An Exploration of Participant Behaviour in Online Communities

Introduction
The paper explores how participants behave in online communities. The paper commences with an outline of the research context, online communities. This is followed by the theoretical review, which reviews theories important to understanding participant behaviour in online communities. Building on the theoretical review, the paper proposes a conceptual framework, which proposes that involvement, commitment and engagement exercise influence on participant behaviour in online communities. The proposed methodology, online ethnography is then discussed. Finally the paper outlines the suggested research objectives for an empirical study and research contribution.

Online Community
An online community is a gathering of individuals in “virtual cyberspace” (Kozinets, 1999, p. 253). Online communities provide a low risk environment in which individuals can express opinions, learn new things and develop relationships with other community members (Quinton and Harridge-March, 2010, p. 61). Different types of online communities exist, for example, activity communities and brand communities. Activity communities revolve around individuals’ interests, hobbies or pastimes. Examples include cooking, yoga and music communities. Brand communities are usually specific to a particular brand. Examples include Mini, Harley-Davidson and Swatch communities. Participant motivations for joining an online community vary from information search to brand devotion (Ouwersloot and Odekerken-Schröder, 2008). The number of online communities in existence over the last few years has grown exponentially. Figures reveal that over two-thirds (67 percent) of the global online population visit online communities, which include social networks and blogs (Nielsen Online, 2009). Existing online community research explores participant behaviours such as relationship behaviour (Algesheimer, Dholakia and Hermann, 2005; Quinton and Harridge-March, 2010), search behaviour (Bickart and Schindler, 2001), consumption behaviour (Kozinets, 1999; Cova and Pace, 2006), communication behaviour (Hickman and Ward, 2007) and social behaviour (Thompson, 2005; Toral et al., 2009). This research adds to the field by exploring specific influences for participant behaviour. As such the research considers how participant behaviour can be understood through involvement, commitment and engagement theories using an online ethnography approach. To the researcher’s knowledge there has been no research to-date exploring such themes using an online ethnography approach. The research will also make a contribution by comparing participant behaviour in brand- and activity-based communities. It is proposed that an understanding of how participants behave in online communities is important to marketing if it is to take advantage of the commercial opportunities that online communities offer. The theoretical review outlines key theories important to understanding participant behaviour in online communities.

Theoretical Review
In the online community context involvement refers to interest in the community topic, commitment refers to the customer-community relationship and engagement refers to customer-brand interactions. The theoretical review outlines how each respective theory may shape participant behaviour in online communities.

1. Consumer Involvement
Involvement is the amount of arousal, motivation or interest in a product category (Mitchell, 1979; Rothschild, 1984). Personal factors and product differentiation determine if a product
is perceived as high- or low- involving (Zaichkowsky, 1986). Personal factors refer to the individual’s values. Lastovicka and Gardner (1979) refer to this component of involvement as normative importance. As such it is the consumer's values or norms that influence product and/or brand evaluations (Lastovicka and Gardner, 1979), with consumers only becoming involved with brands that reflect their values. Product differentiation distinguishes one product from another and includes factors such as product performance, design features and brand attributes. Differentiated products cause involvement as the consumer uses greater cognitive effort comparing alternatives. In the online community setting, enduring involvement refers to the participant’s interest in the community topic. Due to the group dimension of online communities the normative importance component takes on a collective element. Group norms are the set of values, beliefs and conventions shared by the community (Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo, 2004). Socialisation and participation in the online community enable participants to become familiar with group norms (Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo, 2004). Information on group norms is readily accessible through community content such as frequently asked questions and archive pages. Thus, in comparison to the offline setting it is more straightforward in the online context for individuals to become informed about product categories that they are interested in.

Product differentiation triggers involvement (Zaichkowsky, 1986). Online communities facilitate product comparisons. Community participants discuss product attributes, product reviews and seek pre-purchase advice. It appears that participation in an online community intensifies involvement with the product category through community discussions. A negative outcome associated with online community membership is normative pressure. Normative pressure refers to “coercion to conform” to group norms (Algesheimer, Dholakia and Hermann, 2005, p. 21). Normative pressure is likely to have a negative impact on involvement with the community. The paper proposes that normative pressure may result in discontinued participation. Based on the theoretical review it is apparent that involvement plays an influential role on how participants behave in online communities. The next section reviews consumer commitment which is another related concept to understanding participant behaviour in online communities.

2. Consumer Commitment
Moorman, Zaltman and Deshpandé (1992: 316) define commitment as “an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship”. Commitment is viewed as a mediator to the customer-firm relationship. Committed consumers benefit the firm through non-switching behaviour, positive word-of-mouth and brand support (Amine, 1998). Consumer commitment consists of three components: affective commitment, continuance commitment and normative commitment. Affective commitment arises from closeness between the customer and the firm (Casaló et al., 2008). Relationship reciprocity and trust are key contributors to affective commitment (Gustafsson et al., 2005). Continuance commitment refers to the inherent value built up in the relationship over time (Gustafsson et al., 2005). Continuance commitment is founded on switching costs or a lack of alternatives (Anderson and Weitz, 1992). Normative commitment refers to the customer’s perceived obligation to remain with the firm (Gruen et al., 2000). Participant commitment to an online community is described as their “psychological attachment” to the community (Kim et al., 2008, p. 413). This is similar to off line affective commitment with emphasis placed on closeness of the customer-firm relationship. Wong et al. (2003) explore participant commitment within online communities. They found that the greater the amount of participant time and energy invested in the online community, the higher the switching costs. Wong et al. (2003) also proposed that if a participant finds a competing community appealing they would switch. These factors mirror
off line continuance commitment which is based on switching costs and lack of alternatives. Normative commitment fosters a sense of belonging to the group (Gruen et al., 2000). In the online community setting, members provide advice and support in relation to the community topic. It is likely that such activities foster normative commitment, with for example a member who has had a problem solved feeling obliged to help someone else. For these reasons, it is proposed that normative commitment leads to community commitment. The next section reviews an emerging concept in the consumer behaviour literature that is consumer engagement which is also relevant in explaining participant behaviour within an online community.

3. Consumer Engagement

Research on consumer engagement is at an early stage. Hollebeek (2011) conceptualises engagement as consisting of three dimensions: immersion, passion and activation. Immersion is the customer’s “brand-related concentration” and refers to feelings such as “time flies” during brand interactions (Hollebeek, 2011, p. 566). As a result, immersion is associated with the individual’s cognitive attention to the brand interaction. Passion refers to the individual’s emotional investment in the brand and relates to feelings such as ‘obsessive’, ‘loving’ or ‘adoring’ the brand (Hollebeek, 2011, p. 566-567). The final dimension activation represents the “customer’s level of energy, effort and/or time spent on a brand in particular brand interactions” (Hollebeek, 2011, p. 569). Examples of activation include talking about the brand to friends and family, time spent perusing branded products in store. The perspective of engagement as an active, behavioural manifestation towards the brand is gaining support (van Doorn et al., 2010; Verhoef et al., 2010). Examples of customer engagement behaviours include: word-of-mouth activity, recommendations, helping other customers, blogging and writing reviews (van Doorn et al., 2010). All these activities are non-transactional in nature, implying that engagement behaviours are about customer-brand interactions rather than purchase specific situations. This paper proposes that customer engagement with the community topic stimulates participation. Thus, for an online community to be successful it needs to engage its members. Possible engagement initiatives include selecting key community participants to write a blog about the brand or to review a new product. Building on the theoretical review the next section outlines the conceptual framework of the research.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 outlines the conceptual framework of participant behaviour in online communities. Two types of involvement exist - product involvement and community involvement. Product involvement is the participant’s interest in the community topic. It is the individual’s interest in the community topic that makes them sign up to the online community. Product involvement consists of brand value and product differentiation. Within product categories consumers purchase brands that reflect their own values. Products that are differentiated or complex also stimulate involvement. The conceptual framework (Figure 1) proposes that product involvement stimulates community involvement. Community involvement is the participant’s interest in the community group, and consists of community norms. Individuals participate in communities with similar values to their own. It is possible to distinguish between product involvement and community involvement based on the type of community post. Participants involved with the product discuss the community topic, whereas participants involved with the community group discuss more general topics such as lifestyle and personal matters.
As involvement and engagement concepts are similar, debate surrounds their relationship. Mollen and Wilson (2009) propose that engagement encompasses an emotional connection to the brand incorporating feelings like love, passion, devotion to the brand. Involvement refers more to cognitive effort exhibited towards a product category. In comparing involvement with engagement it appears that involvement is rational in nature, referring to an interest in the product category or community. Engagement on the other hand is emotional referring to intense feelings about the brand or online community. The conceptual framework proposes that involvement acts as a precursor to engagement. Thus, interest in community topic, an attribute of involvement, leads to engagement with the community.

**Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of Participant Behaviour in Online Communities**

![Conceptual Framework Diagram]

In Figure 1 engagement occurs at two levels – brand engagement and community engagement. Brand engagement refers to love of, devotion to the brand. Some consumers join online communities because of their admiration of the brand. Thus, brand engagement leads to community engagement. Brand engagement is made up of participant-brand interactions and includes behaviours such as word-of-mouth activity and brand recommendations. Community engagement on the other hand refers to the user-technology interaction. Ahuja and Medury (2010) propose that website design is central to user-technology engagement. Thus, website design is important to community engagement. Members engage in online communities to express their feelings about the brand. The research proposes that website design, an attribute of community engagement may enhance brand engagement. This is illustrated by the two-way arrow between brand engagement and community engagement in Figure 1. The research proposes that a well designed website may lengthen the amount of time the participant spends online talking about their preferred brand. For this reason engagement is perceived as central to participation in online communities.

In support of off-line studies (Beatty, Kahle and Homer, 1988; Bloemer, 1998) the conceptual framework proposes that product- and community-involvement act as a precursor to brand- and community-commitment respectively. Commitment relates to value built up in the customer-brand, participant-community relationship over time. Brand commitment is based on positive customer experiences with the brand. Committed customers form close, affective relationships with brands. Community commitment is shaped by participant investment in the community. Participants, who invest their time and energy in the online community form close relationships with other members, thus become committed to the online community. The conceptual framework proposes that an interactive relationship exists between brand commitment and community commitment. Commitment to a brand is the reason why some consumers sign up to an online community. As the consumer participants in the online community they may form relationships with other members and feel committed to the
community. Community commitment in turn fosters brand commitment, shown by two-way arrow in Figure 1. For the consumer being part of a community dedicated to a brand strengthens their relationship with that brand. A relationship also exists between engagement and commitment. It is proposed that brand- and community-engagement foster brand- and community-commitment respectively. Participants engage with brands they feel strongly about. Brand engagement helps foster a relationship with the brand, thus leading to brand commitment. Similarly satisfaction with the user-technology interaction (community engagement) will lead to repeat use of the community. Over time repeat community visits may lead to community commitment. Given an understanding of the conceptual framework has been provided the next section outlines the research objectives for further empirical research.

**Research Objectives**

1. To explore if participant behaviour in online communities can be explained by theories of involvement, commitment and engagement.
2. To explore relationships between involvement, commitment and engagement type behaviours in online communities.
3. Through an understanding of participant behaviour in online communities make recommendations for companies seeking to attract and interact with customers using commercial communities.

**Proposed Research Methodology**

The proposed research strategy is netnographic or online ethnographic (Kozinets, 2006). This research strategy has been employed by previous online community research (McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig, 2002; Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann, 2005). Data collection methods involve participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Participant observation is a data collection method in which the researcher becomes fully immersed in the social setting under investigation for a length of time (Bryman, 2008). As a participant observer the researcher takes note of social behaviour, takes note of community conversations and when possible asks questions (Bryman, 2008). The sample consists of four online communities, split between two brand communities and two activity based communities. This mix of brand- and activity-based communities will reveal if participant behaviour differs based on the type of online community. The semi-structured interviews will provide insight into aspects of participant behaviour that are not directly observable. The semi-structured interviews will be conducted with members of online communities.

**Research Contribution**

Given the continued increase in online community participation rates, an exploration into how participants behave is important to online consumer behaviour research and practice. The theoretical review draws on theories of involvement, commitment and engagement to explore participant behaviour in online communities. There is no research to-date exploring all three concepts in online communities. The conceptual framework shows how involvement, commitment and engagement type behaviours affect participant behaviour in online communities. For instance involved participants search for information, committed participants focus on building community relationships, while engaged participants want to express feelings towards the community topic. The conceptual model proposes that an interactive relationship exists between the concepts. The research proposes to explore this model by means of qualitative research involving online ethnography. It is hoped that by exploring differences in participant behaviour insight will be gained into how practitioners can convert participants into active members and build long lasting relationships.
References


