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The Levers of Engagement: An Exploration of Governance in an Online Brand Community

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Abstract

Online brand communities represent an increasingly important touch-point for establishing effective consumer–brand relationships. Growing consumer empowerment and an absence of empirical research on the subject, however, have left many firms struggling to balance the often-contradictory goals of community propagation for corporate gain with the autonomy demanded by such groups. This exploratory study investigates the management of this tension between control and engagement in a single Facebook brand community to understand how a firm can balance community goals with corporate needs. Our analysis of more than 13,000 Facebook comments and 2988 company posts reveals that online brand community governance can be conceptualised as a continuum. We identify three critical levers that the case study firm manipulated to establish equilibrium between commercial and community imperatives. The levers represent appealing, consulting and affiliating actions and are manifest in a range of social media marketing tactics exhibited by the company which we examine in the context of engagement theory.

Key Words: Engagement; control; social media; brand community management

Introduction

Online brand communities (OBCs) offer a potentially powerful avenue for customer engagement facilitated by social media's capacity to establish more intimate relationships with consumers than the mass media that preceded it (Bruhn, Schoenmueller & Schäfer 2012; Dessart, Veloutsou & Morgan-Thomas 2015). Their propensity for grassroots evangelism (Algesheimer, Dholakia & Herrmann 2005; Fournier & Lee 2009) furnishes consumers with an influential and credible voice when messages are shared with peers across such socially oriented networks. Leveraging these qualities for commercial purposes is, therefore, of increasing interest to marketers who seek to engage brand fans through firm-sponsored social media-based communities. In this regard, a growing corpus of literature is devoted to explaining user behaviour in the context of social media (Ngai, Tao & Moon 2015; Sierra, Badrinarayanan & Taute 2016), while research exploring the manner in which firms manage relationships with their communities has been largely neglected.

The intrinsic nature of OBCs can create problems for firms on two levels. First, these collectives are inherently self-interested, thriving on independence while simultaneously craving recognition for their contribution (Fournier & Avery 2011). The engagement that marketers seek with these consumers is increasingly being achieved on the consumer's terms as the locus of control shifts away from brands (Hatch & Schultz 2010; Quinton 2013). This presents a dilemma for managers, who must balance the seemingly contradictory goals of propagating these groups for engagement while preserving their autonomy which makes them attractive avenues of communication in the first place. Second, the motivation of fans to engage with brands via these communities is not always wholly consistent with the firm's commercial imperatives. Understanding how to address this potential discord without discouraging (or, worse, antagonising) fans is important because negative brand experiences are potentially more visible, more difficult to control and can travel further and faster on

social media than in offline environments. The greater access for stakeholders inherent to social media heightens reputational risk for brands, according to Hatch and Schultz (2010), who maintain that managers cannot manage brand communities in the same way they would their own company. A new paradigm has emerged, therefore, driving the management of OBCs beyond a simple one-sided transactional event to one characterised by community integration, whereby the brand becomes a collaborative outcome of active consumer engagement (Quinton 2013).

The current study acknowledges a broad cross-section of previous research examining engagement and control in different contexts, including research from various academic disciplines, environments and viewpoints (Macnamara & Zerfass 2012; Muntinga, Moorman & Smit 2011). Drawing on this existing knowledge as a conceptual background, this paper examines the tension between control and engagement in order to understand how a firm's communication strategy can best be managed to promote equilibrium in its relationship with consumers via social media. Specifically, we ask: how is the leading social networking platform, Facebook used to balance a firm's interests with those of its fans? The study responds to calls for empirical research into the processes and strategies used to sustain engagement in OBCs (Wirtz et al. 2013) and, more recently, into the brand community management efforts of firms (Liao, Huang & Xiao 2017).

Where previous research on OBC engagement and control leans towards consumer motivation, the current study is shaped by a brand management perspective and takes a corporate view. The paper contributes to knowledge in this important emerging field in two ways. First, we use a case study approach to provide empirical evidence of community member responses and reactions to company communications. And, second, using this contemporary example of OBC management, we propose a classification of social media marketing practices presented as a framework for corporations seeking to leverage OBCs. We

contend that relationships can be shaped via a flexible approach to community governance using a typology comprised of three operational levers to facilitate balanced community–brand engagement. In doing so, the research expands our understanding of the concept of control in OBCs, adding to the discourse first introduced by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) and later extended by Hatch and Schultz (2010) that remains otherwise largely unexplored.

The next section of the paper examines the literature relating to brand communities to provide a theoretical background to the study. We review the current thinking in relation to these communities, the concept of control in social media platforms and the construct of engagement in Facebook – the online practice context where much of the study took place. Next, an explanation of the methodology and an outline of the findings are presented. Finally, the empirical insights are discussed before the paper concludes with an examination of the managerial and theoretical implications and opportunities to further extend the research.

Conceptual Background

OBCs

Brand communities are defined as non-geographically bound, self-selected groups of consumers who come together in a context of social consumption around a brand (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001; Veloutsou & Moutinho 2009). In the postmodern world they are thought to provide their members with a sense of meaning through human association (Arnould & Price 2000; Cova 1997; Firat & Shultz 1997) via enduring yet complex relationships. However, the seminal research that ushered in this field was largely centred on groups that formed before the advent of computer-mediated social networking platforms.

These social aggregations have now moved online, appropriating the inherent benefits of the internet, to form what Kozinets (1999) describes as ‘eTribes’, through which the construct of value is socially negotiated, and consumption becomes a creative experience shared with networked peers (Taillard et al. 2014). In this setting, utility is eschewed in favour of the symbolism bestowed by the marketplace (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig 2002) as users seek a mode of satisfaction that differs from the traditional transactional construct, the former being a more affective or relational self-awareness (Carroll & Ahuvia 2006). OBCs have now gravitated to social media which provide an efficient suite of networking tools capable of rapidly diffusing communications. The potential to leverage these platforms as commercial channels has captured the imagination of marketers seeking connection with consumers, leading to a proliferation of company-sponsored OBCs contrived artificially as part of a broader communications agenda. The research presented in this paper was conducted in the context of this group of corporately instigated communities with the aim of identifying the implications of a firm’s efforts to engage these social networks for corporate gain.

In this setting, the influence sought by firms via sponsored online communities has a commercial dimension associated with transactional outcomes, as well as a social dimension associated with relational outcomes. Both are contingent on the engagement of brand fans, which can be achieved in brand communities through the elicitation of consumer comments to company created social media posts as an important component of a firm’s relationship-building strategies. Extending these commercial friendships by facilitating brand communities is important as it can aid brand socialisation; positively affect consumer satisfaction, loyalty and brand advocacy; lead to higher customer engagement; elicit positive word-of-mouth; and increase brand commitment among consumers, resulting in greater intention to purchase (see Algesheimer, Dholakia & Herrmann 2005; De Vries, NJ & Carlson

2014; Kim et al. 2008; McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig 2002; Scarpi 2010; Stokburger-Sauer 2010).

Nurturing relationships in OBCs is fraught, however, as the media hosting such groups are characterised by the dynamic and frequent change inherent to digital platforms. Relationships between companies and these communities must adhere to a nebulous framework governing engagement due to the absence of theory pertaining to the management of such associations. Consequently, practitioners and academics have sought to borrow paradigms associated with traditional offline communication despite the fact that the online context operates under different rules of engagement (Davis, Piven & Breazeale 2014; Naylor, Lamberton & West 2012; Prendergast, Ko & Siu Yin 2010). One key challenge for marketers managing online communities lies in establishing bidirectional trust, an antecedent of brand loyalty (Laroche, Habibi & Richard 2013). Implicit in gaining the trust of consumers in these settings is a rejection of unilateral company-centric brand management paradigms so that meaningful relationships can be facilitated through community access and engagement. The control of such access has, therefore, emerged as a key theme in the recent literature (Berthon et al. 2012; Dobeles, Steel & Cooper 2015; Fournier & Avery 2011; Gensler et al. 2013), yet there is little agreement on what constitutes the optimal balance between flexibility and enforcement in relationship management within these environments.

Engagement in OBCs

Customer relationship management refers to an integrated approach to managing customer relationships based on people, process and technology (Chen & Popovich 2003). A central construct in this complex system is engagement, which sits at the heart of OBCs. Yet only recently has the conceptualisation of engagement in marketing made a distinction between online and offline forms. Brodie et al. (2013) describe engagement in virtual brand

communities as a highly context-driven iterative process centred on specific interactive consumer experiences which is distinct from involvement and participation. More recently, Hollebeek et al. (2014), in addition to offering a comprehensive summary of extant definitions of engagement, sought to include the user's psychological state to redefine consumer-brand engagement as 'a consumer's positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioural activity' (Hollebeek 2014 p.154). This approach acknowledges the multi-dimensional nature of the concept of engagement and the importance of involvement as an antecedent. In Facebook communities, positive valence is inseparable from engagement and is manifest in *liking, sharing or commenting* on posts. For many firms, these actions have become the trophies of online engagement and are pursued via increasingly sophisticated rich-media technology; whereas, for consumers, they are a manifestation of a network-based source of empowerment capable of influencing the decision-making of others (Labrecque et al. 2013). Facebook comments, therefore, may be regarded as a gateway for marketers seeking to build rapport with OBCs.

Engagement on Facebook

In examining the motivation to participate in online brand-related activities, Muntinga et al. (2011) outline three levels of social media engagement ranging from consuming to contributing to creating. Similarly, Li and Bernoff (2008) use a social technographics ladder to describe 'how far down the funnel' (p.126) users venture in their engagement, emphasising the spectral nature of the social media journey. In Facebook, users *like* a post by clicking on the 'like' button, an action considered a positive affirmation by the user in relation to the content (De Vries, NJ & Carlson 2014; Jahn & Kunz 2012). We suggest, however, that liking is a static measure and a poor proxy for engagement due to the limited interaction required – a deficiency now acknowledged by Facebook through the introduction of reaction buttons in 2016. *Sharing* requires more substantive input from users whereby a post is forwarded to

other members of one's social network. While liking and sharing are valid engagement measures, *commenting* is the highest form of engagement, requiring the user to compose and post their thoughts or *tag* friends by name. This form of engagement is thus an interactive process that provides users with the opportunity to engage in dialogue with brands and their own social networks simultaneously.

Control Theory and OBCs

Understandably, many firms pursue the positive rewards associated with consumer engagement via social media, but greater resonance with brand fans now comes at the cost of less control for brand managers (Fournier & Avery 2011). What this means in the context of OBCs is contestable in the absence of theory; and thus the exploration of relationship management in social media-based brand communities forms the basis of this research.

To understand the concept of engagement we turn, therefore, to control theory which has yet to explore brand community governance but has been used to explain the application of formal and informal controls characterising the management of relationships between firms and their customers (Joshi 2009). Thus, control in OBCs may be defined as 'the attempts by management or other stakeholders to influence the behaviour and activities of [community members] to achieve desired outcomes' (adapted from Jaworski 1988, p. 24). Central to this proposition, therefore, is customer empowerment via social media and the related realignment of the abstraction of contemporary marketing theory towards a service-dominant logic that emphasises the inherent power of customers as the co-creators of value (Vargo & Lusch 2004); (Ind & Bjerke 2007).

Rejecting the view of consumers as exogenous entities, in their examination of the negotiation of value between customers and firms, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) identified four agencies of consumer interaction that form the locus of collaborative value-

creation between firms and their communities. Access, dialogue, transparency and an understanding of the risks and benefits were identified as the building blocks on which such interaction is contracted. Exploring co-creation in the Lego (LUGNET) brand community, Hatch and Schultz (2010) extended work in this field to incorporate the concept of brand governance, acknowledging the loss of control for firms inherent to such cooperation. Adding to the discourse, Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) highlight an important distinction between governance and control, the latter providing an alternative management framework for firms to apply in the context of social media engagement. These studies provide important insights into the elements at play in consumer–brand relationships, yet fail to address the issue of how such elements are calibrated to satisfy both the firm and its customers.

The regulation of OBCs has therefore become something of a conundrum for brand managers, whose roles have been redefined as shared custodians of brands rather than the inalienable masters of their destiny. Balancing the participation of insiders and outsiders in the organic process of contemporary branding, managers are cautioned against a heavy-handed approach (Ind 2014; Quinton 2013). Fournier and Lee (2009) note that successful brand communities defy control, instead negotiating the terms of community participation. This view is shared by Wirtz et al. (2013), who highlight that disillusioned members are free to conduct their activities beyond the reach and sovereignty of the firm. The common theme in the research is that blatant efforts at exerting control by firms will potentially provoke conflict, emphasising the importance of balancing the needs of the firm and its OBC. The prevailing sentiment in the literature to date advocates that firms adopt the role of enabler to facilitate and nurture these relationships, but previous research provides no guidance to firms on how this might best be achieved. What we know about governance in OBCs remains linked to the constructs of engagement and control but research to date has yet to identify how firms manage their coexistence. The current study seeks to address this research gap.

Research Method

Case Study

This research is based on an intensive longitudinal case study interpreted from a grounded theory perspective, with the researchers undertaking an interactive and comparative analysis, moving in and out of data, to generate meaning (Bryant & Charmaz 2007). It is exploratory in design in order to develop initial insights into this domain of brand management, about which the theory is largely underdeveloped. The research context was Facebook, the world's largest and pre-eminent social networking platform, with more than 1.8 billion monthly active users (Statista 2018).

Sample Selection

The researchers sought a case study that provides a typical example of an active and engaged community. Our examination aimed to use this example to understand how the processes (rather than the outcomes) of control and engagement were managed. Black Milk Clothing (BMC), a pureplay (i.e., online only) retailer of young women's fashion, was selected.

Founded in 2009 by James Lillis (who goes by the online moniker of JL), BMC has been one of the fastest-growing Australian clothing companies since its formation, with a multimillion dollar turnover (Clun 2016). The customer-facing aspects of the firm's business are conducted exclusively online across an integrated array of 20 social media platforms (Marr 2016), of which Facebook is the primary channel (Huynh 2014). The brand has more than 700,000 Facebook fans, many of whom refer colloquially to themselves as "Sharkies" given their metaphorical blood lust for sale items offered by the brand. BMC is the top-ranked retailer on Facebook in Australia (SocialPulse 2015), outperforming many established brands across a range of engagement metrics. The firm has a reputation for exemplary social media management (Huynh 2014; Korporaal 2014; Redrup 2014; Stafford 2013) as well as being

infamous for a high-profile incident of social media misjudgement relating to brand community control (Jayne 2014).

Data Collection

We sought to integrate data from multiple sources to maximise the constructivist equivalent of validity (Shenton 2004) – described by Guba as credibility and transferability (Guba 1981). The principal data were collected longitudinally from BMC’s publicly available Facebook (fan) page over two separate months, two years apart, to facilitate comparison over time and account for the fast-paced nature of social media change. Data were triangulated with observations from other BMC digital platforms (principally its website) and online fan forums (primarily Reddit and Tumblr), documents taken from the traditional media and observations of BMC’s social media engagement practices. These multiple empirical sources provide a strong basis for the examination of verbal and symbolic behaviours (Kassarjian 1977; Kolbe 1991) and facilitate a thick description of the issues related to control within the firm’s community (Denzin & Lincoln 2011). The data collection and analysis methods are mapped in Figure 1.

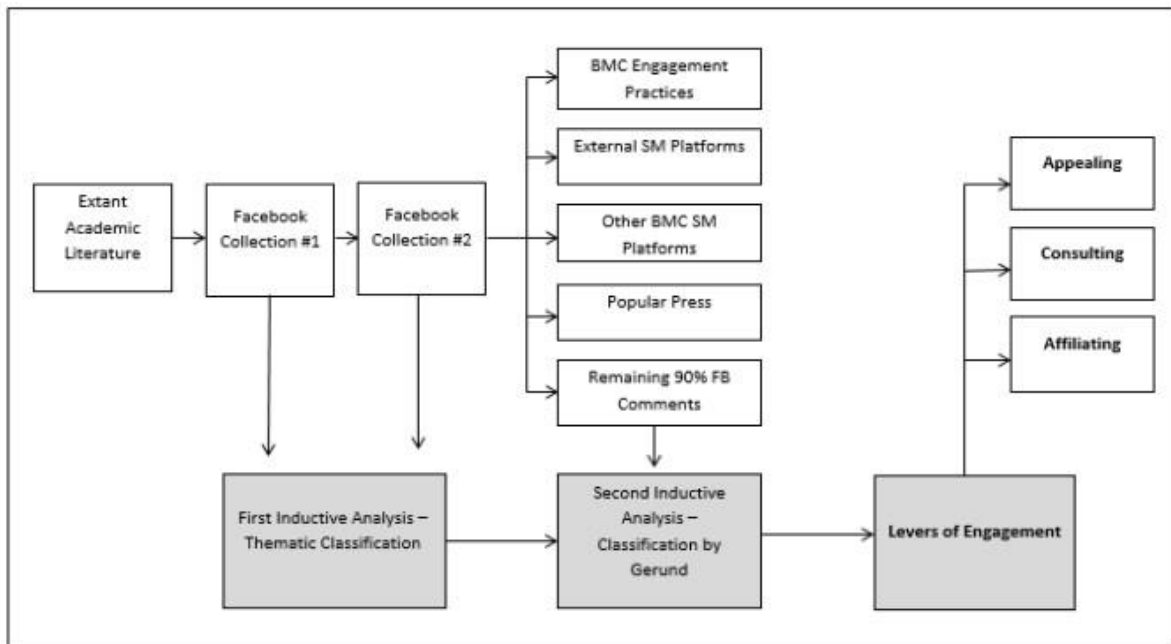


Figure 1. Data Collection and Analysis Relationship

Our initial sampling criteria were the posts made by BMC to its Facebook page. The second criteria comprised the top 10 posts that generated the most user comments as we posited that such posts represent the richest form of user efficacy, permitting a more granular understanding of the engagement outcomes. The use of *share* and *comment* metrics as indicators of engagement is widespread in social media marketing (de Vries, L, Gensler & Leeftang 2012). Our first collection of data yielded a total of 6308 comments and the second collection two years later yielded a total of 7570 comments, representing 25% and 48% of all comments made, respectively. The unit of analysis in the current study is the interaction between the company posts and the OBC members expressed through Facebook comments.

Data Analysis

The urban slang vernacular typical of Facebook users, together with the use of emoticons and a nuanced lingua franca, rendered proprietary text-mining analytical software problematic. The researchers therefore manually read the transcripts multiple times to identify a range of

broad themes using a manual coding system and a two-stage inductive analysis drawn from grounded theory.

Inductive analysis takes a bottom-up approach and is exploratory in design, using lower-level abstractions to define higher-level concepts via the constant comparison of various units of data (Vincze 2012). The first stage of the analysis identified and grouped substantive recurring comments in order to identify any patterns, before conceptualising comments that had similar characteristics in line with particular themes (Miles, Huberman & Saldana 2013), which are presented in Table 1. A system of open coding by topic was used to distil comments into these classifications which were verified for inter-observer reliability by cross-coding between the researchers. In this process, indeterminable content (symbols and punctuation marks) was not classified. Comments that were deemed to align with more than one classification were coded to the theme agreed by the researchers to reflect the dominant sentiment.

In the second stage of coding, and in response to our research question, a further inductive process was implemented. The initial themes identified from the Facebook data were juxtaposed with other BMC digital platforms and literature using a technique borrowed from grounded theory to create partial abstractions or ‘gerunds’ which we describe as the levers of engagement (appealing, consulting and affiliating). These levers distil a range of company actions, examples of which are outlined in Table 3, and are examined in the context of contemporary theory (Charmaz 2014; Glaser 1978). In this study, the levers need to be understood as outcomes of a composite of actions stemming from BMC’s social media strategy rather than a classification of community comments or specific brand posts. As components of a typology of practice, the three levers are not intended to be mutually exclusive or exhaustive sets but rather a polythetic conceptualisation of characteristics of engagement that sometimes overlap (Rich 1992). They do not reflect decision rules for the

nominal classification of constructs relevant to heterogeneous groups (Doty & Glick 1994); rather, they provide a basis for understanding how balance is established in the relationship between firms and OBCs.

Table 1. Thematic Classification

Theme	Defining Characteristics
Network Shared Content	Users tag friends in their comment, users forward the comment to a friend, users ask for help from the community or offer help to the community
Brand Evangelism	Brand or product affirmations, outpourings of enthusiasm, users respond directly to the firm's prompt / question
Questions Directed to BMC	Questions and statements directed at the firm, includes product suggestions, requests, clarifications
Responses from BMC	BMC staffers respond directly to a user comment (identifiable by the individual staff members signature: Lo, QB, Shanna, Charlie, Lexie, AC, Lana)
Off Topic	Comment not related to the firm's post
Language Other Than English	Predominantly French and Spanish

Results

BMC aggressively pursues social media engagement via multiple platforms. For online retailers, these media represent a virtual shopfront, providing consumers with important touchpoints necessary for forming brand attitudes. BMC's integrated social media approach ensures that each platform supports the others, with all communications taking on the casual tone of voice of the owner, JL. This casual tone is also reflected in the rules by which the firm and OBC agree to abide – known as *The Commandments* (see Table 2). While the firm's website remains the transactional interface, Facebook is the communications hub around which other social media activities revolve. In contrast to the firm's other channels, this platform delivers the corporate message with substantially more community input and represents an important forum for B2C and C2C network dialogue.

Table 2. The Commandments

- 1 WE SHALL BE ACCESSIBLE
- 2 WE SHALL RESPOND QUICKLY, FACTUALLY, AND COMPASSIONATELY
- 3 WE SHALL RESPOND DIRECTLY TO ALL QUESTIONS
- 4 WE SHALL ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY
- 5 WE SHALL TREAT ALL FEEDBACK WITH RESPECT, AND RESPOND WITH GRACE
- 6 WE SHALL CELEBRATE YOU
- 7 YOU SHALL BE EXCELLENT TO ONE ANOTHER
- 8 YOU SHALL NOT BE INAPPROPRIATE
- 9 YOU SHALL NOT SPAM
- 10 YOU SHALL NOT EXPLOIT OTHERS
- 11 YOU SHALL NOT MAKE CRITICAL COMMENTS ABOUT OTHERS' BODIES
- 12 YOU SHALL NOT FREAK OUT
- 13 YOU SHALL NOT BE A PERVY MAN
- 14 YOU SHALL HAVE FUN

Source: <https://blackmilkclothing.com/pages/facebook-commandments>

Evident from our analysis was BMC's ability to direct its Facebook operations at arm's length from the fans, engineering engagement through discreet marketing initiatives that keep the focus on both interrelated shared content and the company's implicit commercial imperatives. The management of these exchanges is achieved by pushing and pulling on the three theoretical levers of engagement, in different combinations. While the levers are often independent, our analysis revealed occasions when certain company actions that we apportioned to one lever appeared to have multiple behavioural outcomes. This suggests that, periodically, the operation of one lever can have both a primary and secondary function, and it is this aggregate application that allows the company to relinquish or exert control as circumstances demand. Table 3 provides examples of the types of firm actions that engage each of the three levers of appealing, consulting and affiliating. We posit that their manipulation allows the firm to establish equilibrium in its relations with its consumers.

Table 3. Firm Levers

Lever	Definition	Company Actions	Examples of Company Actions	Total Fan Comments
<p>Appealing Notice Me Liking/Loving Sensory Gratification Curiosity Individualism Urgency Excitement</p>	<p><i>Actions with the capacity to attract, generate interest, entertain or provoke.</i></p>	<p>Providing impactful visual appeals Uploading fan 'selfies' Regulating inventory supply and rapid product release Offering multiple platforms for fan engagement Engaging product themes</p>	<p>Firm attracts fans' attention and arouses their curiosity via a combination of aesthetically gratifying or curiosity-evoking imagery. 'Furmaid', the 10th most commented-upon post used a non-product related 'notice-me' image depicting a cat in a mermaid suit. Facilitates individual expression and symbolic consumption through the curation of ideal self; thus appealing to gen-Z narcissism A tactical action that frequently re-engages consumers with the brand, creating urgency through scarcity of supply and an example of an operationally based appeal. Providing multiple access points for fans enables the application of a range of techniques to launch appeals reinforcing the brand's core values The Harry Potter theme resonates with the target audience. This is an example of an exciting and passion-provoking action that evokes effusive brand-loving affirmations</p>	519
<p>Consulting Market Research Feedback Poll/Survey Focus Groups Confering Problem Solving Collaborating</p>	<p><i>Actions eliciting participatory engagement that draw primarily on consumer's cognitive faculties.</i></p>	<p>Communicating a call to action Seeking community feedback Facilitating community conference Conducting quasi focus groups and concept testing</p>	<p>Surveying fan opinions. The 9th most commented-upon post in this study invited community feedback regarding a proposed price reduction: 'Hey Peeps ... let me know if you agree with this crazy proposal' Collaborative decision making that enables community 'buy-in'. The fifth most commented-post ['Important Announcement'] sought fan input into proposed operational changes, yielding effusive thanks from fans when their input was acknowledged, and lengthy C2B comments. Similarly, the 11th most commented-upon post asked users to: 'Complete the sentence; I really think should become a staple' (ie a permanent range item) facilitating collaborative engagement while shoring up commercial success A listening post for market and community intelligence by monitoring fan conversations Risk mitigation tactic informing decision-making via consumer research: The 7th most commented-upon post involved dialogue between the brand's and JL about product possibilities, with JL concluding; 'If enough people like it we'll add it to the range'</p>	524 675 515
<p>Affiliating Affinity Network Sharing Community Esprit de Corps Collectivism Belonging Tribalism Proximity</p>	<p><i>The practice of creating an association or connection with others</i></p>	<p>Undertaking teaser campaigns Building network visibility Ensuring staff accessibility Story telling</p>	<p>Two separate posts in the days preceding the Harry Potter release asked; 'Which house are you?', maximising network chatter as users 'tagged' friends with the same question The second most commented-upon post in the study, a teaser listing the forthcoming Harry Potter styles, generated more C2C comments than any other post - with users alerting friends who were also Potter fans but not BMC followers The most commented-upon post in the study ['Museum Revival'] conducted a poll via Facebook requesting fans to nominate styles for reintroduction, thereby maximising visibility to networks (where, as pointed out by one fan, the website would have provided a more robust polling vehicle). This provided the strongest evidence of fans commencing a thread to which others then contributed Staff engender association and connection by providing a prompt response to all consumer queries, enabling feelings of belonging Inviting fans to participate in shaping the brand narrative impacts their perceptions of co-ownership thus facilitating brand socialisation</p>	525 544 1549 2472

Appealing

Appealing actions are defined in our study as those with the capacity to attract, generate interest, entertain or provoke. Typically aimed at eliciting participatory engagement based on emotional arousal, they are linked to a broad range of antecedents of online engagement.

Dessart et al. (2015) contend that one such trigger is the establishment of a relationship with the focal brand and we suggest that the appealing lever can play a pivotal role in this regard.

Furthermore, though not tested in the current study, we speculate that the appealing lever may play a moderating role in relation to the other levers; for example, the stimulation of affiliation is reliant on appeals from the brand. Facilitated by the dynamic nature of the internet, BMC displays these appeals through the curation of its virtual store window to entice consumers by experimenting with an ever-evolving range of engagement practices.

The fan page hosts a comprehensive range of media including videos and podcasts as well as links to BMC's blog and webpage, Instagram and Pinterest pages, and company newsletter.

Such integration of multiple platforms maximises user interest through diverse points of contact, thereby enhancing stickiness (Ashworth et al. 2006). On the fan page, the techniques deployed to appeal to fans may be classified as either operational or design-based.

Design-based appealing actions are facilitated by the highly visual nature of the Facebook platform, and evident in BMC's strong emphasis on the quality of the photographic images it posts to its fan page. The imagery advances the firm's brand management agenda by positively depicting the brand's offerings while offering fans sensory gratification. Attractive models, eye-catching studio backdrops and exotic locations are combined with behind-the-scenes glimpses of life at the firm's headquarters to showcase its products in an appealing light. Rich visual imagery combined with clever verbal appeals and the occasional notice-me posts were found in our study to consistently attract a high volume of comments from the

target audience. These comments frequently took the form of highly effusive positive brand affirmations demonstrating a highly affective state:

I love you unconditionally black milk. (Fan)

I CANNOT PUT INTO WORDS HOW HAPPY I AM RIGHT NOW OMG. (Fan)

The appealing actions evident in our analysis of the Facebook exchanges, which BMC enacts through design-based techniques, also reveal a community-oriented dimension. The company's bid to strike a balance between its needs and those of its fans is illustrated by BMC's frequent posting of fan 'selfies' to the page. This practice is one of several examples demonstrating the dual motives implicit in one engagement action which results in the simultaneous influence of two separate levers. First and foremost, the posting of 'selfies' is classed as an appealing action insofar as it facilitates the symbolic consumption of the firm's offerings. It also affords fans the opportunity for self-image curation, appealing to the narcissistic individualism of users (McCain et al. 2016).

One of the things we absolutely love is seeing girls match their Black Milk outfits with their surroundings. :) How about you - have you ever worn Snake Pit in a snake pit? Queen of Hearts leggings in Vegas? Mermaid Leggings under the sea? Matte leggings... on a mat?! (Okay that last one was a stretch).

Post your pics below, we want to see it! :) (BMC)

However, a secondary motive implicit in the application of this appealing lever is the desire to promote a sense of collectivism, which is more closely aligned with affiliating characteristics. In this context, the action confirms to fans that they are part of a wider community, thereby providing an important sense of brand co-ownership and proximity to both the brand and other fans (Ind 2014). The company's practice of posting fan selfies also functions as a reference point for fans and prospective customers by delivering an important

visual cue representative of other community members. In online environments these other actors normally remain largely invisible (Naylor, Lamberton & West 2012).

Operationally based appeals are those that are steeped in the company's management of its business operations and have their origins in two key domains. First, the firm selects appropriate product themes – specifically, those with broad appeal to the target market. In our data, the firm's use of the Harry Potter theme was highly prominent, with 48% of 18–34 year olds reported to have read at least one Harry Potter book (YouGov 2011). While the theme elicits compelling liking characteristics, an important attribute of appealing actions, a secondary motive is evident through the significant degree of sharing of the theme among fans via their networks. In our study, such sharing is classified as an affiliating behaviour (see Table 3), again demonstrating that the application of the levers can have multiple engagement outcomes.

BMC's ability to undertake low volume production runs through in-house manufacture allows it to manipulate product availability, which represents the second domain of operationally based appeals. Strong sellers are repeated while the firm cuts its losses with slower-moving items. This supply chain efficiency permits experimentation with design concepts by releasing new products with greater frequency but in smaller quantities. Repeat purchase is thereby encouraged as consumers are incentivised to re-engage constantly with the brand.

Consulting

In this study, consulting refers to the practice of eliciting participatory engagement that draws primarily on the consumers cognitive faculties. Like appealing, this is a practice that accommodates both firm and fan needs. Given that the empowerment of customers is thought to be a way of enabling governance of OBCs (Sorescu et al. 2011), analysis of consulting is

instructive in extending our understanding of the management of OBCs. Via a range of actions, BMC engages the community in collaborative decision-making around issues such as a proposed reduction in pricing, changes to the photographic style and community involvement in the choice of garment fabrics and prints. At one extreme, this lever extends to community pressure to influence the timing of range releases to which the firm accedes:

Lately, we have spent quite a bit of time talking with customers about what they want to see from the brand in the future, and they have been very open with us. Based on these discussions, as well as reflecting on who we want to be as a brand, we have made some big decisions. (JL) (BMC)

In addition, we observed that JL spent a considerable amount of time personally engaging fans in extensive late-night Facebook conversation. These quasi-focus group discussions attracted a high volume of comments from fans eager to influence product directions and engage with the principal. Invitations to participate in such decision-making are classified as consulting actions and include genuine calls for community feedback in relation to product preferences:

Lol, so many feels on this one!!! I didn't realise there was so much love for the Punk Tartan. Ok then, we'll put the Punk Tartan back in the range with something else cool. (JL) (BMC)

Other calls for community consultation are not so black and white and carry a subtext of secondary motives:

Hey peeps, so I've been thinking.We're getting pretty good at making dresses ... I was thinking maybe we should sell our basic printed dresses at \$85 instead of \$99, then girls could buy more? Let me know what you think about this crazy proposal. (JL) (BMC)

Such blatant provocation, while classified as a consulting action, primarily because of its explicit call to action requesting feedback, serves to excite the fans and elicits fervent brand affirmations – behaviours associated with the appealing lever. Thus, in this instance, one firm action manipulates two levers, each with different outcomes.

The BMC posts in our datasets that elicited the most comments from the brand community fall at both ends of a spectrum of authenticity. The community's input no doubt contributes commercially to the firm by mitigating risk in product development and seeking such input can be seen as a research practice aimed at better understanding consumer needs. It might be suggested, therefore, that the role of the lever of consultation facilitates the coexistence of community wishes and the firm's commercial imperatives. The company earnestly acts on the community feedback it receives, reflecting a consultative process that is clearly valued by the fans who delight in the acknowledgement of their contribution:

I love you guys!!!! I love you 'cause you listen, and you care more about your fans than making a few quick bucks Thank you thank you thank you!!!! (Fan)

JL you listened!!!!!! This is whyyy I love you and whyyyy I'm so committed to BM coz you guys try your best to satisfy your sharkies. (Fan)

We'd be nowhere without our lovely sharkies, so we'll always try to take on board what you guys are telling us :) <3 – Shelby (BMC Staff)

Community members also consult one another when commenting on BMC posts, with C2C engagements often ending up as side conversations among networked friends, in the form of personal banter of a peripheral nature. Firm posts stimulating such behaviours, however, are regarded as affiliating actions rather than consulting actions as this practice enables conferring with normative reference groups and the internalisation of community values, both important validating roles of fashion (Arnould & Price 2000; O'Cass 2004) and intrinsically affiliative in character. Enabling such behaviours balances the tension between competing imperatives by satisfying a range of psycho-social needs for the community, while diffusing BMC's message among a broader network than those who simply follow the BMC brand:

Hey there's this online store thats [sic] selling Harry Potter gear. (Fan)

Abigale, not sure if you know about this already. (Fan)

OMG yes What to choooooose? You get one ill [sic] get the other. (Fan)

When pulled in the opposite direction, the consultation lever moves away from a cooperative position to one where BMC takes a more hard-line approach to the management of its community. This was apparent when BMC controversially posted a meme (a photograph humorously depicting an ‘expectation versus reality’ situation) to the fan page to support a new product line. The meme caused offence to many users, who complained via Facebook comments that the post contravened *The Commandments* and the firm’s expressed commitment to positive body image and acceptance. Rather than acknowledge the conflict, the company deleted several posts, blocked fans and banned some users. The unintended consequence of the furore, which lasted two days, was the viral sharing of BMC’s dogmatic initial response to the crisis:

We’re happy for people to speak their mind but not in this space where it might ruin it for others. Alicia (BMC Staff)

this is our space here and so if we don’t like the way people talk to us of [sic] the way they choose to discuss an issue with it we can remove it. Just the same as customer [sic] take care of their own Facebook accounts, we take care of this page. Alicia (BMC Staff)

We LOVE our customers, but yes, we believe that if you get really upset by the way we do things, you should probably move on and not be a part of what we are doing. - All the BM team (yes, all of us!) (BMC)

After 48 hours and with the meme and thread removed, the firm issued an apology:

I want to start off by saying I am incredibly sorry for everything that has happened over the last couple of days. We made a mistake and we apologise sincerely We are taking ownership of this situation. Cam (BMC Staff)

The incident illustrates the paradoxical nature of control whereby a distinct lack of clarity around what defines brand community ownership creates a tension that is not easily managed.

Does the firm have the right to determine its own core values? Or does choosing to place such strong emphasis on brand community participation intrinsically tie BMC’s corporate

direction to the wishes of its fans? The lever of community consultation can empower users but also demands that firms are held to account for the promises they make to their fans through the symbiotic contract of cooperation inherent to OBCs. Ontologically, therefore, despite its gatekeeper role as the nominal owner of the page, the firm is beholden to the community and walks a tightrope in the management of content, access and responsiveness.

Affiliating

An affiliating action is defined in this study as the practice of creating an association or connection with others (Dionísio, Leal & Moutinho 2008) and extends beyond mere kinship within the group (Beverland, Farrelly & Quester 2010) to encompass the influence of social networks. It is a lever that facilitates the self-identity and group identity dimensions of social engagement. As such, it is central to BMC's community management strategy and a lever that the firm goes to great lengths to nurture. While affiliating is manifest in a range of practices evident in the data, in our study two were prominent by virtue of their implications for OBC governance. First, BMC provides a team of social media administrators on 24/7 standby who work actively to incite user engagement and promise to respond to every question put by a consumer, thereby engendering association through the fostering of a collective consciousness. The interaction, feedback and participation support provided by these staff play an important role in determining brand socialisation (Liao, Huang & Xiao 2017), customer value (Ashworth et al. 2006) and trust (Toufaily, Souiden & Ladhari 2013). Second, extensive teaser campaigns precede most BMC product launches. This affiliating action is the cornerstone of the second-most-commented-upon post in the study, which comprised a list of the soon-to-be-released Harry Potter range. Generating more C2C comments than any other post, the action aroused a collective fervour that penetrated deep into the fans' Facebook networks.

The purpose of teaser campaigns is to create buzz by starting conversations. While BMC's teasers excite fans and occasionally pose questions (characteristics of appealing and consulting actions), they have affiliating motives at their core. This is illustrated by two posts that preceded the Harry Potter launch. Posted four days apart, in both posts the firm posed the question:

Which house are you? Cam :) (BMC)

Importantly, these posts were made only days prior to the product release, leaving no opportunity for the firm to adjust its production based on the responses of fans to its rhetorical question. We suggest, therefore, that the primary motive for this action was to stimulate networked tribalism, a classic affiliating indicator. The post generated 525 user comments in less than two hours and triggered more 'tagging' of friends than any of the other posts in the dataset, ensuring the brand remained highly visible in the feeds of its followers and their friends, culminating in a network shared zeal of almost evangelical proportions:

OMG I think I'm gonna die. I just cant [sic] wait for this stuff. (Fan)

Seriously, the weddings [sic] off and im [sic] buying all this. (Fan)

Shut up and take my money!! (Fan)

Such outpourings, identified as brand evangelism, emerged as a dominant theme in our initial coding. Indeed, our analysis revealed a substantial proportion (52%) of all user comments posted during the data collection period were categorised as positive brand affirmations, based on user language and/or sentiment.

Omg love this release! So many goodies. I love you blackmilk. (Fan)

You are the bestest black milk!!! (Fan)

Despite this, the fervour was not shared by all and there remained many passive fans. Even the most-commented-upon post among the more than 13,000 engagements attracted only

2,472 comments from a fan base approaching 700,000 at the time, indicating that the majority of fans remain on the sidelines of the conversation. This should not be seen as downplaying the importance of the ardent supporters, however, who play a vital role in sharing, tagging and commenting via their networks. These mavens disseminate brand messages, provide modelling behaviour and showcase the brand values for prospective and inactive customers. But, ultimately, the fans decide how close they will get to the firm and the extent of their engagement. And for most community members, the brand remains at the periphery of their social networks rather than the centre. Our analysis of the responses to BMC’s posts supports this network-centric view, revealing that the community engages primarily with one another via comments and tagging of comments to communicate with specific friends in their networks rather than with the brand itself (see Table 3). Our data show that, of the top 10 most-commented-upon posts, only 5.2% of elicited comments in our first dataset and 9.4% in the second were directed at BMC, with peer networks the main focus of these conversations.

Table 4. The Comparative Impact of Company Posts

	1st Dataset	2nd Dataset
Average number of engagements generated by one post	96	282
Average number of comments generated by one post	10	45
Average number of likes generated by one post	80	230
Average number of shares generated by one post	6	6
Most comments generated by one post	1549	2472

BMC’s use of the affiliation lever in this context stimulates dialogic engagement and capitalises on Facebook’s peer-to-peer networking characteristics to access the friends of their most vocal supporters (Bortree & Seltzer 2009). Coupled with the firm’s consulting actions, these affiliating actions leverage the firm’s intimate relationship with this small number of highly vocal fans to influence their friends. Yet the desire to connect with the community, so vital for BMC’s success, is not shared in equal measure by all followers, and

this has implications for community governance. Typically, the majority of users fall broadly within Li and Bernoff's (2008) middle rungs in the ladder of engagement, described as spectators, joiners and collectors, who to some extent, consume what the rest produce (p.45). We argue that BMC's primary sphere of influence may be limited to the smaller group who choose to commit to the brand by enthusiastically commenting on its posts. The firm's strategic focus on nurturing these brand champions via the three levers gives it access to the friends of fans and thus scope to extend its domain. The company's approach to community management appears to subscribe to the view that a meaningful relationship with a small group of loyal followers is preferable when such affiliations have the propensity to influence a wider audience.

Finally, the data offer a key insight into BMC's tactical use of its Facebook page to further promote its agenda via fan networks in what emerged as the most-commented-upon post in the study:

Hi guys LET'S HAVE A MUSEUM REVIVAL!!!! And we want YOU (yes you) to call it. :) Here's how it works: if there is a Black Milk piece that you absolutely LOVE, which is stuck in the museum, simply leave your request in the comments below, and (if we can actually make it!) - we will bust out the top three! (BMC)

Superficially, the post has the appearance of a consulting action by seeking community feedback. However, the invitation to comment via Facebook ensured that each response was highly visible to other fans and their friends. This resulted in a substantial number of users contributing to threads that were commenced by others. As one observant fan points out, soliciting nominations via BMC's website would provide a more robust vehicle for data manipulation and analytics (but with substantially less visibility to other users):

Wait wait wait. There's a wish list function on the site. Don't you guys get info about that? Surely if everyone goes and puts things that they want on to their wish list that would be more rich in data than comments ...? (Fan)

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gather initial evidence relating to the management of tension in OBCs so as to understand how balance may be achieved between firm and fan needs. Our analysis of more than 13,000 community comments revealed three key levers that are critical in maintaining this equilibrium. The significance of these levers is that they highlight the range of mechanisms available to marketing practitioners and how their application may add strength to the ongoing relationship between a company and its consumers. In identifying these levers, we extend the exploration of the recognised protocols of accessibility and transparency established in the literature (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004), and initiate an important conversation about the significance of such levers as markers of success in the management of customer relationships via OBCs.

We suggest that the transparency identified in previous research as necessary for brand building, and which stems from community access (Hatch & Schultz 2010), is limited in its efficacy. It would appear that this access creates expectations among community members that firms consistently struggle to meet. Establishing the appropriate limits of fans' influence on company operations requires deft manipulation of three levers. In asserting what would once have been a firm's assumed authority, BMC's attempt to openly declare its ownership of the brand ended in community backlash as the firm overplayed this lever. We speculate, therefore, that companies whose brand positioning relies heavily on community endorsement face increased risk where social media are used as the basis for such communities, and we highlight this as an area requiring further research. Thus, we concur with Booth and Matic's (2011) view that control is an increasingly illusory construct for firms in social media settings where the viral effect empowers consumers (Quinton 2013).

This power transfer results in a relational state whereby neither the firm nor the fans are in a position of complete dominance. Each seemingly requires the other for certain elements of their existence (Labrecque et al. 2013). This co-dependence does not necessitate acquiescence by firms, however, or a fortress mentality. Rather, we suggest that the effective governance of OBCs must acknowledge the power shift from brand to fan. This calls for an understanding of the community's cognitive, affective and social needs alongside the leveraging of such needs in the pursuit of the firm's corporate goals to foster long-term relationships based on meaningful engagement. We therefore propose that the equilibrium that digital marketers seek to establish by manipulating the levers of community governance ought to be conceptualised as a continuum. This spectrum of company actions range in character from those typical of interruption marketing endemic in traditional media at one end and, on the other, by communities that are organically derived, owned and managed by consumers seeking their own enjoyment. Thus, in the context of OBCs, we demonstrate that the construct of engagement is binary, such that two forces meet in a forum of seemingly irreconcilable tension. At times, the middle ground will be an appropriate position, while at other times the firm may choose to exercise more or less control.

We note that BMC is an active member of its community, not the top-down provider of posts (contributing substantially fewer posts [8%] than its fans [92%]). The firm creates the illusion that it does not seek to control the conversation and exercises influence discreetly, going to great lengths to be seen to share the brand with its fans, thus enhancing the perceived fairness of its governance system. But rarely is the firm far from the online exchange. Even innocuous consumer-brand encounters in the BMC community appear traceable to the micromanagement of communications aimed at guiding community responses to suit the firm's agenda. The delivery of appealing content to constantly entice engagement without being perceived as aggressive is an essential component of this balanced approach. This study

demonstrates that the process of (perceived) consultation permitting the community a voice in decision-making can be effective in prompting the diffusion of positive sentiment across extended user networks. As the conduit for fan affiliation, the leveraging of these networks through dialogic strategies allows the firm to infiltrate networks that might otherwise be inaccessible, enabling further dissemination of the brand message via dialogic loops (Bortree & Seltzer 2009).

Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of this paper was to shine a light on the tension between corporate goals and brand community connection in an online environment and to identify strategies for achieving equilibrium between these conflicting needs. The research extends our understanding of the critical juncture at which OBC engagement and a firm's control over such engagement meet. BMC successfully capitalises upon the intersection of consumers as social beings and social media as enablers of conversations. Ultimately, the Black Milk story is one centred on the search for equilibrium in community governance via an online presence that creates a cooperative environment, engendering conversational marketing to leverage networks.

Managerial Implications

This study's results have practical implications for the planning and execution of engaging communications campaigns designed to direct consumers towards specific relational outcomes, and for the formulation of effective social media marketing strategy. First, the pursuit of commercial imperatives does not necessitate the ceding of control to consumers despite social media's inherent customer orientation (Jahn & Kunz 2012) and the growing empowerment of consumers. Marketing practitioners have three levers at their disposal, offering a range of settings with which to manage OBC relationships. Manipulation of these

dynamic agents of control allows the firm to regulate the extent to which appealing, consulting and affiliating actions are reflected in the strategic management of its online communications programs – pivoting sometimes in favour of the firm and at other times accommodating fans. Second, although effective brand community governance requires a degree of flexibility in systems, processes and philosophical approach to the use of such levers, ultimately transparency sometimes means (diplomatically) sticking to your guns (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004). Finally, where the social media literature currently addresses best practice relating to the elicitation of engagement, this study provides empirical clarity for managers by demonstrating that these practices have a dual purpose in both eliciting comments to reinforce brand positioning and extending the brand’s reach into non-user networks.

Theoretical Contribution

The research contributes to our understanding of the nexus between engagement and control, drawing together the disparate constructs that influence consumer relationship management in online communities. We add to this discourse by collecting initial evidence designed to provide a more detailed understanding of governance in relation to OBCs, in the absence of substantive or formal empirically grounded theory. In acknowledging the scope provided by the rapid change in relationship dynamics facilitated by social media, we expand on the findings within the extant literature by determining that the control of relationships with brand fans exerted by companies is not absolute. Rather, in the online context, such control operates within a range of settings that facilitate an inherent interdependence. Importantly, this study highlights the particularly delicate position that pureplay retailers find themselves in when leveraging OBCs for the development and dissemination of brand narratives. At a theoretical level, the present findings illustrate that pureplay firms occupy a distinctive operational space and, therefore, demand a separate research agenda.

Limitations and Future Research

The case study approach provides a rich pool of data at a granular level but is nonetheless a methodology that restricts the generalising of our findings. Similarly, the reliance on one case in this research raises the question as to whether BMC may be an outlier, suggesting the need for future research to test a broader sample. Furthermore, the authors acknowledge the hedonic nature of buyer behaviour in the fashion industry and its influence on the effusive nature of the comments elicited from a predominantly young female target audience. While this is acceptable in the current study by virtue of the product type, we encourage researchers to examine alternative settings to understand the extent to which the relationship between control and engagement is context specific. Researchers could also seek clarification relating to brand community evolution, by measuring temporal changes in firm actions and community behaviours in response to shifting competitive landscapes. Similarly, further exploration of the mediating role of the lever of consultation and the moderating role of the appealing lever will allow marketers to refine strategies aimed at establishing equilibrium between the conflicting needs of firms and their customers. And, finally, as previously mentioned, based on our findings we believe that firms whose retail operations are wholly online are more vulnerable to highly visible public criticism. We therefore suggest that there is a growing need to investigate how the reliance of such firms on social media-based consumer-brand relationships differs from traditional bricks-and-mortar operations.

Conflict of Interest Statement

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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