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# Consumer devotion to a different height

## How consumers are defending the brand within Facebook brand communities

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Effective handling of negative word of mouth in the social media has dramatic impact on customer retention, deflects potential damage and improves profitability. Although marketers enact various defensive strategies to combat such negative publicity, consumers are increasingly acting on behalf of marketers and new value creating behaviors are noticed within virtual brand communities. The purpose of this paper is to explore the kind of consumers' defensive behaviors present within Facebook brand communities (FBCs).

**Design/methodology/approach** – A netnographic approach guided the data collection. Data were gathered by downloading messages; only the threads related to member's defensive behaviors were downloaded and archived. This resulted to 34 pages of data with 418 individual comments and 6,257 words in total.

**Findings** – Data reveals that defensive behavior is practiced within Facebook, noticing that more diverse types of defensive behaviors are practiced in high involved products. Also, defensive behaviors are more prevalent within utilitarian rather than hedonic brands.

**Research limitations/implications** – This study suggests that marketers should be open to engage and empower consumers to fulfill the role of defending the brand within brand communities first.

**Originality/value** – This work adds to previous literature on handling complaints in social media by analyzing how devoted consumers may defend the brand against negative remarks done by other consumers in FBCs. This study not only confirms that defensive behaviors are apparent within the eight FBCs considered, but also investigates possible differences between high and low involved brands and also utilitarian and hedonic brands.

**Keywords** Facebook, Value creation, Brand communities, Netnography, Defensive behaviour

**Paper type** Research paper

# 1. Introduction

The benefits of a positive brand reputation are an intangible asset contributing most to overall corporate success (Hall, 2006). To achieve goals, remain competitive and prosper, the received wisdom is that good reputation of a brand paves the organizational path to acceptance and approval by stakeholders. However, consumer attitude toward a brand can be heavily altered by others negative view and opinion toward it. Extant literature indicates that negative word of mouth (WOM from now on) has the power to negatively influence consumers' attitudes and behaviors (Pfeffer *et al.*, 2014). However, effective

handling of such negative WOM may have positive effects (e.g. Chang *et al.*, 2015) such as dramatic impact on customer retention, deflect potential damage and improve profitability. To achieve such heightened consumer allegiance marketers had been defending their brands against negative publicity coming from competitors, consumers and other sources.

An unprecedented level of customer-to-customer interactions are practiced since internet has opened up the platform of online communities (Casalo *et al.*, 2010). However, consumers are also using these online forums to vent their dissatisfaction regarding the brand (Hassan, 2013). Recent surveys confirm that consumers are increasingly using social media to complain and opted to vent their frustrations on social media platforms (eMarketer, 2014a, b), especially when dealing with big companies and probably because consumers believe that social media has given them greater customer voice (Fishburn Edges and Echo Research, 2012). In such a scenario consumer devotees who consider these brands as an extension to their self-image (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002) are noticed to protect these brands against the negative remarks by fellow members. Such a constructive behavior will help reduce the negative publicity and restore brand's positive image. In addition, constantly monitoring these virtual communities can be a tedious job by the marketers as many of these virtual communities have millions of members and hundreds of messages get posted every hour. Hence defensive behavior by fellow members should take the burden out of its managers who needs to monitor these communities in a regular basis. The importance of such behavior is further strengthened by the fact that within online communities' consumers tend to listen to other consumers view compared to the marketers. Hence knowing the antecedents and consequences of such behavior is an important brand building activity for the marketers. This will help them understand and explore the causes of such behavior, know when and how such behavior is materialized and enact strategies to make them engage more. However, recent studies are mainly focussing on service recovery (Cambra *et al.*, 2014; Bijmolt *et al.*, 2014) and how managers have to dealt with consumers complaints in social media (Einwiller and Steilen, 2014; Grégoire *et al.*, 2015), without focussing on how devoted consumers may react to others' complaints and defend the brand (although some evidence of this phenomenon has been already reported (e.g. Colliander and Wien, 2013). Therefore, there is both a managerial and an academic need to understand consumers' defending behaviors in virtual communities.

To shed some light in this issue, the present research has the following goals. First, this study aims to observe the presence of consumers' defending behaviors in virtual brand communities. Moreover, it is suggested that a more systematic process of virtual community selection would deepen our understanding of consumer behavior in this context (Schau *et al.*, 2009). To this end a useful starting point are the established theories of strategic brand management, for example, involvement and product positioning (Keller, 2008). In this regards, this study further intends to explore the differences (if any) of members' defensive behavior between high and low involved brands and also utilitarian and hedonic brands. To do that, this study focusses on Facebook brand communities (FBCs from here on) since this is the leading social networking site and many companies are maintaining their brand communities on Facebook (Waters *et al.*, 2009).

The remaining of this work is structured as follows. First, the conceptual background serves to briefly define the main concepts used in this work. Second, the propositions regarding members' defending behavior are justified. Then, the

methodology employed in this research is carefully explained and afterwards, major findings of members' defending the brand are shown. Finally, the main conclusions, implications, limitations and future research opportunities are widely discussed.

## 2. Conceptual background

### 2.1 Consumer's defending behavior

Negative WOM can adversely influence consumer's attitude toward the brand; however, effective handling of such a situation could not only keep the customers who have the bad experience, but also enforce the image identification of the company and switch them from angry to loyal customer (Pfeffer *et al.*, 2014). In such a scenario marketers enact various public relation activities to achieve positive outcome to increase the credibility of the organization.

However, not only marketers get involved in these behaviors but also the customer. Indeed, WOM among consumers may be motivated when someone criticizes a company, brand or product and committed consumers respond to this by defending it (Casalo *et al.*, 2011). These non-transactional behaviors that go beyond product repurchase may enhance company image or boosting business performance in the long term (Cambra *et al.*, 2014). This study defines defending the brand as "consumer's behavior of informing, clarifying, explaining brand's position by sharing information and real life experiences with the intention to protect brand's image and integrity against negative remarks which may adversely affect the brand."

Extant research also indicates that such behavior is taking place within online communities. For example, Colliander and Wien (2013) provided support that consumers often act as a buffer against negative WOM by actively defending companies and their brands online. Their analysis uncovered six different defense styles that consumers use when defending companies online, i.e. advocating, justifying, trivializing, stalling, vouching and doubting. Furthermore, Folse *et al.* (2013) investigated the brand-defending rather than brand-building abilities of spokes persons and assessed how they defend the brand when unfavorable third-party information is encountered. Specifically, we add to previous studies by focussing on defending behaviors on FBCs due to the increasing relevance of these communities, and exploring possible differences of members' defensive behavior between high and low involved brands and also utilitarian and hedonic brands.

### 2.2 FBCs

Recently, it has become apparent that consumers are increasingly using the internet to search and share information, and communicate with each other (e.g. Chang *et al.*, 2015; King *et al.*, 2014). According to Hassan (2013), internet provides the infrastructure for enhancing social interaction and cyberspace has become a new kind of social terrain, crowded with virtual communities. From a marketing perspective, virtual communities become especially relevant when they are focussed on specific brand, product or company (forming the so-called brand communities) and consumers participate on them (Healy and McDonagh, 2012). This sort of brand community participation strengthens customer relationships with the brand, other customers and enhances customer loyalty (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002). Facebook, which exploded onto the cyber scene in early 2004, has since become the leading online social networking site with more than 1.3 billion registered users worldwide (Facebook, 2015). Facebook also have a large number of brand community sites managed by the companies since it allowed companies to register

personal or corporate account (Waters *et al.*, 2009). Many of these FBCs (from now on) have millions of members who interact on a daily basis and share brand and personal experience through these sites. Marandi *et al.* (2010) indicates that Facebook users have from the beginning not only co-created value with the marketer, but also defined value in new ways. Given the tremendous growth in this medium, and its member's practices, this study seeks to identify consumers' defending behaviors that are performed within FBCs. As indicated a number of controls are also put in place. The following lends some precision to these.

### 2.3 Involvement
Product involvement is important to understanding consumer attitudes and behavior because involvement is a central motivation factor that shapes the pre-purchase decision making process (Parment, 2013). In this regards, Thorne and Bruner (2006) suggest that consumers of high involvement products "focus their time, energy, and resources intently on a specific area of interest" (p. 53). On the other hand low involved products are usually low priced; frequently purchased items where consumers pay little or no conscious attention to the information environment during the purchase (Elliot and Percy, 2007). Furthermore, there is inconsistency in the literature concerning brand community practices among high and low involved products. For example, McAlexander *et al.* (2002) indicate that traditionally, only high involved products operating in niche markets (i.e. Mercedes, Harley Davidson, etc.) had a noticeable brand community. On the other hand, recent research (Schau *et al.*, 2009) indicate that brand community management might be an option for brands offering convenience products such as soap, tools, toys or soft drinks. The present study investigates whether differences within defending behaviors exist between FBCs based on high vs low involvement products and also utilitarian and hedonic brands.

### 2.4 Utilitarian vs hedonic products
Consumers take decisions based on utilitarian and hedonic criteria attached to a product, and brands position themselves accordingly (Hartmann *et al.*, 2005). Utilitarian goods mostly offer functional, instrumental and practical benefits to its consumers and hedonic goods offer aesthetic, experiential and enjoyment-related benefits (Pawle and Cooper, 2006). This indicates that hedonically motivated consumers are heavily influenced by emotions and not solely by reason. By contrast, those motivated by utilitarian benefits seek products which fulfill necessary functions, and more logical and rational features related to transactions (Batra and Ahtola, 1991). In this regards, Okada (2005) further postulate that consumers who purchase a utilitarian brand behave carefully and are efficiently oriented to the problem solving – indicating differences with their pre- and post-purchase consumption behavior. In light of these differences, the present study suggests that the extent of defending a brand may differ between hedonic and utilitarian brands.

## 3. Data expectations and propositions
Belk's (2004) concept of "individual's defense mechanism" indicates that consumers want the protection of their own self-esteem and brand loyal consumers consider these brands as an extension to their self-image (McALexander *et al.*, 2002); and do not hesitate to defend the brand to safeguard their own integrity. As brand loyal consumers enthusiastically participate within FBCs (Dunay and Krueger, 2011); hence this study suggests that:

*P1.* Members' defending behavior will be apparent within FBCs.

Brands can reflect deeper, symbolic, sometimes spiritual meanings that can lead the consumers to have an extensive attachment (Muñiz and Schau, 2005). Consumers' extremely high level of emotional bonding with the brand justifies the distinction of devotees from the rest of loyal and committed consumers (Pichler and Hemetsberger, 2007). The characteristics of the products/brands themselves or their usage contexts may systematically act to arouse consumers' involvement (Nicolau, 2013). High involvement product categories typically are those with which the consumer wants to feel connected even beyond the moment of consumption (Parment, 2013) as there is pleasure in using such product. However, such heightened connection and involvement is absent within low involved context where the involvement toward the brand is typically low (Elliot and Percy, 2007). As defensive behavior is an extension of consumers' attachment toward the brand – hence we suggest that:

*P2.* Members' defending behavior will be more apparent within high involved context than in low involved context.

Previous studies document that consumers often look for opportunities to justify their choice (Shafir *et al.*, 1993); and it is easier to justify utilitarian goods than the purchase of hedonic goods (Chitturi *et al.*, 2008). Utilitarian brands are considered necessities and hedonic brands as luxuries (Okada, 2005) and consumers give greater importance to the necessities (Kivertz and Simonson, 2002). Moreover consumers view the utilitarian purchase as more rational which satisfies necessities of life (Khan *et al.*, 2005); hence these consumers are further motivated to reciprocate by engaging in more defending behavior (Blau, 1964). Hence, this study suggests:

*P3.* Members' defending behavior will be more prevalent within utilitarian brands.

Furthermore, products that meet or exceed hedonic expectations will evoke high arousal feelings of excitement and cheerfulness, leading to delight – an emotion that is also high in arousal (Roseman, 1991; Chitturi *et al.*, 2008). This indicates that member's defensive behavior within hedonic context should show greater level of intensity and excitement, and we suggest that:

*P4.* Members' defending behavior will be more passionate, vivid and vibrant within hedonic brands.

## 4. Methodology
This study proposes to use netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2009) that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications (Kozinets, 2009). "Netnography," or ethnography on the internet, is a new qualitative research methodology that is used to understand virtual communities in the same ways anthropologists seek to understand the cultures, norms and practices of face-to-face communities (Sandlin, 2006). Kozinets (2009) has defined netnography in terms of both product and process. As a product, a netnography is "a written account of online cyber culture, informed by the methods of cultural anthropology" (p. 470). As a process or research methodology, netnography is a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications. Research involving exploration of poorly understood phenomena is better approached through qualitative methods (i.e. Carson *et al.*, 2001); as a result netnography is deemed suitable for this study.

Facebook is chosen as the online forum to gather data's because of large number of brand communities, huge number of active members, variation within member participation (both demographic and geographic aspect) and rich data within these sites (Kozinets, 2009). To accommodate potential confounds such as involvement level and purchase motivation members' defensive behavior were examined across eight brand communities from two different categories, on the basis of involvement (high and low involved category) and on the basis of product positioning (utilitarian and hedonic category).

*4.1 Justification behind choosing the high and low involvement brands*
Automobile and soft drinks are chosen as high and low involved products as a significant portion of our day to day consumption is attached with both these categories. Automobiles are one of the most relevant possessions for consumers worldwide, the amount of money invested in their purchase is usually high and consumer decision process can be complex – indicating that automobiles are high involvement products. On the other hand, soft drinks are one of the more frequently consumed products worldwide, the amount of money invested in their purchase is usually low and consumer decision process is not that complex – suggesting that soft drinks are low involvement products.

To additionally check that automobiles are perceived as higher involvement products than soft drinks, we asked 62 consumers to rate their product involvement. Respondents were selected among students and workers of a South-European University. Based on a seven-point disagree/agree item borrowed from Hong (2015, p. 334) ("This product is important to me"), results showed that involvement is higher for automobiles ($M = 6.13$; semantic differential (SD) $= 1.19$) than for soft drinks ($M = 2.35$; SD $= 1.28$). An independent samples $t$-test (using the statistic software SPSS v22.0) confirmed that this difference is significant ($t = 16.966$; $p < 0.01$). Therefore, automobile and soft drinks were finally confirmed as high and low involved products.

Four brands were selected in each product category, being two of them utilitarian and the other two hedonic. Specifically, Ford Fiesta, Honda Fit, Gatorade and PowerAde are considered as utilitarian brands and Chrysler Crossfire, Volvo, Sprite and Fanta are considered as hedonic brands (Figure 1). The following indicates the reasons behind such decision.

*4.2 Justification behind choosing the utilitarian and hedonic brands*
This study acknowledges Okada's (2005) remark that different products can be high or low in both hedonic and utilitarian attributes at the same time. However, consistent



Figure 1.
List of brands under each category

with Dhar and Wertenbroch (2000) this study examines consumer choice between two set of brands which is seen as positioned on hedonic dimensions and the other is seen as positioned on utilitarian dimensions.

Gatorade and PowerAde contain carbohydrates and electrolysis which helps athlete regain important body fluids lost within sweat and workouts – utilitarian decisions behind purchase (Gwacham, 2011) – hence this study considers them as utilitarianz brands. Furthermore Tremblay *et al.* (2013) and Vlastic (2008) indicate that both Honda Fit and Ford Fiesta perform low in hedonic dimension like driving pleasure, ability to thrill and impress others and scores high in utilitarian dimensions like the fuel efficiency (30 MPG), smaller in size (easy for parking), etc. Hence this study considers Honda Fit and Ford Fiesta as utilitarian brands.

Carbonated soft drinks like Sprite and Fanta are thought to bring immediate and long term health hazards (low in utilitarian benefit); however, consumers devour them to gratify immediate thirst motive (high on hedonic benefit) (Wyshak, 2000). As a result both Sprite and Fanta are considered as hedonic brands. Moreover, both Chrysler Crossfire and Volvo are considered as luxury brands with higher perception within hedonic dimension. For example, Mazali and Rodrigues-Neto (2007) categorized Chrysler Crossfire as premier sporty luxury/sports model and Rubin *et al.* (2008) indicate that Volvo has evolved from eccentric "practical" car brand to luxury brand and categorized Volvo as positioned more toward hedonic dimension. Hence this study categorized Chrysler Crossfire and Volvo as hedonic brand.

Finally, we checked that utilitarian brands were perceived as more utilitarian than hedonic brands, and that hedonic brands were perceived as more hedonic than utilitarian brands. Again, 62 consumers rated two seven-point evaluative semantic differential (SD) items from Batra and Ahtola (1991) to measure both the utilitarian and hedonic values of the selected brands. Following Lim and Ang (2008), the "pleasant-unpleasant" SD item (ranging from 1 "unpleasant" to 7 "pleasant") was used to measure the hedonic value, and the "rational-emotional" SD item (ranging from 1 "emotional" to 7 "rational") was used to measure the utilitarian value. Results from independent samples *t*-tests (using the statistic software SPSS v22.0) confirmed that hedonic brands are perceived as more hedonic than utilitarian brands (see Table I). At the same time, utilitarian products are perceived as more utilitarian than the hedonic ones (see Table II). In turn, no differences were found among brands on the same product positioning (utilitarian or hedonic) at both the automobile and the soft drinks categories. Therefore, the selected brands were finally confirmed as utilitarian and hedonic brands, as it is summed up in Figure 1.

### 4.3 Data collection and coding

The actual methods of observation – spending time in a natural setting and recording what occurs (Jorgensen, 1989) is applied in this study; which involved downloading large amount conversational cultural data from archives. For this study, eight different brand community sites in Facebook are considered for data collection through naturalistic observation. The amount of data varied greatly depending on the specific brand community sites. The selected brands have a significant number of followers ranging from 3,000 to 8.7 million and huge amount of downloaded data are generated. These messages are considered in between February 2010 and August 2011, and data coding process was carried out manually to ensure quality and consistency. All the posts, messages and threads by any member are downloaded and a copy of each of these downloaded messages are filed and kept in the computer. Standard filing

| Selected brands | Mean value (SD) | Means difference | | t-test | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Automobiles* | | | | | |
| Utilitarian | | | | | |
| Honda (1) | 5.27 (1.26) | (1)-(2) | 0.11 | 0.49 | > 0.1 |
| Ford (2) | 5.16 (1.27) | (1)-(3) | 2.03 | 8.21 | < 0.01 |
| Hedonic | | | | | |
| Chrysler Crossfire (3) | 3.24 (1.48) | (1)-(4) | 1.59 | 6.47 | < 0.01 |
| Volvo (4) | 3.68 (1.46) | (2)-(3) | 1.92 | 7.75 | < 0.01 |
| | | (2)-(4) | 1.48 | 6.01 | < 0.01 |
| | | (3)-(4) | −0.44 | −1.64 | > 0.1 |
| *Soft drinks* | | | | | |
| Utilitarian | | | | | |
| Gatorade (5) | 5.15 (1.24) | (5)-(6) | 0.13 | 0.56 | > 0.1 |
| PowerAde (6) | 5.02 (1.32) | (5)-(7) | 2.07 | 8.71 | < 0.01 |
| Hedonic | | | | | |
| Sprite (7) | 3.08 (1.40) | (5)-(8) | 2.25 | 10.18 | < 0.01 |
| Fanta (8) | 2.90 (1.21) | (6)-(7) | 1.94 | 7.92 | < 0.01 |
| | | (6)-(8) | 2.12 | 9.27 | < 0.01 |
| | | (7)-(8) | 0.18 | 0.75 | > 0.1 |

**Table I.**
Differences in
hedonic values
among the
selected brands

**Note:** Following Lim and Ang (2008) and Batra and Ahtola (1991), to measure the hedonic value of the selected brands, respondents rated each brand on a seven-point semantic differential item ranging from 1 "unpleasant" to 7 "pleasant"

| Selected brands | Mean value (SD) | Means difference | | t-test | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Automobiles* | | | | | |
| Utilitarian | | | | | |
| Honda (1) | 3.34 (1.06) | (1)-(2) | 0.26 | 1.34 | > 0.1 |
| Ford (2) | 3.08 (1.11) | (1)-(3) | −2.05 | −9.65 | < 0.01 |
| Hedonic | | | | | |
| Chrysler Crossfire (3) | 5.39 (1.27) | (1)-(4) | −2.30 | −11.53 | < 0.01 |
| Volvo (4) | 5.64 (1.15) | (2)-(3) | −2.31 | −10.77 | < 0.01 |
| | | (2)-(4) | −2.56 | −12.67 | < 0.01 |
| | | (3)-(4) | −0.25 | −1.18 | > 0.1 |
| *Soft drinks* | | | | | |
| Utilitarian | | | | | |
| Gatorade (5) | 3.15 (1.07) | (5)-(6) | 0.22 | 1.04 | > 0.1 |
| PowerAde (6) | 2.93 (1.17) | (5)-(7) | −2.17 | −9.78 | < 0.01 |
| Hedonic | | | | | |
| Sprite (7) | 5.32 (1.39) | (5)-(8) | −2.35 | −11.62 | < 0.01 |
| Fanta (8) | 5.50 (1.18) | (6)-(7) | −2.39 | −10.34 | < 0.01 |
| | | (6)-(8) | −2.57 | −12.12 | < 0.01 |
| | | (7)-(8) | −0.18 | −0.76 | > 0.1 |

**Table II.**
Differences in
utilitarian values
among the
selected brands

**Note:** Following Lim and Ang (2008) and Batra and Ahtola (1991), to measure the utilitarian value of the selected brands, respondents rated each brand on a seven-point semantic differential item ranging from 1 "emotional" to 7 "rational"

procedure is maintained and all the messages are grouped under each brand and these data were separated by months. For example, there was a separate file for Honda Fit and the data were grouped like Honda Fit, March 2010; Honda Fit, April 2010; Honda Fit, May 2010 and so on. This resulted in a total of more than three thousand pages of data.

Table III shows the details on various aspects of the data under each brand (number of members at the end of the data collection period, and number of total pages containing downloaded data). All these downloaded messages under the particular brand are then copied in paper and every single message is read several times to identify member's defensive behavior. Being a qualitative study, only the posts that indicated that a member is trying to defend the brand in any circumstance are considered for this study. Once such behavior is identified it is marked and kept in a separate file for further analysis. To avoid mistakes, this process is done for three times so that all the data related to defensive behavior is considered and kept for further investigation. Hence, only the threads related to member's defensive behaviors were finally retrieved and archived. This resulted to 34 pages of data with 418 individual comments and 6,257 words in total. Table III also shows the details on specific aspects of the data related to member's defensive behaviors under each brand (number of total pages containing data related to member's defensive behaviors, and number of total messages related to member's defensive behaviors). The members whose messages are used as a quote for this research have been given a pseudonym to protect their identities. The first letters of their names are used along with their gender, which is denoted as (M) for male and (F) for females.

## 5. Findings

This study expected defending behavior to be prevalent within FBCs (*P1*) and predicted that such behavior will be more apparent within high involved products (*P2*). Consistent with the expectation it is noticed that defensive behavior is apparent within FBCs. In support of *P1*, we have found defensive behaviors in the eight FBCs considered. However, member's comments within FBCs further indicate that this behavior is more apparent within high involved products, which supports *P2*. For example, within high involved category consumers defend their brands by clarifying manufacturer's role, justifying the brand's decision (by providing facts, providing their own opinion and consumers own experience with the brand), by comparing competitor's actions or industry norms (comparing with competitors' features, customer service, product specification, etc.), blaming the uncontrollable

| | | General data | Specific data | |
| | | Number of total pages | Number of total pages | Number of total messages |
| Brand | Number of members[a] | containing downloaded messages | containing members' defensive behaviors | related to members' defensive behaviors |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Honda Fit | 47,179 | 419 | 6 | 79 |
| Ford Fiesta | 246,176 | 758 | 11 | 136 |
| Chrysler Crossfire | 3,239 | 67 | 1 | 07 |
| Volvo | 207,415 | 252 | 3 | 35 |
| PowerAde | 19,138 | 158 | 2 | 30 |
| Gatorade | 4,966,298 | 908 | 6 | 82 |
| Fanta | 3,016,158 | 195 | 2 | 21 |
| Sprite | 8,668,691 | 416 | 3 | 28 |

**Note:** [a]Number of members of the brand communities in Facebook at the end of the period of data collection

Table III.
Data collection:
number of
members and
message quantity

features, blaming the complainer's own action and blaming the third party. However, within low involved products the behavior is limited to providing facts, clarifying manufacturer's role, providing their own opinion and blaming the third party. This study further projected that defensive behavior will be more apparent within utilitarian brands than in hedonic brands (*P3*) and expected that in hedonic brands such behavior will be more intense and passionate (*P4*). Data found herein further confirms that such behavior is more prevalent within utilitarian brands (in support of *P3*). As can be seen in Table IV, in both the high and low involvement categories, defending behaviors are more apparent within the utilitarian brands. However, vivid and passionate expression is practiced within both hedonic and utilitarian contexts and a significant difference is not identified – hence, *P4* is not supported. Data that support these results is reported herein.

It is noticed within FBCs that many members complain for not getting the product on time. In such occasion fellow members justified brand's decision and put the blame on third party's shoulder (uncontrollable natural hazards) to defend it against other's complain (high involved/utilitarian brand):

JW (M): My dealer got 2 Fiesta's in last week, neither one was mine. Just cars they ordered for stock, what's wrong? (August 1, 2010 at 6:46 a.m.).

MK (M): You're talking about a factory that is pumping out thousands of cars as fast as they can, dealer orders mixed with customer orders. In many cases, dealers placed their order before individuals did […] so while it sucks to see a dealer get theirs first, it's quite possible they ordered theirs first, right? (Defending by justifying).

Shipping was also messed up severely when major storms took out the rail lines and roads being used to transport them. Things are a little mixed up […] just be patient, I'm sure Ford wants to get you your Fiesta as quickly as they can (Putting the blame on third party, August 2, 2010).

| | |
|---|---|
| *High involved/utilitarian*<br>Defending the brand is more apparent within this context<br><br>Members defend the brand by clarifying manufacturer's role, justifying brand's decision (by providing facts, providing their own opinion and consumers own experience with the brand), by comparing competitor's actions or industry norms (comparing with competitors' features, customer service, product specification, etc.), blaming the uncontrollable features, blaming the complainer's own action and blaming the third party | *High involved/hedonic*<br>Defending the brand is more apparent than the low involved products but less apparent than the utilitarian brand<br>Members defend the brand by clarifying manufacturer's role, justifying brand's decision (by providing their own opinion and consumers own experience with the brand), by comparing competitor's actions or industry norms (customer service, etc.) and blaming the complainer's own action |
| *Low involved/utilitarian*<br>Defending the brand is less apparent than high involved products but more apparent than the hedonic brands<br>Members defend the brand by clarifying manufacturers' roles, by providing facts, providing their own opinion and experience, etc. | *Low involved/hedonic*<br>Defending the brand is less apparent than high involved products and less apparent than utilitarian brands<br>Members defend the brand by providing their own opinion and blaming the third party |

**Table IV.**
Major findings of defending the brand

MK (M)'s comment in response to JW (M)'s issues is interesting as he tries to challenge the damaging comment by providing a justification from brand's perspective and later putting the blame on uncontrollable features. By expressing "In many cases, dealers placed their order before individuals did" – MK (M) is trying indicate that it is justified if the dealers receive it before individual consumers, as they placed the order before. MK (M) further poses some of the blame on the uncontrollable issues as he states – "Shipping was also messed up severely when major storms took out the rail lines and roads being used to transport them." Through such statement MK (M) is trying to indicate that such natural hazard can ruin any well-organized planning.

In some instances members were defending the brand by putting the blame on the complainer's action rather the brand's performance (high involved/utilitarian brand):

> DH (M): Yesterday I got my first drive in both an automatic Fiesta and a five speed. It's a cute little car but seriously under powered. I like the tight turning circle and definitely the looks […] and the car feels like a quality automobiel, but I can't abide the lack of power. I really wanted to buy one of these cars – but since I live in the mountains – this car is just not for me. Perhaps they could shoe horn the 2.0 engine from the Focus in it or give it a dose of Eco-boost […] (August 12, 2010 at 5:37 p.m.).

> AW (M): If you drove the manual, did you actually downshift? Any car with a manual transmission will do just fine if you choose the correct gear. My Honda Element can rocket around another car while going uphill if I downshift to 4th or 3rd and get it into the torque band (which is usually pretty close to redline in any 4-banger) (Blaming the complainer's own action, August 12, 2010 at 7:31 p.m.).

> KD (F): All the cars in this class are pretty under powered, that's why they're cheap gas sippers. Can't really compare it to anything else other than the Yaris, Fit, Aveo, Versa, Accent etc., which all suffer from < 120 hp engines. If sales do well I'm sure they'll bring the eco over, albeit at a higher price (Defending by citing industry norms, August 12, 2010 at 8:01 p.m.).

This is amazing how loyal members' try to find faults in the complainer's wrong use of the brand and try to put the blame back on their shoulder. AW (M) tries to defend the brand by putting the blame on the complainer's action as he notes "If you drove the manual, did you actually downshift" – or did you use the product in the right manner before complaining? He then indicates "Any car with a manual transmission will do just fine if you choose the correct gear" – meaning this is not the fault of the brand rather the performance of the product depends on the right technique of usage. Such defensive note of a brand devotee should provide justification to any new consumer who is thinking of purchasing these brands and read these online reviews. KD (F)'s message detailing competitors' specification within such product category should clarify how much a consumer should expect from the brand. Within high involved categories it is noticed that different members engage in various defensive behaviors for the same complain which is less apparent within low involved context.

It is noticed within FBCs that some consumers blame the manufacturer even though it is beyond their (manufacturer) expected role. In such situation some members remind the complainer about the firm's responsibility to deter them from future criticism (high involved/hedonic brand):

> LAS (M): SCREW @Volvo @Volvo Cars US #Volvo #Volvo Cars US. Why? We terminated a lease and paid the early termination fees, remaining 4 payments, and wear (totaling nearly $5,000) SIX YEARS ago and NOW it shows as a "derogetory/negative" account on our credit report. WTF @Volvo and @Volvo Cars US? (October 21, 2010 at 2:46 a.m.).

AAH (M): have u spoken to your bank that you leased your vehicle with […] Volvo is just a car not your financing bank. Same issues like yours happen to other makes […] so once again it is not the Volvo it is the leasing BANK! (Defending by clarifying manufacturer's role, October 22, 2010 at 3:10 a.m.).

AAH (M)'s remark "so once again it is not the Volvo it is the leasing BANK!" – clarifies that that it is not the brand's responsibility when it comes to issues relating to lease agreement and termination of such agreements. Such information clarifying manufacturer's responsibility should make the complainer realize that his grumble has limited ground and deter them from posting similar remarks in the future.

Members of low involved/utilitarian brands also bring facts and scientific evidence to combat against any misinformation as seen within the following excerpts:

IM (F): This guy T (M) kept arguing how bad the salt in Gatorade is for you, and I tried to explain to him that when you are dehydrated you need salt. But, I guess his business degree and the 4 hours he told me he spent researching this topic trumps my 4 years of schooling to become an athletic trainer :) Anyways, I guess his way of winning the argument was to delete his profile and all of his posts stating his opinion :)So, i guess I win […]. Gatorade IS good for you when you are dehydrated! :) (August 24, 2010 at 11:26 a.m.).

AA (F): Some people lose potassium and sodium through physical activity and others have medical problems where they can't hold onto electrolytes. Those ppl are fine consuming Gatorade. Couch potatoes and recliner jockeys might find the sodium an issue since they aren't sweating it out. When I sweat I literally have white patches of salt left behind on my face and arms. There's some interesting articles on how the decline in sodium consumption as it has gotten a bad name has increased the incidence of infectious diseases. But that's a whole other discussion […] (Defending by providing scientific evidence, August 24, 2010 at 9:32 p.m.).

IM (F)'s comments to oppose the negative information of T (M) should help the brand to combat in such a situation. Moreover such an expert advice should create trust among the readers mind; and help rely on the argument. AA (F) brings the facts into the discussion board to prove her point. "Some people lose potassium and sodium through physical activity and others have medical problems where they can't hold onto electrolytes" – this sort of information to contest complainer's claim with scientific evidence is strong verification of the statement.

Members of low involved/hedonic brands also noticed to blame the third party to take the liability away from the manufacturer:

RG (F): I dont know if anyone from the Coca-Cola company is monitoring this page but I really wish they would do something about the recent quality of their sprite product, I buy numerous amounts of sprite every year and recently have been getting home and finding that several of the bottles are flat or have broken seals, also causing them to go flat, and Im thinking of switching […]. Just So you know […] (October 8, 2010 at 3:17 a.m.).

CME (F): The Sprite I've gotten has been fine. Maybe it's the store you're getting it from? And if the seals are broken. I wouldn't drink it (Blaming third party, October 8, 2010 at 10:49 a.m.).

The role of the retailer is to stock the product, keep it fresh and handle it in such a manner that the product is in good condition. By putting remarks such as – *The Sprite I've gotten has been fine. Maybe it's the store you're getting it from* – CME (F) is trying to cast the blame on the retailer's shoulder by insisting that "we are all getting the right product, however, your retailer must not be doing things right

and hence you are experiencing such a problem." This is another way of saying that "the manufacturer is not responsible for this situation- so you better check with the retailer."

To sum up, Table IV demonstrates the major findings for defending the brand practiced within FBCs.

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

This study defines defending the brand as "member's behavior of informing, clarifying, explaining brand's position by sharing information and real life experiences with the intention to protect brand's image and integrity against negative remarks which may adversely affect the brand." Findings of this study indicate that today's consumers engage in behaviors to defend and offset the negative remarks and bad publicity by others within FBCs. This is an extension to the current notion that to dampen the negative effects of any harmful remarks by consumers; marketers administer public relations efforts (e.g. Levesque and McDougall, 2000) that helps restore positive image for the brand. Such a passionate behavior is consistent with Belk's (2004) concept of individual's "defense mechanism" which include the protection of self-esteem. Loyal consumers consider these brands as an extension to their self-image (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002); and do not hesitate to defend the brand to safeguard their own integrity. These consumers defending the brand are thus very relevant for companies and may be considered as value-building evangelists willing to spread favorable comments and information about a company/ brand/product (Cambra *et al.*, 2014) or even defend it from peer consumers' criticisms due to its great commitment to the company (Guinalíu, 2005).

Findings of this study indicate that member's defensive behavior deters complaining associates from posting further negative comments and sometimes they apologize for earlier remarks. This is consistent with Pfeffer *et al.* (2014) suggestion that effective handling of complaining behavior limits the spread of potentially damaging negative remarks. This behavior further implies that the complaint handling by fellow members are more effective than marketer's actions; because in many product categories consumers tend to rely more on other customers than advertisers or marketers (e.g. Jeong and Koo, 2015).

Data reported herein indicate that more diverse types of defensive behaviors are practiced in high involved products. It is further noticed that within high involved context more members are engaged in various defensive behaviors for the same complains raised by an associate which is less apparent within low involved context. This is perhaps members of high involved products have more knowledge on various product/brand-related issues (Engel *et al.*, 1993); helping them defend from a variety of direction. For example, member's defensive behavior concerning industry norms by comparing competitors' features and customer service is only noticed within high involved products. A higher level of knowledge on the product and its industry is required to disseminate such information and members of high involved products possess higher level of knowledge (e.g. Parment, 2013) – hence more of such behavior is noticed in high involved context.

It is further noticed that this behavior is more prevalent within utilitarian brand communities of Facebook. This is perhaps because utilitarian brands are considered as necessities and hedonic brands as luxuries (Chitturi *et al.*, 2008), and consumers give greater importance to the necessities (Kivertz and Simonson, 2002). Moreover consumers view the utilitarian purchase as more rational which satisfies necessities of

life (Khan and Dhar, 2007); hence these consumers are motivated to reciprocate by engaging in more defending behavior (Blau, 1964). In addition, it is difficult to justify the purchase of a hedonic good and relative degree of guilt is associated with consumption of hedonic goods (Chitturi *et al.*, 2008); hence defending behavior is less apparent within hedonic brands.

### 6.1 Theoretical contribution

A first theoretical contribution of this work is that it goes one step further from previous studies focussing on handling complaints in social media by a managerial perspective (Einwiller and Steilen, 2014; Grégoire *et al.*, 2015), and analyze how devoted consumers may defend the brand against negative remarks done by other consumers in FBCs. This study not only confirms that defensive behaviors are apparent within the eight FBCs considered, but also investigates possible differences between high and low involved brands and also utilitarian and hedonic brands. Specifically, this behavior is found to be more apparent within utilitarian and high involved brands. In this respect, another major contribution of this study is the identification that members of low involved products also engage in customer-to-brand relationship within online communities. This contradicts to the previous belief that members of low involved products do not engage in customer-to-brand relationship within brand community sphere (Sicilia and Palazon, 2008). This behavior is confirmed as members of low involved products engage in defensive behavior against any misinformation toward the brand. This study has enriched the body of knowledge by indicating that members of low involved products are also keen to establish customer-to-brand relationships within the context of brand communities within online SNSs. It is, however, important to mention that less defensive behavior is taking place within the low involved context. Future studies should identify the causes behind such reason and propose strategies for further engagement.

### 6.2 Practical implications

Managerially, what is most dominant about our findings is that consumers appear to be using brand attachments to further engage themselves with new behaviors; in this case, defending the brand from negative comments and complaints from fellow consumers. Managers potentially have a very important way of strengthening their brand's equity if they can harness this motivation. Specifically, the various defense strategies for the brand observed in our findings are particularly compelling to managers looking for a credible response to complaints and other crises online. In this respect, Chang *et al.* (2013) already noted that brand community members may take actions to prevent a breakdown of brand's image and insulate brands from negative events. Therefore, the identification of these new behaviors adds strength to the arm of those making a case for online brand communities as a key component of brand strategy (e.g. Chang *et al.*, 2013; Casalo *et al.*, 2010). All these suggest that managers should motivate consumers to be part of online brand communities, and cultivate a strong consumer identification and attachment to the brand in order to benefit from consumers defending the brand.

Findings of this study further suggest that managers should make it a habit to regularly follow these virtual community sites as the new avenue to understand consumer behavior. By reading these posts managers can have a better understanding of the overall health of the brand and the direction its consumers

are heading to in terms of their expectations, preferences, engagement, value creating activities and so on. Such understanding will help them better formulate strategies consistent with the changing consumer taste. Furthermore, it is noticed that this behavior of defending the brand by fellow consumers deters further aggravation and help restore positive brand image; prompting a suggestion that such roles should be delegated to them. Although many well-known companies are implementing best practices in response to this new form of complaining via social media (e.g. Grégoire *et al.*, 2015), marketers should be open to such engagement and empower consumers to fulfill this role first (as interpersonal communication is considered as more trustworthy (e.g. Jeong and Koo, 2015). However, management should keep a close eye on the dialogues within their virtual communities to ensure its effectiveness. Furthermore the company should act rapidly if no defending behavior is noticed by fellow members as consumers complains in social media should be responded quickly (e.g. Grégoire *et al.*, 2015), or if these comments may help them improve their products and services (e.g. Chang and Wu, 2014). This study thus suggests that important transition is taking place within marketing as far as roles of the different actors are concerned, which places enormous challenges and burdens on both the parties.

Finally, our results show that complaints on social media include problems with confusing business rules, unsatisfactory delivery issues or product failure. These are common complaints online, and therefore consumers' replies to these complaints on brand communities (i.e. by clarifying manufacturer's role) may help companies to get an adequate service recovery and prompt the service recovery paradox; that is, consumer behaviors even more favorable than those expressed before the problem occurred (Bijmolt *et al.*, 2014). In sum, apart from to better reach and understand their customers, marketing managers should carefully monitor the social media, let the consumers be the frontline of defense, and support the customers by handling their complaints quickly if no defending behavior is noticed by fellow consumers.

### 6.3 Limitations and future research

In spite of its interesting findings, this study has some limitations that also open some opportunities for future research. We hope to inspire researchers to validate the findings of this study within other contexts (i.e. service industries, non-profit sector, SME, etc.). Such research might lead to a greater understanding of the crucial and fundamental conditions for brand community strength and expand the theoretical understanding of how defensive behavior is executed. Future research should also include other product categories to test this framework and generalize the findings. The data sources used to describe high and low involved products were automobile and soft drink brands, respectively. Future studies should aim to expand the investigation to online communities formed around other types of industries. In addition, we have found no differences in the passion and vividness of defending behaviors between utilitarian and hedonic brands. Future research may analyze this unexpected result in more detail.

In sum, as with any qualitative study, there are limitations as to the generalizability and reliability of these findings. This is an exploratory study which emphasized on the collection of rich, elaborate and meaningful data through FBCs. Future studies should also concentrate on developing the psychometric properties of defending behavior and its constructs.

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