Profiling Customer Engagement with “Snuggie” Experience in Social Media

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Abstract: In order to understand meaningful customer experience in social media, this study profiles customer engagement by exposing the essential brand experience rooms in hyper-reality contexts. This study selects Snuggie as a target brand as it uses multiple contact points, including social media, to provide meaningful experience to customers. With their unique marketing strategy, Snuggie became a popular brand among the U.S. customers beyond just a wearable blanket. Upon analyzing a total of 364 customer reviews about Snuggie in Amazon.com, five experience rooms were exposed; “Physical artifacts” and “customer involvement” are influential experience rooms which signify interactions between products and customers, while “intangible artifacts”, “technology” and “customer placement” reflect a lower degree of experiential engagement. This approach suggests a theoretical foundation in understanding the customer engagement concepts by the means of brand experience dimensions in social media. The ability to create compelling engagement in social media depends on the successful facilitation of relationships and information, which lead to a creative, communicative and interactive experience.

Key words: customer engagement, experience room, social media, Snuggie

1. Introduction

The challenge of incorporating digital channels lies in coping with the volume, nature, and velocity of the digital content for effective use (French et al., 2012). Delivering brand experience through the digital content has been of critical importance as customers demand different kinds of relationships with brands online; they check prices at a keystroke; they are increasingly selective about which brands to share their lives with; and they form impressions from every encounter and post withering online reviews. Indeed, customers desire “on-demand, personal, engaging, and networked” experiences when they search, shop, and consume products or services (Brakus et al., 2009).

As the critical moments of interaction between brands and customers are increasingly spread across multiple channels of fashion retailing, customer engagement is now every business’ priority (French et al., 2012). Customer engagement goes beyond managing different channels, as it motivates customers to invest in an ongoing relationship with a product or service (French et al., 2012). Over the past years, a wide range of fashion retail companies have tried to address customer engagement in more integrated ways; yet, companies are struggling to determine appropriate business approaches as the spectrum of consumer’s brand choices is broader than ever.

Snuggie, a fleece blanket with sleeves which is turned around and worn backwards, incorporated creative marketing strategy that led them to become a fun part of pop culture since late 2008 when it was first introduced in the U.S. market. Many similar blanket products with varying sizes, colors, styles and qualities of materials have been marketed by various brands such as Snuggler, Doojo, Toasty Wrap, and Slanket (“How to tell”, 2009). However, Snuggie got popular by early 2009, which resulted in four million dollars’ worth of sales revenue in 2009 (Puente, 2009) due to its multi-channel approach including inimitable TV ads, online sales and traditional retailers (e.g. Walmart and Bed, Bath & Beyond). Specifically Snuggie’s viral marketing being referenced or imitated by many comedians or TV shows, created a pop culture phenomena while exceeding customers’ expectations for a simple seasonal product. Their success shows the importance of reaching customers through multiple contact points, and providing meaningful experience through visible cues that reflect the consumers’ identities, lifestyles, and interests, which reinforce symbolic and social values, and generate emotional responses (Hamedie, 2011).

To enable customers to have experiences of a product before purchase, an increasing number of fashion retailers have begun to offer a “test drive” of the brand experience. It is thus apparent that some of the elements of the service or the product must be simulated. Edvardsson and Enquist (2010) suggest that the simulation of all or part of an experience has been referred to as “hyper-reality”. Drawn from the concept of “hyper-reality” as “... the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of one’s experience” (Hirsh-
man & Holbrook, 1982), several scholars have suggested that “hyper-reality” refers to a simulated (or partially simulated) service reality (Baudrillard, 1994; Edvardsson et al., 2005; Grove & Fisk, 1997; Martin, 2004; Venkatesh, 1999). Indeed, such “hyper-real” (or simulated) experiences are common in many retail services particularly in social media. The ability to create compelling experiences on social media depends on the successful facilitation of e-WOM (Chu & Kim, 2011), which leads to creative, communicative and interactive engagements in discrete experience rooms. This experiential perspective expands the scope of online consumer behavior and provides practical applications of brand experience research to the marketplace. Therefore, given Snuggie’s viral power in conjunction with its integration with pop culture, examining customer engagement exposed in social media may provide potentials to promote brands to diversified global market segments.

Online customer reviews have been found to improve customer perception of social presence of the brand or product (Kumar & Benbasat, 2006). Reviews have the potential to attract consumer visits, increase the time spent on the site, and create a sense of community among frequent shoppers (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). Compared to other online retailers or social media such as eBay or Snuggie’s official website, Amazon.com is ideal for customer engagement as its instantaneous platform enables customers to create, share, exchange and comment among themselves (Layton, 2012). Amazon customers actively share their opinions and stories by leaving their review comments, which incorporates the value of customer reviews as part of the product or brand descriptions. Amazon.com has become the leading source of product reviews which lures more customers into the brand’s website (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). Further, the customer review system of Amazon.com strategically allows customers to get engaged as it encourages them to respond to others’ reviews. For example, after each customer review, Amazon.com asks, “Was this review helpful to you?” and provides helpfulness information alongside the review (e.g., “26 of 31 people found the following review helpful”).

If information, consumption, and experiences are intersecting across the global market, the global fashion industry can make an informed decision and gain tools for predicting, measuring, and configuring this uncharted experiential paradigm. Yet, generalized knowledge from the conventional consumer behavior paradigm makes it difficult to address inimitable nature of multifaceted customer engagement (Kim, 2012). In order to understand customer experiential engagement in social media, this study employs Edvardsson and Enquist (2010) conceptualization of six experience rooms in hyper-reality contexts. By focusing on the Snuggie case, this study aims at (1) exploring the underlying dimensions of customer engagement in the Snuggie consumption; and (2) identifying the six experience rooms from customer review comments drawn from Amazon.com. Identifying dimensions of customer engagement in the Snuggie case will provide the insights on utilizing customers’ brand and product experiences on social media.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Customer engagement in social media

Social media is a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, allowing the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Within this general definition, there are various types of social media such as Wikipedia, YouTube, Facebook, Second Life as well as blogs, twitters and many brands’ websites that need to be distinguished further. Regardless of types of social media, it allows consumers to feel emotionally connected, helps brands to achieve their marketing goals through storytelling, and establishes a personal connection with a brand (Singer, 2011). Brands can aim for maximum viral effects among engaged customers as social media allows customers to engage, seek, share, and create individual stories regarding brands (Divol et al., 2012). Although a few studies try to comprehend reliable experience dimensions relevant to social media, many scholars and practitioners are perplexed about its effectiveness; whether a social media platform can drive everything from customer relationships to product development, or if it is just another marketing tool.

When relational resources (e.g., trust, norm of reciprocity and social identity) are optimized within the virtual social networks, these motivate consumers to voluntarily share and gather information in order to reduce uncertainty, gain insights into knowledge shared in the virtual learning communities, and consume and obtain services (Koh et al., 2007; Wu & Liu, 2007). This process of building commitment is often referred to as engagement (Mathwick et al., 2008). Many scholars (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Wasko & Faraj, 2005) explicate engagement experiences as a critical element of virtual behavior, emphasizing the role of information gathering, knowledge sharing and interactive learning. Not only are users able to share information with virtual friends with common interests (Blanchard, 2004; Haubl & Trifts, 2000; Sismeiro & Bucklin, 2004), but also make contributions to knowledge building within the virtual community (Humphreys & Grayson, 2008; Ritner & Jurgenson, 2010).

While the practitioners’ view of engagement has focused on the outcome such as gaining a competitive advantage (Roberts & Lafley, 2005), the scholarly view tends to use other constructs to assess the consumer engagement experience. Mollen and Wilson (2010) have recently defined the online engagement as a cognitive and