

A woman with dark hair and round glasses is shown in profile, looking upwards. The background is filled with vibrant, out-of-focus neon lights in shades of pink, red, and blue, creating a bokeh effect. Some of the visible neon text includes "Dogs" at the top and "ELB" in the middle.

A research study into the drivers/inhibitors of brand advocacy

Collaboration: The Future of Brand Advocacy

Executive summary by Anushka Malhotra



Executive Summary

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This study was conducted by interviewing a selection of brand execs and consumers. A semi-structured interview study with a qualitative design was used to conduct the interviews (based on the grounded theory approach). Grounded theory is an 'iterative' and a 'recursive' methodology, which is adopted when a researcher intends to generate theory from the data gathered and analysed systematically (Glase & Strauss, 1967). Moreover, grounded theory brings social constructs to surface through the analyses (O'Callaghan, 1996), thereby compelling the researcher to discover the origins of concepts and categories as they emerge from the data (Goulding, 2002).

Introduction

The rationale of this study was to offer execs a broader perspective of a partially exploited concept within the field of relationship marketing. A careful exploration of the existing studies identified an incomplete and a lack of cohesive understanding, thereby, specified an opportunity to theorise an integrated concept around brand advocacy.

Subsequently, to enable operationalisation of the concept, the research solicited what motivates or impedes the customer to exhibit brand advocacy behaviours. The analysis recognised several determinants that drive/inhibit consumers from engaging in WOM/referrals, co-creation, crowdsourcing activities, or participate in a community.

Furthermore, it also revealed factors that may potentially weaken or moderate the relationship between the intention to and the demonstration of brand advocacy actions.

Given the variety of the extant literature the integrated brand advocacy concept borrows its context from, this study sought to compare the research findings, with the aim to either affirm, refute or extend, the established antecedents prevailing in the literature.

The 8 Drivers/Inhibitors of Brand Advocacy

The analysis discovered 8 overarching drivers/inhibitors and 3 moderating factors of brand advocacy. Brand advocacy constitutes WOM/Referrals and the 3Cs of Collaboration: Community, Crowdsourcing, and Co-creation, reflecting on the proposed concept. Although the concept suggests a non-siloed view of its components, the absence of a unified body of literature necessitated treatment of the elements of collaboration distinctively to aid the investigation. The approach facilitated an effective comparison of the research outcomes and findings affirmed in previous studies. Moreover, an evaluation of scholarly sources and interview analysis outlined similarities between the antecedents in the literature and the research outcomes. A range of literature demonstrated direct effects of abstract relationship marketing concepts and discovered specific motives for customers to engage in WOM/Referrals. While much of the literature discusses motivations from a general point of view supported by utility theory for an assortment of brands, this research goes further. It aims to identify drivers critical from a brand's perspective to be able to capitalise on its brand advocates.

1) Make life easy for your customers

Several studies have affirmed that a customer's evaluation of satisfaction has an impact on WOM/Referrals (Brown, et al., 2005; Fullerton, 2011). The notion that increased satisfaction encourages a positive exchange of WOM and the willingness to recommend is widely accepted (Oliver, 1980; Bloch, 1986; Bitner, 1990). Although most works of the literature confirmed a positive direct relationship between satisfaction and WOM/Referrals, precursors of increased satisfaction in the extant sources supplemented the discovery of specific motives.

While Tax, et al. (1998) recognised increased satisfaction as a result of complaint handling and Verhoef, et al. (2009) amongst many others associated customer experience with satisfaction, Buttle (1998) and Berger, et al. (2011) acknowledged Product Quality and Product Accessibility as drivers of both satisfaction and the subsequent positive WOM/Referrals. Consistent with these findings, the analysis identified *accessibility, longevity, customer support, and seamless customer experience* as the starting point of brand advocacy behaviours. Additionally, the analysis uncovered ease of use and simplicity as the most pressing determinants to compel customers to exchange in WOM/Referrals. Thus, **Making Life Easy** attributed as a key driver of Brand Advocacy Behaviour. However, not many publications seem to have identified ease as a significant construct. Furthermore, the analysis suggested ease of life as a practical focus of a brand's market orientation.

2) Ensure your brand is customer orientated

Additionally, authors have acknowledged **Customer Orientation** vital to relationship marketing. But, a prior investigation into motives of advocacy, including community, crowdsourcing, and co-creation, appears limited to recognise the positive impact of customer orientation on advocacy behaviours. Whilst few authors have identified delivery of core service performance and perceived value as indicatives of positive WOM/ Referrals and Co-creation, (Buttle, 1998; Gruen, et al., 2000), the research participants stressed the significance of brands to deliver on promise, act on their feedback, while being highly customer focused to induce brand users to collaborate with, advocate for, and help the brand to grow.

Subsequently, a few others have determined delight or exceeding expectations as a motivator of WOM/ Referrals (Buttle, 1998; Libai, et al., 2001). Albeit the analysis identified exceeding expectations as a driver of brand advocacy, it did not recognise it as a mandatory driver of WOM/ Referrals. This result was supported by equity theory, which suggested a desire for fair exchanges (Huseman, et al., 1987). Accordingly, the analysis proposed that the motivation to exert efforts to demonstrate advocacy behaviours was relative to the value received from the brand in exchange. As a result, since respondents believed that WOM/ referrals did not demand much effort, they did not expect to feel delighted by the brand to perform this activity. However, for actions that required more effort from the end of the customer, exceeding expectations served as a common motive amongst the respondents.

3) Understand what motivates your customers to become brand advocates

Built on equity theory, and coherent with the findings of previous inquiries, the desire to help the brand emerged as an **intrinsic motivator** to demonstrate advocacy behaviours in response to customer orientation. While Hennig-Thurau, et al. (2004) avowed customer's willingness to engage in positive WOM in response to satisfaction, this research verified the relevance of this motive across other advocacy behaviours. Additionally, the analysis also revealed the enjoyment to help other customers get better value as another intrinsic driver, which was a motive similar to the social integration of a Market Maven (Buttle, 1998; Phelps, et al., 2005). Besides, the impact of offering economic rewards or monetary benefits to prompt WOM/ Referrals has been highly debatable. However, the analysis identified rewards as a motivator to exhibit advocacy behaviours as a token of appreciation for the customer's efforts. The results also confirmed recognition (Gruen, et al., 2000), maximum efficacy, and better service as additional **extrinsic drivers** in exchange of efforts exerted for the brand. Likewise, altruism had been a shared motive verified across most prior studies.

4) Discover your customers' personalities

Typically, this research also regarded *Altruism* as a driver distinctive of an individual's **personality**. Additionally, the research recognised that the level of usage of social media influenced most respondents' intention to display advocacy behaviours. Furthermore, the degree to which users of a brand were willing to involve and engage varied amongst people according to their characteristic traits. Surprisingly, existing pieces of research have not discovered personality as an overarching motive yet.

5) Make your customers feel special

Moreover, much of consumer behaviour literature has strongly held positive association of personality and **self-worth** to persuasion and attitude change (Kassarjian, 1971). Primarily because psychologists McClarty, et al. (2007) affirmed that individual's self-views, self esteem, self-concept, behavioural outcomes, and social settings are deeply correlated, which significantly influence one another. Several studies associated self-enhancement as a motive of WOM/ Referrals. However, this motive did not surface as a significant driver of advocacy behaviour. Subsequently, scholars confirmed that traces of past experiences unknowingly stimulate attitudes and self-esteem of individuals (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Supported by this proposition, the results of the analysis revealed that personalised/tailored experience and the efforts of the brand to make customers feel special notably encouraged customers to advocate for the brand. Also, participants significantly stressed the importance of their efforts being acknowledged and suggested that acknowledgment made them feel valued.

6) Foster a relationship with your customers

Further, the analysis discovered that customers sought acknowledgment of their efforts to advocate through active communication from the brand or its employees. Coherent with the belief of scholars that front-line employees are the face of the brand (Netemeyer & Maxham III, 2003), the participants expressed the significance of their relationship with the brand representatives on their decisions to advocate. Often, respondents articulated that their relationship with the employees had a mediating and moderating effect on their **relationship with the brand**. Subsequently, customers were willing to maintain relationship continuity with the brand for an on-going exchange of value. Not many studies have identified a relationship with the brand as an antecedent of WOM/referrals. However, most scholarly articles have recognised commitment as a precursor.

7) Understand the level of relationship you have with your customers

Relationship marketing experts defined consumer-brand commitment as “an implicit or explicit pledge of relationship continuity between exchange partners” (Dwyer, et al., 1987). Although many researchers presented a unidimensional view of commitment, several scholars identified the need for a multidimensional view in response to the evolving dynamics of relationships. They proposed affective, continuance, and normative forms of commitment to represent the true nature of a consumer’s relationship with the brand and its implication on its continuity (Bansal, et al., 2004). Basis the unidimensional view, several authors confirmed brand commitment as an antecedent of WOM/referrals, mediated by satisfaction (Verhoef, et al., 2002; Gunst, et al., 2005; Fullerton, 2011). Subsequently, the analysis of this research identified that the **level of relationship/commitment** determined a customers’ decision and the degree to which they were willing to exert effort to perform an advocacy action.

According to the analysis, a transactional relationship/normative commitment (*passive loyalty*), was a starting point of advocacy behaviour through positive WOM/ Referrals. However, supported by the social exchange theory, which based its roots of relationship development on the cost-benefit analysis, (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), transactional relationship as a driver did not necessarily transcend to other acts of advocacy, subject to the level of effort required. But, results further suggested that customers’ strong psychological bond with a brand invigorated advocacy behaviour beyond WOM/ Referrals. The customers shared an emotional connection/ affective commitment with brands that had positive memories attached to them or those brands that had greatly contributed to their lives. Contrary to the previous findings that claimed affective commitment as a motive of WOM/referrals, the research argued that affective commitment was a potential driver of advocacy actions other than WOM/referrals, which involved a substantial exertion of effort. Interestingly, customers agreed to voluntarily advocate for the growth of the brands they were emotionally committed to, without anticipating any reward/acknowledgment in return.

8) Align your values to those of your customers

Successively, many academic sources have accredited affective commitment as a mediator of consumer-brand identification (Gunst, et al., 2005; Ferguson 2011), and postulated WOM/Referrals, and participation in a brand community as its consequences (Algesheimer, et al., 2005; Wirtz, et al., 2013). Subsequently, scholars defined identification as “the degree of overlap between the self-schema and the schema held by the target object” (Bergami & Bagozi, 2001; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Built on the self-schemata theory (Markus, 1977), previous literature regarded identification with the brand as a precursor of engaging in a brand community. Some argued that commitment was an outcome of active engagement in a brand community (Carlson, et al., 2008). Typically, the analysis discovered that customers who strongly identified with the brands were more likely to voluntarily perform

advocacy actions. Besides brand similarity, brand distinctiveness, brand prestige, memorable brand experiences, and brand warmth (Stokburger-Sauer, et al., 2012), the research revealed that customers identified with brands when they could buy into its espoused and shared values. While many academicians ascertained trust as an antecedent of commitment (Fullerton, 2011; Marzocchi, et al., 2013), Morgan & Hunt (1994) defined trust as customer's confidence in the brand's reliability and integrity. The research acknowledged that customers trusted brands when the stated espoused values were in line with shared values. Additionally, for customers to strongly identify with the brands, the analysis revealed that brand values must align with the values of its customers. Not many scholars have credited the alignment of values as a potential driver of collaboration. Furthermore, the analysis identified that customers were willing to associate with brands that had a sound ethical and moral standpoint. In the wake of being ethically-conscious, customers felt strongly for brands that actively contributed to society (Maignan & Ferrell, 2004). Furthermore, brand values, purpose, and principles emerged as strong factors influencing brand advocacy behaviours.

The Moderators of Brand Advocacy

Further, the research uncovered moderating factors of brand advocacy drivers. It identified time as a major detriment to the intention to perform advocacy. The demonstration of the advocacy action was subject to the time required to advocate for the brand. Subsequently, the customers' prioritisation of the task at hand versus the advocacy action also had a potential impact on advocacy. Also, a significant moderator of brand advocacy was the knowledge of the brand, skills and interest, confidence, and logistics or means and resources involved.

Lastly, respondents expressed hesitation and anxiety towards associating themselves with brands that held a conflicting/weak opinion in society. Consequently, they sought to gain additional information about the brand across various sources before deciding to advocate for the brand. Thus, the brand image significantly moderated the effects of advocacy. Intriguingly, extant literature fails to acknowledge the above-mentioned determinants that weaken the link between the intention to and display of brand advocacy behaviours.

Implications for Brand Execs

Word-of-mouth communications, referrals, and collaboration have been long identified as antecedents and consequences of brand loyalty (Libai, et al., 2010; Loureiro, et al., 2012; Marzocchi, et al., 2013). However, the analysis we conducted suggests otherwise. Due to a significant loss in trust on brands, an increasing number of customers are becoming cynical towards brand loyalty.

Moreover, with a plethora of brands at their disposal, customers' commitment towards a particular brand appears volatile. Thus, in the present context, true loyalty may be perplexing to achieve. Consequently, over the years, practitioners have resorted to loyalty programs/schemes to gather customer data and increase sales (Bolton, et al., 2000).

However, scholars affirm that loyalty programs deliver mere quantitative measures of relationship with the customers (Uncles, et al., 2003). In the wake of the evolving dynamics between brands and their customers, this research identifies key managerial considerations for brands to operationalise the potentials of the partially informed theory of brand advocacy.

In this summary, the analysis and interviews with key marketing and customer experience (CX) experts conceive salient points of deliberations for managers to support the effective use of the brand advocacy concept while catering to the subtleties of the changing rapport between the brands and their users.

Get the Basics Right

The analysis and CX professionals affirm that consistency in delivering the promise, making it easy for customers, and making them feel a positive emotion offer a starting point of advocacy behaviour. Currently, professionals believe that companies are far behind the stage of collaboration unless they get the basics right. The absence of the basic regimen may create friction for customers to attain value from the solution proposed. Consequently impeding brands from the initial opportunity to compel users to engage in a positive word of mouth or refer to the brand. Moreover, it may lead to customers switching to alternative brands within the same category.

Embed a Customer-Centric Culture

Consistent with the findings in the extant strategic management literature, the analysis identifies the need for customer-centricity. Scholars agree that companies that place customer's interest at the heart of its organisational cultures are more profitable (Shah, et al., 2006). Typically, the analysis construes that articulating the brand purpose within the culture and empowering employees to live the customer-oriented values enable brands to build a

relationship with the customers. Subsequently sharing espoused brand values aligned with the customer values supports the development of a psychological bond between the two parties, consequently inclining brands users to voluntarily engage in active advocacy behaviours.

Know your Customer

As stated by the marketing professionals and inferred from the analysis, a brand's purpose is to understand the customer and tweak its offerings in a way that delivers the right value to that distinct user. Subsequently, experts believe that factors that motivate or inhibit customers from performing advocacy for the brand may be determined by the psychology of the customer himself. The customer's values, background, experiences, etc. may regulate the type of motivation as well. Consequently, motivation may be different for different kinds of people. Therefore, the key is for brands to understand who its customers are what is important to them.

Brand Advocacy is Integrated

This study identifies Community, Crowdsourcing, and Co-creating as elements of Collaboration that extends the advocacy form WOM/ Referrals. While the research addresses each element differently to facilitate a better understanding of the drivers/inhibitors, professionals and extant literature around collaboration confirm that a distinct delineation of the elements may be complicated. Scholarly articles and case studies around brand communities recognise that a typical brand community engagement activity is co-creating and/or crowdsourcing with other community members (Gruen, et al., 2000; Albert M. Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schau, et al., 2009). Moreover, experts recognised commitment, engagement, satisfaction as significant outcomes of brand community participation (Schau, et al., 2009; Wirtz, et al., 2013), which were identified as profound abstract mediators of advocacy behaviours.

Furthermore, research and development experts avow that the core of crowdsourcing and co-innovation is co-creating with stakeholders, built on collaborative provisions and congregating ideas (Lee, et al., 2012). Thus, managers must note that institutionalising true brand advocacy is an integrated effort and necessitates management across facets. However, brands may steer their focus on individual elements accordingly.

Advocacy versus Customer Engagement

The field of relationship marketing recognises the importance of customer engagement in co-creating customer value in an interactive environment. As this concept gains popularity, several authors define customer engagement behaviour as customer's post-purchase behavioural manifestations towards a brand as a result of motivational drivers (Verhoef, et al., 2010). Intriguingly, authors identify Word-of-Mouth, recommendations, blogs, testimonials, and feedback/suggestions as to different post-purchase activities a customer engages in (Doorn, et al., 2012; Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Subject to its similarity with the activities of advocacy behaviour, constructs related to customer engagement tend to overlap with those of brand advocacy (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). While few antecedents and consequences of customer engagement behaviours and brand advocacy behaviours may also intersect (Morgan, et al., 2012; Sashi, 2012; Brodie, et al., 2013), the key differentiating dimensions are **Valence** (positive or negative customer engagement), **Modality** (different subjective ways to express customer engagement behaviour); **Scope** (momentary or geographic), and **Variations** in Customer's Purpose of Engaging (Doorn, et al., 2010). Therefore, managers must understand the incidence of operationalising either of the two concepts accordingly.

Super Advocates and Brand Love

Based on the research results, the analysis suggests several psychological and emotional antecedents of brand advocacy. Interestingly, coherent with the research findings, studies around precursors of brand love verify consumer-brand identification, positive emotional connection, long-term relationship, overall positive attitude, and confidence as core elements of brand love among the rest (Batra, et al., 2012; Albert, et al., 2013). Additionally, interviews with marketing experts highlight that although brand love exists and firms must aspire to achieve brand love, customers struggle to associate emotions to transactions. Further, despite demonstrating antecedents of brand love, research participants denied admitting love for a brand. Therefore, scholars attempt to differentiate love as an emotion from love as a relationship (Batra, et al., 2012). Consequently, brand love may encourage customers to deepen brand relationships and accordingly drive deeper levels of brand advocacy behaviour. Thus, managers may pursue to get customers to attain brand love to create a super advocate.

Conclusion

The research suggests execs should consider institutionalising the proposed top-down concept of brand advocacy. Although the implementation might encompass several facets to reflect on, given the potentials of the projected implications, practitioners may be able to make effective use of the suggested managerial concept.



Next Steps

To discuss this research in detail and understand how it can be used to activate your brand advocates email: hello@hyvespace.com and we'll get in touch to arrange a convenient time to speak.