also offers a clear outline for sport managers and marketers to understand how OSBC quality would influence consumer brand loyalty and how to effectively utilize OSBC and launch relevant campaigns to cultivate long-term consumer involvement.