

Exploring online engagement within Facebook brand communities

Facebook has 2.38 billion monthly active users, and connects about a third of the world's population and as a result Facebook's reach and influence has a growing impact on business marketing effectiveness as well as marketing spend. However, research on Facebook brand communities, how consumers engage online, and the related antecedents and outcomes, is sparse and inconclusive.

In this regard, an empirical research was conducted by Danita van Heerden, a [Doctoral](#) student in the [Department of Marketing Management](#) to investigate online engagement within Facebook brand communities (fan pages) with its behavioural manifestations and psychological connections. Sense of community (SOC) theory was investigated to determine whether it can be used as an underpinning for online engagement. In addition, the antecedents (motivation to engage) and the outcomes (implications or benefits for consumers but, more importantly, for brands) were also explored.

Two separate data sets were used in this study with the purpose of exploring different elements related to online engagement and Facebook brand fan pages. Non-probability, convenience sampling was used, and sample sizes of 497 and 381 useable responses were realised for Study A and Study B respectively. The target population consisted of adults (18 years and older) who belong to Facebook brand fan pages. Structural equation modelling (SEM) was used to test the various relationships identified in the study.

The results confirm that SOC theory is a suitable theoretical underpinning for investigating online engagement in Facebook brand fan pages, and that there is a cyclical relationship between online engagement and SOC. Furthermore, when considering engagement behaviours, it was found that consumers can be classified as either 'Lurkers' or 'Superfans', and that the so-called 'Lurkers' could hold more benefits for brands. Facebook brand fan pages have several positive financial and non-financial implications for brands. Continued usage and involvement with a firm's products are the strongest implications for 'Lurkers', and a sense-of-belonging and word-of-mouth are the strongest implications for 'Superfans'. Furthermore, it was found that – irrespective of the perspective of engagement (behavioural or psychological) – purchase intent emerged as an outcome of online engagement, rendering financial benefits to the firm. It was also evident that loyalty results from online engagement. The more traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) and the net promoter score, which is more often used in industry as a replacement for WOM due to the simplicity of the measure, also rendered positive results. This confirms the argument by Goldsmith et al. (2011) that loyalty, frequent consumption/purchase intention, and positive WOM are three of the most desirable marketing outcomes. Finally, it is evident that hedonic motivations such as entertainment, brand-likeability, and interpersonal utility are strong drivers of online engagement, while the same is not true for utilitarian motivations such as information seeking, convenience, and remuneration for using the Facebook brand fan page.

The study makes practical and theoretical contributions as well as responds to the differing viewpoints using either a behavioural and/or a psychological perspective

when investigating engagement, and provides suggestions pertaining how engagement should be treated and viewed. As a large percentage of firms' marketing budgets goes towards developing and maintaining strategies for social media pages, this study provides evidence that members of Facebook brand fan pages are indeed engaged with the brand, and that this holds financial and non-financial benefits for brands, other than being merely a communication channel. Furthermore, this study suggests various strategies for brands to encourage customers to engage with the brands online via Facebook brand fan pages to ensure the brands maximum financial and non-financial benefits.

The research was conducted by Danita van Heerden, as part of the fulfilment of the requirements of a [Doctor of Philosophy \(PhD\) degree](#) with specialisation in Marketing Management in the [Department of Marketing Management](#), under the supervision of [Prof Melanie Wiese](#).