A Woke Approach to User-Generated Content: How Product Involvement and Gender Influence What We Post

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ABSTRACT

Although online brand community (OBC) literature grows, the majority of the studies are examining gender differences in communities of products that are consumed disproportionately by males. In continuation of Soylemez (2021a); this study utilized ELM and equity theory and investigated how gender and product involvement influence the relative contribution of brand-oriented content and community-oriented content. Findings suggest that members of high-involvement product communities generate more brand-oriented content than community-oriented content, whereas members of low-involvement product communities generate more community-oriented content than brand-oriented content. A significant gender-product involvement interaction exists.

INTRODUCTION

Online brand communities (OBC) are specialized, non-geographically bound communities based on a structured set of social relations among the admirers of a brand (Muniz and O'guinn, 2001). OBC members contribute to and utilize the collective intelligence of communities by generating content (Laroche *et al.,* 2012). Although the OBC literature grows every year, there are still two important gaps in the literature. First, an overwhelming percentage of the studies regarding OBCs is conducted by studying online communities of brands mostly preferred by men such as motorcycles (Madupu and Cooley, 2010; Felix, 2012), cars (Luedicke and Giesler, 2007), and consumer electronics (Soylemez, 2021b). Although gender is often used as a dummy variable in these OBC studies, the influence of gender in relative generation of different UGC types cannot be fully understood, since female members in these communities are likely to adopt the male-dominant culture of these OBCs to be accepted in the community. Another issue is that although Soylemez (2021a) and Soylemez

(2021b) investigated various personal, brand, product and contextual factors that influence relative generation of different types of UGC, product involvement is an unstudied area. Based on ELM and the equity theory, the research question of this paper is stated as below.

RQ: What is the relationship between individual-level factors (gender and product involvement), and the relative contribution of brand-oriented content and community-oriented content?

Research objectives are investigated through three hypotheses that examine the impact of gender and product involvement on the relative generation of different types of UGC. Based on the findings, managerial implications and future research directions are also discussed. Investigating customer behaviors in social networks and harnessing the power of consumer engagement are hot topics in interactive marketing (Wang, 2021); thus, it is hoped that the study will expand the body of knowledge in this field.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEREOTICAL DEVELOPMENT

User-generated Content Types

User-generated content (UGC) is defined as any form of brand-related content including but not limited to photos, comments and videos created by users (Itani *et al.*, 2020). In an OBC, the brand and the community are the two stakeholders whom the members can choose as target audience (Haikel-Elsabeh *et al.*, 2019). Soylemez (2021a) argues that it is possible to categorize UGC based on target audience, namely brand-oriented content (BOC) and community-oriented content (COC)

BOC is UGC that directly targets the brand, providing value to it such as suggestions, complaints or discussion of brand-related news (Soylemez, 2021b). Members seem to be communicating among themselves, they are aware that fellow members do not have the means to address the grievances or utilize their suggestions. By communicating with other members,

they try to force the brand to develop new games and address the grievances. Therefore, if the brand wants to use the community for co-creation tasks; then, it shall cultivate factors that produce more BOC (Soylemez, 2021a). Members can also choose other members as target audience, such as when they provide tips for using products more effectively. This *community-oriented content* provides value to the brand indirectly as well, since community troubleshooting means reduced load in customer service, and high communal interaction increases brand loyalty (Soylemez, 2021a). Thus, if the brand wants to designate the community as a gathering place for fans or as an informal information providing center; then, it should apply a strategy that maximizes the generation of COC. Understanding the distinction between different types of content would help brands adjust their online-marketing strategies, depending on their expectations from their OBCs (Soylemez, 2021a).

Personal-level Factors: Gender

Gender socialization theory suggests that, beyond sex-specific skills, females and males attain sex-specific personality attributes, self-concepts and value sets (Mason and Mudrack, 1996). Generally speaking, gender differences in online settings are pretty much well-studied. Literature suggests that predominantly male newsgroups can be often characterized by large amounts of facts, related exchange and impersonal speeches, while women-dominated newsgroups often display textual patterns of social interdependence (Van Doorn and Van Zoonen, 2008). Males have a tendency to read reviews for confirming their already-established views and disregard comments that invalidate those views, while female participants are more open to information and aim to minimize discrepancy by paying attention to opposing views (Chung and Monroe, 1998). Blogging literature suggests that women are more likely to be interested in the social aspects of blogging, and men in information, opinion and demonstrating more technical sophistication (Pedersen and Macafee, 2007). Women blog writers emphasize involvedness and male blog writers emphasize information (Schler *et al.,* 2005). Women tend

to share more personal topics such as family matters, while men are more likely to discuss more public topics such as politics and sports in social networks (Wang *et al.,* 2013). Men often have more adversarial, self-promoting, lengthy posts involving strong assertions, putdowns, and sarcasm-aimed style, and women have a style of supportiveness and attenuation, including appreciation; and community-based activities, thanks, apologies and questions (Herring, 1996).

In the OBC context, findings are less clear. Scholars are divided on whether gender differences play an important role or gender gap is closing (Islam and Rahman, 2017). Although a significant body of literature exists, little attention has been paid to the relevance of gender differences (Akar and Topcu, 2011; Rialti *et al.,*2017). Gender differences in OBC engagement are pointed out for future research (Hammedi *et al.,* 2015) and considered to be in early stages of development (Islam and Rahman, 2007). Recent studies also show that the moderation impact of gender is declining (Krishnapillai and Ying, 2017). Women are found to be more trusting toward fellow members (Bae and Lee, 2011; Mansour and Farmanesh, 2020) and using OBCs for social support, while men are found to be increasing and protecting social standing (Awad and Ragowsky, 2008; Fan and Miao, 2012), Thus, it is expected that female participants are prioritizing the community. Moreover, male participants are also found to be generating more BOC than COC (Soylemez, 2021a; Soylemez, 2021b). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Male members generate more BOC than COC, whereas female members generate more COC than BOC.

Product-level Factors: Involvement

Elaboration likelihood model (ELM) theorizes the attitude change caused by persuasive communication methods (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). According to ELM, there are two main routes to persuasion, namely central and peripheral routes. Central route is associated

with rational thinking about message content such as product details (Heinze, 2010). Meanwhile, peripheral route processing is about peripheral cues like emotion or other unrelated factors (Lee and Hong, 2016). Level of product involvement is about how personally significant or interested somebody is in consuming a product (Zaichkowsky, 1986). Low-involvement products are often within lower price ranges and do not bring much risk to the buyer, if they realize that their purchase decision was a mistake (Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Kim *et al.*, 2017). Meanwhile, high-involvement products are often expensive, and wrong purchase decisions create more problems for the buyer (Ansarin and Ozuem, 2015). Thus, low-involvement product purchase decision process is heuristic,short and often handled by peripheral route, while high-involvement product purchase decisions take long time and come with a long rational thinking process (Elliot and Percy, 2007)

In the context of OBCs consistent results about how product involvement influences OBC practices are hard to find (Hassan and Casaló Ariño, 2016). However, there are two approaches that can be utilized. From the brand perspective, high-involvement brands try to manage their OBCs with the purpose of staying in touch with customers. They engage with their OBC members by coming up with attracting offers, discount coupons and by responsive behavior (Viskovich *et al.*, 2018). Although OBCs are more common for high-involvement products, relevant literature also started to pay attention to the OBCs of low-involvement products (Schau *et al.*, 2009).

From the member perspective, involvement level is known to affect information processing (Dholakia, 2001). As product involvement increases, consumers seek more information (Suh and Yi, 2006). Moreover, members of high-involvement product communities are also likely to engage in defensive behaviors for the brand against unsatisfied customers (Hassan and Casaló Ariño, 2016). Customers of high-involvement products are more influenced by the arguments from past customers in online consumer reviews than

customers of low-involvement products (Sarathy and Patro, 2013). Members of high-involvement product community members are likely to utilize their central route more often, and expected to search and generate more BOC such as product information to make sure that they will not experience a buyer remorse. Members of low-involvement product communities often do not seek product information, since risks are marginal (Sarathy and Patro, 2013). Even if they do, they are often attracted to posts that do not focus on the product and require less cognitive effort (Barreto and Ramalho, 2019). Members of low-involvement product communities also don not perceive self-relevance to the brand unlike members of high-involvement product community members (Chang *et al.*, 2013). These members are likely to use their peripheral route and they will not be very interested in product-related information. In this case, brands are likely to encourage social interactions among users to create a strong sense of identity among customers, since their products are not as important to the customers as high-involvement products. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Members of high-involvement product communities generate more BOC than COC, whereas members of low-involvement product communities generate more COC than BOC.

Literature also suggests that stereotypical gender differences may manifest differently in different product involvement levels when it comes to the brand preference (Friedmann and Lowengart, 2019). Thus, an interaction is possible.

H3: Male participants of high-involvement product communities generate more BOC relative to COC, whereas female participants of low-involvement product communities generate more COC relative to BOC.

METHODOLOGY

Procedure

The experiment was designed as a four-condition study that investigates the impact of gender and product involvement on the generation of different types of UGC. A group of 120 Clickworker users who engaged with an OBC in the last 30 days prior to the interviews participated in the study. Seventy of the participants were females (58%) and fifty of them were males (42%) with a median age of 25-34. Eighty two percent of the participants has studied at least in a college and fifty three percent of the participants had a full-time job with a median income range of $40,000-$49,999.

First, participants were asked their gender self-identification. Then, participants were randomly assigned either a high-involvement condition or a low-involvement condition. Gillette disposable razors were chosen for representing low-involvement products and Trek Bikes were selected for high involvement products. After their familiarity, knowledge and attitude toward their assigned brand and product involvement level were measured, the participants were asked to imagine themselves in an online brand community about a male/female variant of their assigned product. After reading the scenario, participants were shown six content types and asked how likely they would post a content similar to those types in their assigned communities.

Measures

To determine *content orientation*, participants were asked to what extent they are likely to post particular types of content in the OBC on a 7-point scale. The six items that were used in Soylemez (2021a) were used in the experiment. Content orientation was calculated in the same way. The average brand-oriented score was divided by the average community-oriented score. A higher score indicates a higher inclination toward posting brand-oriented content as

opposed to community-oriented content. *Product involvement* was measured by the 10-item-long Personal Involvement Inventory Score (Zaichkowsky, 1994). In 7-Point Likert scale, a higher score indicates higher involvement, while a lower score indicates lower involvement. After reverse items scores were reversed, the average scores for both high-involvement products and low-involvement products were calculated. As control variables, socio-economic status and real-life OBC experiences (number of communities they are a member of, duration of membership, anonymity features, existence of formal reputation systems) of the participants were used.

Analysis

For manipulation check, a multiple regression with product involvement score as the dependent variable; product involvement type, familiarity, knowledge and attitude as the independent variables was performed. Results showed that there is indeed a significant difference between high involvement condition and low involvement condition ($t(115)=2.831$, $p=.005$, $\beta= .511$). The difference was also checked for each gender. Although product involvement was significant for the male participants ($t(45)=2.279$, $p=.027$, $\beta= .602$), it was not significant for the female participants ($t(65)=1.529$, $p=.131$, $\beta= .409$).

To analyze the relationship among gender-product involvement and types of user-generated content, a multiple regression with content orientation as the dependent variable; gender, product involvement type and control variables as the independent variables was performed. Gender of participants was found to have an insignificant positive effect on content orientation ($t(103)=.388$, $p=.699$, $\beta= .040$); thus, it can be stated that H_1 is not supported, which shows that there is no significant difference between male and female participants regarding relative generation of BOC and COC. Product involvement level was found to have a significant positive effect on content generation ($t(103)=1.980$, $p=.05$, $\beta= .261$), which shows that members of high-involvement product OBCs have a greater focus on BOC relative to

COC, while members of low-involvement product OBCs have a greater focus on COC relative to BOC. Thus, it can be said that H$_2$ is supported.

Product involvement-gender interaction has a significant but negative effect (t(103)=-1.765, p=.081, β= -.305) within the 90 percent confidence interval, which suggests that male participants of high-involvement product communities has the lowest content orientation, and female participants of low-involvement product communities has the highest content orientation. ANCOVA was conducted for further details. ANCOVA results suggest that, in the high involvement condition, female participants have significantly higher content orientation (more BOC) compared to their male counterparts (MD=.265, F(1,103)=3.759, p=.055), and female participants in high-involvement product communities have higher content orientation than their counterparts in low-involvement product communities (MD=.261, F(1,103)=3.920, p=.050). Thus, H$_3$ is not supported.

Among the control variables, the ability to use aliases/nicknames was found to have significant and negative effects on content generation (t(103)= -2.073, p= .041, β= -.303), which suggests that the members in OBCs, where they have to use their real-names, generate more BOC than COC, whereas the members in OBCs in which they can use aliases/nicknames, generate more COC than BOC. One possible explanation could be that the mandatory usage of real-names compels the users to take more serious manners while engaging with the OBC. Another explanation could be that communities which does not allow their members to use nicknames are often brand-hosted communities where members are aware that their contents are closely monitored by the brand.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Although content generation is a popular dependent variable in the literature, earlier studies often assumed that UGC is monolithic, and that all content are meant for the same target

audience. However, OBC members generate both BOC and COC (Soylemez, 2021b). Both types of UGC create value for brands either directly or indirectly (Carvalho and Fernandes, 2018), and a proper balance between the two is important to the health of OBCs. Brands should develop a deeper understanding of the factors driving the generation of each content type, in order to maximize the utility they receive from OBCs.

In this paper, the impact of two personal-level factors (gender and product involvement) on the generation of different types of UGC was examined. Based on the equity theory, it is argued that male participants are likely to perceive the brand as the greater stakeholder than the community, and consequently generate more BOC, and female participants are likely to perceive the community as the greater stakeholder than the brand, thus generating more COC. The experiment showed that there is no significant difference in terms of content orientation between genders. Recent studies also show that the moderation impact of gender is declining (Krishnapillai and Ying, 2017); thus, it can be said that the insignificant findings of this study are in parallel with the literature.

Based on the equity theory and ELM, it is argued that the members of high product involvement brand communities are likely to perceive the brand as the greater stakeholder than the community, and consequently generate more BOC, and the members of low-involvement brand communities are likely to perceive the community as the greater stakeholder than the brand, thus generating more COC. The experiment showed that this was indeed the case. Although how product involvement influences OBC dynamics is hard to identify (Hassan and Casaló Ariño, 2016), the results are promising.

Another finding of the study is that there is a significant negative interaction between gender and product involvement, which suggests that female members of low-involvement product communities generate relatively more BOC, while male members of high-involvement

product communities generate relatively more COC. Although this finding is the opposite of H$_3$, it still demonstrates that male and female members generate different types of UGC depending on product involvement level.

Theoretical Implications

This research is expected to help marketing scholars in several ways. This study has sought to advance Soylemez's study (2021a), which categorized UGC based on target audience. The equity theory argues that people evaluate social exchanges based on the fairness they perceive in the relationship, and, in social exchanges, self-interest and interdependency are key tenets (Lawler and Thye, 1999). Both for gender and product involvement, it is argued that members focus on the generation of different types of content to maintain equity. Although the equity theory is rarely used in OBC research (Kamboj and Rahman 2017), the theory offers explanations for differences among members. Thus, this study brings new insights to the theory by analyzing how members sustain equity between the self-inside and others-inside aspects.

Another contribution of the study is that it is the first study that focuses on gender in the generation of different types of UGC rather than using it as a control variable. Many OBC studies conduct their research by investigating communities of products that are used predominantly by males. OBCs are known for creating their own rituals and subcultures (Cova and Pace, 2006). Thus, studying how females generate content in a Harley-Davidson community where the majority of members are male does not give us an accurate picture about how female members engage with an OBC. Moreover, with even the impact of gender in online settings is declining (Krishnapillai and Ying, 2017), this study puts the gender to the center and expands the knowledge by addressing a gap in the literature.

The study also expands Soylemez's work (2021a) by studying how product involvement influences the relative generation of different types of UGC. Product involvement

is a relatively uncharted territory in the OBC literature, since the majority of OBCs is about high-involvement products (Schau *et al.,* 2009). The OBC literature often correctly assumes that members seek self-relevance to the brand and seek information when they join OBCs. However, these are not often the case for low-involvement product communities. Therefore, the dynamics analyzed based on high-involvement product communities may not be true for low-involvement product communities. Thus, this study brings a new point of view to the literature. In addition to that, the study also investigated how male and female participants engage with OBCs in different involvement settings.

Managerial Implications

This research is expected to help marketing practitioners in various ways. First, this study provides opportunities for marketing managers to develop strategies based on the level of product involvement. Although the product involvement level varies for each person (Park and Keil, 2019), certain characteristics of the product make these variations limited and the involvement enduring (Lou and Xie, 2021). Information-based strategies are closer to being optimal for highly involved members, since they are more predisposed to examining product information in detail (McMillan *et al.*, 2003), while socialization-based strategies that provide entertainment value to the members could be more suitable for lowly involved members (Lou *et al.*, 2019). Literature suggests that more symbolic and high involvement brands benefit significantly from building their own communities (Liao and Wang, 2020).

Companies may have different expectation from OBCs, thus should adjust their strategies according to the tendencies of OBC members. For some brands, OBCs are strategic resources for product development and various co-creation activities that inspire the company. In that case, brands should put extra effort into certain actions such as inviting OBC members to exclusive events, offering member-only discounts and giving early access to new products. Meanwhile, some brands regard OBCs as informal gathering places where members can get

socialized. In that case, the brand should put in extra effort by organizing social activities for OBC members. Since product involvement is positively associated with higher BOC generation, the brands can either double down or curve members' tendencies.

Secondly, understanding the impact of gender on the relative contribution of different types of UGC helps marketers to determine if they need gender-based strategies for men and women. Marketers should apply different strategies for each gender for better performance (Friedmann and Lowengart, 2019). Although gender was found to be insignificant in the study, gender-product involvement interaction was significant. The study shows that, in high-involvement product communities, female members generate more BOC, while male members generate more COC. Therefore, high-involvement brands should apply policies mentioned above for different genders depending on their expectations from the OBC.

Limitations and Further Studies

This research has several drawbacks that need to be examined by future research. The first problematic aspect of the study is partial results in the manipulation check. Although selected products were perceived differently in the overall sample, female participants have not considered bike and disposable shavers differently. Future studies can extend this study by investigating the effects of members' experiences with other OBCs. Although this study investigated how members try to maintain equity within a specific community, the equity theory also argues that individuals also try to maintain equity against their peers outside the communities. It would also be interesting for the future studies to examine whether the findings of this study are applicable to offline brand communities. Although online and offline brand communities have some fundamental differences, it is possible that similar dynamics could be observed in real-life discussions in offline brand communities. In face-to-face communications, some members tend to talk more about the focal brand and its latest products, while some

members prefer to engage in social networking depending on brand/product- and contextual-level factors.

Community characteristics on consumers' attitudes and behavior toward a brand community and the brand are a popular research stream in the OBC literature (Wang, 2021). Future studies can also advance this research by studying other community-level factors such as community orientation. Anti-OBCs, where members come together to demote certain brands or product categories, are worth investigating. These OBCs may have different dynamics. Future studies can also enhance this study by investigating the effects of various product classifications, such as goods vs. services, search vs. experience vs. credence goods, prevention- vs. promotion-oriented products and different stages of product lifecycle.

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