Friends with benefits: Can firms benefit from consumers' sense of community in brand Facebook pages?

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Abstract

Purpose – This two-country comparative study investigates the antecedents to, and the consequences of, a sense of belonging to a firm's Facebook community.

Design – The model was grounded in the theory of a sense of community and tested through SEM. Consumer panels were utilised via online surveys.

Findings – Of the three antecedents hypothesised to influence an individual's sense of belonging, enjoyment is a very strong predictor in both countries; while the credibility of posts was also a significant predictor for Australia, but not for South Africa. The findings also show no direct relationship between a sense of belonging and continuing behaviour. However, for both countries, there is a strong relationship between a sense of belonging and the involvement with a firm's offerings in Facebook; and that involvement is significant for the intention to continue engaging with firms through this social media platform.

Research implications – The findings support the framing of the study, in the sense of community theory; and they enhance researchers' understanding of the role of a sense of

belonging in moving visitors from simply clicking 'like' to a deeper sense of engagement with the firm's social media community and the flow-on effect to managerially relevant outcomes.

Originality – The model is developed from the theory of a sense of belonging, thus providing a fresh perspective to this research context. Additionally, there is limited research into the psycho-social antecedents to and the outcomes of consumers' sense of belonging to a firm's Facebook community.

Key words: Facebook, Social media, brand community, sense of belonging

Research paper

Introduction

Social media create even more opportunities for marketers to engage with their customers and for customers to engage with each other – in ways that benefit the brand (de Vries et al., 2012; Muk and Chung, 2014; Shamari and Schaefers, 2015) and these opportunities extend brands' global reach (Okazaki and Taylor, 2013). However, simply 'liking' a brand by clicking on a 'Like' button is not the same as interacting with a brand and its brand community, as expressed by 'following' a brand in social media (Logan, 2014). For meaningful consumer engagement, it has to go beyond a mere 'liking' (Naylor et al., 2012). Therefore, 'following' a brand through its Facebook site is the important stage that permits the individual to join the brand community, and to start to contribute to such a community (Logan, 2014).

According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), a network-based brand community is a "specialized, non-geographically bound community that is based on a structured set of social relationships among the admirers of a brand" and it can then exist as a virtual entity (Thompson and Sinha, 2008). As such, firm or brand, Facebook pages comprise a special form of consumer community (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) and they have become a major current issue in the

study of brands, since they bind brands and the community (consumers) together. The social interactions between community members also strongly influence consumers' relationships with and attitudes towards brands (McAlexander et al. 2002).

Consequently, brand communities represent valuable marketing opportunities and they could be helpful in managing customer relationships (Zaglia, 2013). At the firm's level, a key measure of social media success is the level of consumer engagement with the brand through the community that is facilitated on the site. In extending this thinking, if the focal point for engaged consumers is belonging to the firm's social media site community, then research should focus on the consumers' sense of belonging to such communities (Petri and Petrov, 2014).

Within the theory of a sense of community, it has long been recognised that being part of a community creates a sense of belonging (McMillian and Chavis, 1986). Moreover, the need to belong is an important "fundamental human motivation" that provides insights into people's behaviours (Baumeister and Leary, 1995, p. 497). Recent research shows that a sense of belonging constitutes an emotional or affective component of consumer engagement, (Brodie et al., 2011) and this sense of belonging in an online context arises through individuals' emotional engagement with the social aspects of the community (Brodie et al., 2013).

Yet, in a social media context, there is less research focusing on this affective component of community engagement in firm-based offerings – with the exception of the research of Muk and Chung (2014). In the light of the foregoing, it is argued that social media sites are essentially social places that offer people a virtual space within which to interact with others, thereby creating a sense of community. Therefore, a sense of belonging to such communities becomes an important point-of-departure in research into consumers' behaviour with firms' social media sites. Sacco and Ismail (2014) argue that it is becoming increasingly

important to understand how various social interaction formats satisfy individuals' social needs; and how the format facilitates the sense of belonging.

The second aspect of interest to the research is that Facebook is regarded as a global social media site (Araujo and Neijens, 2012; Kemp, 2015). As such, it can form a virtual multicultural marketplace, in which marketers and brands from different cultures compete with each other on both local and international levels (Demangeot et al., 2015). For international marketers using global social media sites, such as Facebook, understanding possible differences in their global followers' needs in terms of a sense of belonging to the brand community becomes important; if consumer engagement is the desired outcome: and even more so, if an international firm is now attracting brand followers from emerging markets, or markets in the southern hemisphere.

However, international marketing studies based in countries outside the northern hemisphere are limited (Walters, 2001), as also are studies in emerging markets (Fastoso and Whitelock, 2011; Lages et al., 2015). Greenland and Kwansah-Aidoo (2012) argue that international academic journals still neglect market research in emerging markets, especially in the less-developed countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. This study does not merely attempt to fill the gap in academic research in the Southern hemisphere countries; but also in emerging, less-developed countries familiar with the current advances in information and communication technologies.

Zaglia (2013:218) argues that research focusing on the combination of both social phenomena (brand communities and social networks) is required in terms of analysis, as well as conceptualisations and theories. This gap is still prevalent and Shi, Chen and Chow (2016) call for more studies to investigate the relevant factors in the brand page context, which might lead to improved continued interactions with these pages.

Thus, in response to the call for more research to understand online brand communities and social media in conjunction, our study focuses on brand Facebook pages, by using a sense of belonging, as our point-of-departure.

Using Facebook as the relevant social media site, the study extends previous research on consumer behaviour with firms' social media sites (e.g. Park, Jun and Lee, 2015) in three ways. Conceptually, the study contributes to knowledge by investigating the psycho-social antecedents to, and the possible outcomes for brands, arising from consumers' sense of belonging to a firm or a brand's Facebook community. This can be identified as a limitation in the marketing literature. Theoretically, this study is framed within the theory of a sense of community (McMillan, 1996), which has found some utility in the marketing literature (Carlson et al., 2008; Rosenbaum et al., 2005).

As such, the work extends the theoretical lenses for research in marketing. From an international marketing perspective, the study contributes through testing the model in two Southern hemisphere countries: Australia is considered a developed, but relatively small market; and South Africa is seen as a large, emerging, but financially distressed market. Therefore, it provides insights for both national and international marketers into how the antecedents to and the outcomes from a sense of belonging to a firm's Facebook community can be understood to increase consumer engagement.

Theoretical background

The development of computer-mediated communication formats provides a myriad of ways for individuals to initiate and maintain social relations in pursuit of belonging. Facebook brand pages provide one such example. Zaglia (2013) reports that Facebook brand pages have all the characteristics of brand communities. Firstly, the consciousness of a kind, which indicates a feeling of belonging. Members, therefore, often derive a sense of belonging from their

membership of the brand community (Algesheimer et al., 2005). Secondly, a sense of moral responsibility can develop; and lastly, a common thread can be found that helps to unite the community members.

The conceptual model to be tested was developed within the theory of a sense of community (McMillan and Chavis, 1986; McMillan, 1996). Among the theories of a sense of community, that of McMillan and Chavis (1986) is by far the most influential and it is the most broadly validated and widely utilized in the psychological literature. However, this theory has informed research in the consumer behaviour/marketing literature (Rosenbaum et al., 2005), and to an extent, also SNS research (Zhang, 2010; Stronge et al., 2015). The limited use of the theory corresponds with the systematic review of Knoll (2016), reporting that social media studies incorporating a theoretical framework are limited; and if a theory were used, it was mainly social identity and social influence theories.

The author argues for additional theories to be used in social media research, hence our decision for a sense of community theory. A sense of community is defined as 'a feeling that the members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together' (McMillan and Chavis, 1986, p. 9). Within this definition, there are four components that reflect a sense of community: membership (boundaries, emotional safety, sense of belonging and personal investment), influence (members need to feel that they have some influence in the group, and that there is some influence by the group on its members. This is needed for group cohesion), the sharing of values, and a shared emotional connection (McMillan, 1996).

Findings have shown that a sense of belonging through membership is an important outcome that has managerial benefits, such as the firm not needing to offer special deals or discounts. The theory has also investigated informed research on brand communities with findings, thereby indicating that aspects of a psychological sense of [brand] community can be

important factors that may precede, or function in place of, social interaction within the community (Carlson et al., 2008). Components of this theory have also been applied in terms of a sense of virtual community (Koh et al., 2003). The findings show a significant relationship between the identified antecedents and membership, and furthermore, that membership in a virtual community is one of the key factors in developing a sense of virtual community.

The study reported in this paper does not integrate the whole theory of a sense of community, but it focuses especially on that of membership. Membership includes a sense of belonging, personal investment, emotional safety, in addition to boundaries (McMillan et al., 1986; McMillan, 1996). In terms of social media offerings, consumers becoming a member of the firm's Facebook brand community is the first step and this is one that firms need to encourage as it is there that an individual would start to feel a sense of belonging. While limited research is available that examines this particular relationship, Koh et al. (2003) provided support for this conceptual direction in their research on a sense of virtual community. In that study, membership was defined as 'feelings of belonging in their virtual community' (p.81), adapted from the definition in McMillan and Chavis (1986). With this precedent in mind, the theoretical underpinnings for the conceptual model, and the hypothesised relationships to be tested, are discussed below.

Sense of Belonging

This variable is discussed first as it seen as the important one that is influenced by the antecedents and it then acts as an antecedent itself, to predict relevant outcomes or benefits for brands in the model. A sense of belonging has a strong foundation in the psychological literature, being posited as a basic interpersonal motivation owing to people's deep desire to have social interactions with other people (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). People enjoy contributing, creating, and joining communities, to fulfil their need for belongingness, social

connectedness, and being recognized, or simply enjoying interactions with other like-minded members (Laroche et al., 2012). Membership, reflected through a sense of belonging, was the key component of a sense of virtual community that was impacted by the hypothesised antecedent variables (Koh et al., 2003).

Additional support from the social media literature for the importance of a sense of belonging is evident in the work of Lin et al. (2014); where antecedent variables predicted a sense of belonging to a social network site, which in turn, predicted intentions to continue usage. In summarising, Facebook brand communities are designed for people to interact socially; therefore, it can be argued that a sense of belonging to that community would be likely to result in individuals being more actively engaged.

Antecedents to a sense of belonging

While online, the propensity for social interaction is a useful construct in a model that is examining the likelihood of sharing information, the notion of individual traits or dispositions for interacting or engaging with others in social network sites can reflect a broader approach. One such approach is the online social interaction propensity construct by Blazevic et al. (2014). This variable is defined as a "trait-based individual difference in the predisposition to enter into online discussions and it captures three main dimensions: the level of interaction, the social aspect, and enjoyment of the activity" (Blazevic et al., 2014). This predisposition to engage in online discussion relates to people enjoying contributing; and thus joining brand communities to fulfil the need to belong (Laroche et al. 2012), which in turn, reflects the membership component of a sense of community.

Social media sites are mainly used to facilitate the sharing of information, whether this consists of opinions, information, or multi-media content (Campbell et al., 2014). From a firm's perspective, social media sites provide valuable benefits when members are actively engaged

with other members of the site. This may be through sharing user generated content (UGC) (Presi et al., 2014), sharing their brand stories, [positive or negative] experiences, as well as making product recommendations (Shamari and Schaefers, 2015). This co-creation does not just lead to meaning and value for members, but also for firms (Ind and Coates, 2013). However, research shows that many individuals prefer to consume social media content, rather than actively to contribute content that can be shared (Campbell et al., 2014; Tsai and Men, 2013). As such, including the online social interaction propensity in the model extends the investigation beyond a simple propensity to share information (Park et al., 2015) to capture additional dimensions in consumers' engagement behaviours in social media communities.

As a point of departure, this variable is positioned as a key consumer trait that predicts the likelihood of experiencing a sense of belonging to a firm's Facebook community. Such an approach is relevant, since the social dimension of this variable includes aspects, such as a sense of belonging, being involved and participating (Blazevic et al., 2014). Based on the foregoing discussion, it is hypothesised that:

H 1: Online social interaction propensity would be positively related to a sense of belonging to a firm's Facebook community.

Brand pages offer opportunities for community members to not only form relationships with the brand, but also with other consumers with similar interests. Facebook enables its users to present themselves via an online profile that accumulates friends, who cannot only communicate and interact, but also to join virtual groups that are based on common interests. Not only do social network sites, such as Facebook, support both the maintenance of existing social connections, but also the formation of new connections (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe, 2007:1143).

Online peer communication is often driven by the need for social interaction, enjoyment or mood-enhancement (Abrantes et al., 2013). These 'enjoyable', 'social' 'interactions' with peers relate to the three dimensions of social interaction propensity (interaction, social and enjoyment), satisfying individuals' need to belong (membership), as well as the 'shared emotional connection' of the sense of community theory. Knowledge-sharing is a key driver of online brand communities and this is often evident through peer communication. Zaglia (2013) argues that consumers participate in communities because members frequently receive support and assistance from other community members, who are viewed as peers tailored to their needs.

Consequently, online brand communities are changing consumers' relationships with brands through the contribution of creating and sharing, as well as connecting with peers and the brand (Labrecque, 2014), thus fostering online social interaction. It is argued that the online social interaction propensity in a social media context can be further informed by the extent to which individuals engage in social media peer communication. Regarded as the social component of the Internet (Chui et al., 2013), social media is a highly interactive digital platform for consumers to influence, and to be influenced by others (Park et al., 2015; Shamari and Schaefers, 2015).

The importance of this dual focus is evidenced by Wang et al. (2012). They found that peer communication forms part of the relationships between peer group identification and other outcomes, such as involvement and purchase intentions. The peer communication variable, therefore, can provide further exploratory power to the individual trait relating to the propensity for social interaction. Following this reasoning, it is hypothesised that:

H2:   Peer communication has a positive relationship with the online propensity for social interaction.

Media dependency has been recognised in research prior to the emergence of social media and, even with the advent of the internet; studies demonstrate that such dependency can cognitively, affectively and behaviourally influence people's engagement with media sources (e.g. Ball-Rockeach and de Fleur, 1976; Jacob, 2010). In terms of a sense of belonging, prior research suggests that such dependency contributes to a greater sense of integration and attachment to that community (McLeod et al., 1996). In a social media context, it is evident that more and more people now rely on these new media platforms for information, in addition to entertainment and the building or maintaining of their interpersonal connections (Halji et al., 2015). This behaviour suggests that some people may have become dependent on social media in a similar way to media dependency that was noted in earlier research (Lin and Lu, 2011; Park et al., 2009).

This variable is defined in our study as a reliance on social media, as a very important source of communication and information that consumers can access through simply being a member of a social media community. However, there are some questions about the role that this variable might play in regard to a sense of belonging to that community. According to the individual media system, dependency theory individuals achieve some of the personal and collective objectives by accessing information resources that are controlled by the mass media (Grant et al., 1991). Tsai and Men (2013) found that, while significant, social media dependency was a very weak predictor of brand page engagement activity. So, it could be argued to have a stronger affect indirectly, for example, through people's engagement with the messages posted by community members (e.g. Rubin and Perse, 1987). In this relationship, social media dependency can influence the perceptions of trust in such media (Jackob, 2011), and this trust would be evident through the perceived credibility of the posts. In the light of the foregoing, it is hypothesised that:

H 3: Social media dependency has a positive relationship with perceived credibility of the posts on a firm's Facebook site.

When considering which variables contribute to a sense of belonging to a social media community, the perceived credibility of the posts, or the person posting, both need to be considered (Hajli et al., 2014; Tsai and Men, 2013). One of the key benefits of social media sites is the ability for consumers to participate. However, the perceived credibility of information provided by the various stakeholders in the social media community is very important (Hajli et al., 2014). Lack of perceived credibility may reduce the level of trust and subsequently, result in defection from the community (Johnson and Kaye, 2015). And this may influence a member's willingness to participate in the online brand community.

It has been suggested that the more competent online communities are in terms of knowledge, effectiveness and reliability, in other words credibility, the more likely members would be to share their knowledge (Usoro et al., 2007) and engage with the community. Credibility is defined in this study as the believability and trustworthiness of information posts that are provided by community members. It is proposed that credibility may add to a sense of belonging if the consumer perceives that all the members have the firm's social media community's best interests at heart through the credible user generated content that they provide. This trust relates to the influence dimension, as proposed by the sense of community theory. At the core of developing influence is building trust – people must know what they can expect from each other in the community. Community norms are essential for establishing that trust, thereby creating conforming behaviour (Byrne, 2014). This relationship is also inherent in the sense of community theory; where personal investment and emotional safety are relevant factors (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). Therefore, it is hypothesised that:

H 4:   Perceived credibility of information posted on a brand's Facebook site has a positive relationship with a sense of belonging.

The third key antecedent to a sense of belonging is enjoyment, or a sense of pleasure. While these terms appear to be used interchangeably in the social networking literature (e.g. Koh et al., 2003 uses enjoyment, while Lin et al. 2014 use pleasure). Both of these can act as antecedents to a sense of belonging. Facebook brand pages provide a unique opportunity to extend the dependency approach; since they allow users to engage in a wide range of activities, one of which is the multitude of entertainment features and functions enabling participation within the brand page and the community (Ruiz-Mafe et al., 2013:367).

Users that visit social networks for enjoyment, use these sights more often than users with other motivations (Orchard et al., 2014:398-399): thereby creating more opportunities to become familiar with the community and to feel a sense of belonging. Enjoyment has also been identified as an important need in life; and this is also reflected in the sense of community research, as an anticipated need to be fulfilled by being part of a community (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). Individuals have a need for enjoyment in their social media activity and this is consistent with the notions of pleasure in engaging with others in a social network (Karapanos et al., 2016). In a social networking context, enjoyment was a significant component of value in using a social networking site, which contributes to a sense of belonging through membership (Koh et al., 2003). Likewise, pleasure has a positive relationship, with a sense of belonging to a social network site (Lin et al., 2014). It could be argued then that when individuals seek to engage with others through membership in a social media community, they are seeking to have their need for enjoyment or pleasure satisfied through their sense of belonging to that community (Koh et al., 2003; Lin et al., 2014). Based on the foregoing, it is hypothesised that:

H5: Pleasure has a positive relationship with a sense of belonging.

Outcomes of a sense of belonging

The conceptual model suggests that a sense of belonging has outcomes that are beneficial to the brand, in this case involvement with the brand's products and services, and of course, the intention to continue engaging with the brand page. Zaichkowsky's (1985) description of involvement captures the essence of the relationships depicted in the conceptual model in this study. It reflects, "a person's perceived relevance of the object, as it is based upon inherent needs, values, and interest". Yet, this particular construct does not appear to be applied very often in studies examining form in social media sites. Instead, there is a focus on satisfaction (e.g. Lin et al., 2014).

This limitation is interesting, as the role of consumer involvement is considered to be an important antecedent to consumer engagement with a brand in an SNS context (e.g. Hollebeek et al., 2014). In bringing the notion of involvement into an m-commerce environment, San Martin and Lopez-Catalan (2013) argue that this construct can relate not only to involvement in the firm's offering, but also to involvement with the technology facilitating such access. By inference, such an interpretation of involvement could encompass the firm's brand community, and its facilitation through social media technology.

Maintaining meaningful relationships with others has long been identified as a basic human goal. Facebook helps users to build trusting relationships among members through the creation and joining of groups based on common interests and activities (Kobayashi et al. 2006). Belongingness theory proposes that people are motivated to experience social membership, in order to obtain optimal functioning.

According to Cvijiki and Michahelles (2013), collaboration as is evident in involvement in brand pages and the brand community, is linked to forming strong social ties and feeling a

sense of membership. Thus, stemming from the belongingness theory, there is the construct of social connectedness and the feeling of affiliation associated with involvement within a social network (Lee, Draper and Lee, 2001). Therefore, it is argued that, based on the antecedents to a sense of belonging to the social media community shown in the model, an outcome should be a stronger sense of involvement with the firm's goods or service offerings through the social media site. Therefore, it is hypothesised that:

> *H6*: There would be a positive relationship between a sense of belonging to the Facebook community and the actual involvement therewith.

Continued intention indicates that customers are not only willing to keep visiting a community brand page, but they also continue being involved and interacting with it (Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013). The intention to continue is an important outcome; as it measures the consumers' intentions to continue using the technology beyond the early stages of adoption (Kim and Malhotra, 2005), as well as behaviours of interest, such as continuing to use social network sites and fostering closer relationships among customers. Research in virtual communities has likewise validated that the sense of belonging impacts intention and usage behaviour (Boyd and Ellison, 2008; Lin et al., 2013).

Dholakia, Bagozzi and Pearo (2004) argue that a sense of human contact and warmth (sense of belonging) experienced on a brand page can be expected to be positively associated with continuous interaction intentions. Moreover, Lin et al. (2014) confirm that a sense of belonging has a positive relationship with continuing to engage with social media sites. Consequently, if users have a strong sense of belonging to a social network site, such as Facebook; and they feel attached to the brand page, it would motivate them to continue using the brand's Facebook page. Therefore, it is hypothesised that:

H 7:   There should be a positive relationship between a sense of belonging to the Facebook community and continuing to engage with the firm's Facebook sites.

Encouraging customer engagement with the firm's social media community continues to be at the very crux of a social media strategy. Research has focused on community members' activities, such as 'liking' or commenting, or sharing brand posts on social media sites (de Vries et al., 2012), suggesting a lower level of engagement. Firms benefit when members 'share information, experiences, brand stories and when they 'recommend or evaluate products' all done with the other consumers in the social media brand community and the brand (Shamari and Schaefers, 2015, p. 20). These types of activities reflect user generated content (UGC), considered to be highly valuable for firms when positive (Presi et al., 2014). However, UCG can also provide insights for firms to better understand and respond to their customers' complaints (Shamari and Schaefers, 2015). Finally, while not particularly evident in the social media literature, if community members are involved with the firm's goods and service offerings, this involvement should also have a positive relationship with intentions to continue this behaviour, in addition to a sense of community. Therefore, it is hypothesised that:

H8: Involvement would have a positive relationship with the intention to continue to engage with and join firms' Facebook sites.

Country selection

Wilson, Gosling and Lindsay (2012) argue that the broad composition of Facebook users provides a remarkably useful opportunity to examine trends both within and across countries. However, a review by the same authors revealed that although many articles have explored social media and Facebook trends within developed countries, even basic comparisons of

samples across countries were rare. Additionally, the behavioural data gathered from Facebook are well suited to explore cultural differences and to compare trends across groups.

As research of this nature is not evident in the literature at a cross-national level, the study is deemed descriptive and therefore, no hypotheses have been put forward regarding any country differences at this stage. Consequently, the research was conducted in South Africa and Australia, in order to investigate consumers' psycho-social needs when engaging with firms through social media (Facebook brand pages) to better understand consumers' sense of community through membership in a firm's social media site. The two countries in this study offer an interesting opportunity for such a comparative investigation.

Both countries are sufficiently technologically advanced to provide social media to their populations. Most major South African brands are already using social media, with around 91% using Facebook (Goldstruck, 2015). South Africa, however, can be regarded as a "financially distressed less-developed country" (Smith, 1989, p.36). In Australia, 93% of people, who are on the Internet use Facebook and 30% follow brands on Facebook. In this regard, a large number of firms in Australia maintain a social media presence, most frequently Facebook (Sensis Social Media Report, 2015). Moreover, the economic outlook for Australia continues to be positive (OECD Australia – Economic Forecast, 2015). In both countries, firms continue to struggle with understanding the best way to harness the power of social media (Littlewood and Bicks, 2015; Sensis Social Media Report, 2015). Furthermore, although the purpose of this study is not to measure culture orientations, it is interesting to note that, according to Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkof (2010), South Africa and Australia's cultural orientations are generally very similar. Both can be classified as individualistic, normative, masculine, indulgent societies, with a low preference for avoiding uncertainty. For both countries, there are correlations with extant research, showing that firms appear to lack a deeper understanding of how to integrate social media effectively in their business strategies, including

how to encourage visitors to their social media sites to move into stronger engagement activities with the community and the brand (Araujo and Neijens, 2012). The significance of Facebook, as a business communication tool (often low cost and low risk), and the lack of understanding in this area (Kudeshia, Sikdar and Mittal, 2016), emphasises the need to focus on Facebook brand pages.

Thus, given the cross-border applicability of social networks, such as Facebook and the similarities between South Africa and Australia, while reflective of two different continents and different states of development, makes these two countries suitable to test the applicability of our proposed framework across similar, yet very distinct, contexts.

Method

Procedures and Sampling

We selected Facebook as the social media platform of interest as it continues to have a high level of use in the two selected countries (e.g. Goldstruck, 2015; Sensis, 2015). The survey was developed in English for both countries and delivered online. Quota sampling (a non-probability based sampling method), a two-stage sampling technique: applying the judgement of researchers and fulfilling the quota based on country, was applied to collect data. This sampling technique provides a better selection of the population, and assures that the quota is fulfilled to reflect the representation of both South Africa and Australia (Malhotra et al., 2006). Sampling in both countries involved the use of market research firms, by using their online consumer panels. Two screening questions were included to ensure that the respondents were: (a) active adult Facebook users; and (b) belonged to a brand Facebook page.

In a similar fashion as that of Jung, Kim and Kim (2014), which distinguished between brand communities as consumer-created or marketer-created, we focused only on marketer-created brand communities, as is evident in Facebook brand pages. In line with other studies,

such as those of Lin and Lu (2011) and Ruiz-Mafe, Martí-Parreῆo and Sanz-Blas (2014), the focus was not one specific marketer-created brand pages or industry, but rather a more general approach, in which the participants were instructed to refer to the brand or firm Facebook pages to which they belong, when answering the questions.

Measures

The items measuring the constructs in the model were adapted from existing research and measured by using a five-point Likert scale with end points of 1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree (Peer communication; Wang et al., 2012); (Online social-interaction propensity; Blazevic et al., 2014); (Social-media dependency; Tsai and Men, 2013); (Pleasure and Sense of belonging; Lin et al., 2014); (Perceived credibility of posts; Colliander and Dahlén, 2011); (Involvement; San Martin and Lopez-Catalan, 2013); and Continuance-intention measures were adapted (from Lin et al. 2014). Demographical information, as well as Facebook and social media usage patterns were also included. The data were examined by using Structural-equation modelling (SEM), as this is a well-regarded technique for examining consumer behaviour (Muk and Chung, 2014) and for cross-national comparisons (Park et al., 2015).

Results

Sample Characteristics

The total sample for the study comprised 681 respondents, (South Africa n = 381 and Australia n = 300). The participants in both countries indicated that they occasionally join brands' Facebook pages and that they largely participate in these pages by viewing photos, reading company posts and users' comments, as well as 'liking' pages. Sample characteristics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Sample size (n = 681)	Australia (n = 300) (%)	South Africa (n = 381) (%)
Gender		
Male	50	46.2
Female	50	53.8
Age (years)		
18-24	6.3	4.5
25-35	25.7	20.5
36-45	17.7	22.3
36-45	15.3	25.2
46-55	21.0	18.9
56-65	13.7	8.7
65+	0.3	0
Education		
High school/secondary	32.0	24.7
TAFE/vocational qualification	33.3	27.6
Undergraduate degree (bachelors)	25.0	19.2
Postgraduate studies (masters')	7.7	24.7
PhD or ABD	0.7	2.9
Other	1.3	1.0

Validity of measurements

A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted, which confirms reliability and the discriminant validity of multi-item constructs. This analysis is shown in Table 2. The Chi-square $\chi2 =$ 829.108, (df= 216, p=0.00) of this model was significant, however, this result may be sensitive

to sample size and model complexities. An acceptable model fit was achieved from the relevant results for the following indices: GFI=0.900, CFI=0.944, IFI=0.945, NFI=0.926, SRMR=0.04, RMSEA=0.065. According to Bagozzi and Yi (1988), the tests for construct reliability (>0.60) and average variance extracted (AVE) by the latent construct (>0.50) meet the standards. Moreover, all the item loadings are highly significant. Therefore, convergent validity is achieved in this CFA. Additionally, the Chi-square difference test (Table 3) shows that the constructs are statistically different from each other, which indicates that discriminant validity was also achieved (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988).

Table 2. Confirmatory factor analysis

Constructs/items	Standardized estimate**	Construct reliability	AVE
Social media dependency		0.664	0.507
Using social media is one of the more important things that I do each day	0.838		
I would rather spend my leisure time on the internet than someplace else	0.558		
Online social interaction propensity		0.920	0.794
In general, I like to get involved in online discussions	0.875		
I am someone who likes actively participating in online discussions	0.951		
In general, I thoroughly enjoy exchanging ideas with other people online	0.843		
Peer communication		0.821	0.604
I talk to my social media friends about firms' Facebook pages that I belong to	0.816		

Constructs/items	Standardized estimate**	Construct reliability	AVE
My social media friends talk to me about firms' Facebook pages that they belong to	0.781		
My social network friends encourage me to be part of the firm's Facebook pages they belong to	0.733		
Pleasure		0.824	0.611
Posting comments on firm/brands' Facebook page gives me pleasure	0.740		
Reading information firm/brands' Facebook page makes me feel good	0.762		
Interacting with people (e.g. posting messages in a brand community) on a firm/brands' Facebook page makes me happy	0.839		
Sense of belonging		0.886	0.721
I feel as if I belong with the others involved in firm/brands' Facebook page	0.826		
I feel as if I am socially connected to others involved with the firm/brands' Facebook page	0.839		
I feel as if I am a part of the firm/brands' Facebook's community	0.881		
Perceived credibility of posts		0.778	0.549
The user posts on firm/brand's Facebook pages are convincing	0.825		
The user posts on Facebook.com firm/brand's pages are believable	0.830		
The user posts on Facebook.com firm/brand's pages are unbiased	0.526		
Involvement		0.825	0.612
I am very interested in the products and services offered through the firm/brands' Facebook pages that I belong to	0.721		

Constructs/items	Standardized estimate**	Construct reliability	AVE
My level of involvement with the products and services offered through the firm/brands' Facebook pages that I belong to is high	0.806		
I am particularly involved with the products and services offered through the firm/brands' Facebook pages that I belong to	0.816		
Intention to continue		0.915	0.782
I intend to continue using/joining firms/brands' Facebook pages	0.866		
I intend to continue using firms/brands' Facebook pages	0.906		
I expect my engagement with firms/brands' Facebook pages to continue in the future	0.881		

Note: **All parameter estimates are significant at the 0.001 level

Table 3. **Chi-square different test**

Constructs	SMD	PLEAS	OSIP	BELONG	INV	CRED	CONT
PLEAS	71.302						
OSIP	157.803	178.901					
BELONG	36.603	35.523	180.669				
INV	54.365	76.951	251.843	57.822			
CRED	180.948	215.302	357.693	195.086	208.033		
CONT	112.088	102.501	306.357	96.164	86.499	224.375	
PC	41.684	64.070	185.035	42.450	78.303	113.009	117.160

Notes: SMD-social media dependency; PC-peer communication; OSIP-online social interaction propensity; PLEAS-pleasure; BELONG-sense of belonging; CRED-perceived credibility of the info; INV-involvement; and CONT-continuance (constructs are different, $p < 0.001$)

Invariance testing

The model fit indices reported earlier indicate an acceptable fit for the structural model. The next step was to do the invariance testing, in order to determine the equivalence between the measures for the two countries, according to Byrne et al. (1989). The results of the configural invariance analysis (Step 1) demonstrate that $\chi2$ and the model fit indices for each country are

satisfactory, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Results of configural invariance analysis

Model	χ^2	Df	IFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Australia	480.5	202	0.940	0.924	0.939	0.068
South Africa	525.6	202	0.951	0.938	0.951	0.065
Stacked model	1,006.1	404	0.946	0.932	0.946	0.047

In the second step, a metric invariance test was conducted. The results shown in Table 4 indicate that a full metric invariance is not supported, because χ2 difference 52.2 (df=23, p<0.05) is significant. This outcome is not uncommon for empirical research (Park et al., 2015) and it is then necessary to determine whether there is some partial measurement invariance; where the constraints are relaxed, based on modification indices and expected parameter changes (e.g. Milfont and Fischer, 2010). In this further analysis, relaxing 6 of the 23 constraints resulted in partial invariance and the χ2 difference 27 (df=17, p>0.05) between the non-restricted and the partial metric invariance model was not significant. These results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Test for metric invariance

Model	χ^2	Df	RMSEA	AIC	TLI	CFI
Non-restricted model	1,006.1	404	0.047	1,302.119	0.932	0.946
Full metric invariance[a]	1,058.3	427	0.047	1,308.276	0.933	0.943
Partial metric invariance[b]	1,033.1	421	0.046	1,295.075	0.934	0.945

Notes:

[a]Full metric invariance is not supported (χ^2 d (23) = 52.2, **p** < 0.05);

[b]Partial metric invariance is supported (χ^2 d (17) = 27, **p** > 0.05) (with six items of 23 invariance constraints relaxed)

Hypotheses testing for the country comparisons

Given the results for the invariance tests, the two full structural models were run. As is evident in Table 6, the fit indices for both models indicate an acceptable fit.

Table 6. Model fit indices Australia and South Africa

Model	χ^2	df	p	GFI	CFI	IFI	SRMR	RMSEA
Australia	569.5	218	0.000	0.854	0.923	0.924	0.057	0.073
South Africa	633.6	218	0.000	0.874	0.937	0.937	0.049	0.071

The acceptable model fit allows us to consider the structural equation models, as they are valid to answer the research hypotheses.

Table 7. Hypotheses test for Australia and South Africa

	Australia			South Africa		
	Std. estimate	Std. error	p	Std. estimate	Std. error	p
H1 IPS → Bel	−0.026	0.032	0.490	0.002	0.021	0.951
H2 PC → IPS	0.597	0.068	0.000	0.049	0.061	0.383
H3 Depp → Cre	0.679	0.084	0.000	0.823	0.066	0.000
H4 Cre → Bel	0.173	0.050	0.000	0.021	0.066	0.724
H5 Ple → Bel	0.903	0.090	0.000	0.981	0.088	0.000
H6 Bel → Inv	0.890	0.068	0.000	0.840	0.054	0.000
H7 Bel → Con	−0.086	0.159	0.646	0.132	0.087	0.141
H8 Inv → Con	0.797	0.205	0.000	0.692	0.105	0.000
R^2						
Credibility of posts		46.1%			67.8%	
Online social interaction propensity		35.6%			0.20%	

Sense of belonging	99.9%	99.5%
Involvement	79.2%	70.6%
Continuance	52.0%	65.0%

We noted an insignificant relationship between online social interaction propensity and a sense of belonging in both the Australian and the South African data. The argument that social media users actively participate in online discussions, and that they do so to fulfil the need to belong, or that they would experience an increased sense of belonging (Laroche et al, 2012; Blazevic et al, 2014), does not hold true. The results further show that the relationship between peer communication and online social interaction propensity ($\beta = 0.597$, $p<0.05$), and between credibility and the sense of belongingness ($\beta = 0.173$, $p<0.05$) are significant for Australia, whereas such relationships are insignificant for South Africa. It is evident that talking to Facebook friends about the brand pages you belong to, and vice versa, can only drive the propensity to enter and participate in online discussions for certain users (Australia) and that peers' do not necessarily hold the same influence for South African Facebook fans' propensity to engage. South African respondents' sense of belonging is also not influenced by other community members' unbiased, believable or convincing (credible) comments, as suggested by Hajli et al. (2014). It seems that social influence from Facebook friends or Facebook community members is not present in the South Africa sample. For South Africans, trust and credibility are thus not prerequisites to feel that they belong to a community; and it is apparent that the lack of credibility does not necessarily influence all members' willingness to participate in the online community, as was suggested by Johnston and Kaye (2015).

The results further indicate that for both countries, a sense of belonging does not directly influence continuance. This is unexpected as previous research reported that when members feel they belong to a community, they would want to continue to be part of the community and

keep visiting the online community (Boyd and Ellison, 2008; Lin et al., 2013). However, a sense of belonging directly influences consumer involvement ($\beta = 0.890$, $p<0.05$ for Australia and $\beta = 0.840$, $p<0.05$ for South Africa). And consumer involvement influences continuance ($\beta = 0.797$, $p<0.05$ for Australia and $\beta = 0.692$, $p<0.05$ for South Africa).

Confirming the relationship between involvement and continuance is significant as little empirical evidence is available to support this relationship in social media research. Furthermore, the results suggest that a sense of belonging is not sufficient to ensure that Facebook fans would necessarily continue to visit and engage with a brands' page. It seems as if actively encouraging involvement of Facebook fans with a brands' product and service offerings could rather be the key to ensuring that members keep visiting and contributing to the brand pages.

In line with previous findings (Lin et al, 2014; Koh et al, 2003), users visit social media for pleasure while engaging with others in a social media network (Karapanos et al, 2016), as pleasure exerts a strong influence on the sense of belonging for both samples (Australia $\beta = 0.903$, $p<0.05$; South Africa $\beta = 0.981$, $p<0.05$).

The relationship between social media dependency and credibility was also significant ($\beta = 0.679$, $p<0.05$ for Australia and $\beta = 0.823$, $p<0.05$ for South Africa) for both countries, signifying a possible indirect effect on the sense of belonging via messages posted by community members, as was suggested by Rubin and Perse (1987).

For South Africa, only four of the eight hypothesised paths were significant; while six were significant for Australia, signifying that the model might be more suitable to a developed country context. However, on closer inspection, it is evident that pleasure as an antecedent to a sense of belonging, belonging, as an antecedent to involvement and involvement's relationship with continued intention, are confirmed in both samples, in addition to explaining more than half of the variance in continued intention (52% and 65% respectively,) suggesting

a more universal applicability of the main constructs and relationships of the model.

Discussion and implications

In the age of social media, everything is about community building and gaining customers' engagement with the community and the brand. Successful marketing strategies mean exploring and seizing the opportunities of social network environments, presented in online brand communities, such as Facebook brand pages. As a result, this study investigated antecedents to and outcomes from a sense of belonging to a social media community, comparing consumers in Australia with those in South Africa.

The findings show that of the three antecedents hypothesised to influence an individual's sense of belonging to a firm's social media community, enjoyment is the strongest factor for both countries. The findings, therefore, support previous research, such as that of Blazevic et al. (2014), Karapanos et al. (2016) and Lin et al. (2014) in a social media context conducted in the developed countries in the Northern hemisphere. Additionally, the findings support a sense of community research, where pleasure or enjoyment are perceived as a need that individuals expect to be fulfilled through being part of a community (e.g. McMillan and Chavis, 1986).

The perceived credibility of posts was a significant predictor of a sense of belonging for Australia, but not for South Africa. In explaining these findings: in Australia, the findings suggest that individuals need to feel that all the members have the firm's social media community's best interests at heart, through the user-generated content that they provide. Additionally, this finding is in line with relationships in the sense of community theory; where individuals need to trust the community, in order to feel a sense of belonging (McMillan and Chavis, 1986).

However, in South Africa, it may be that people join firms' social media communities for the sheer pleasure of being a part of this larger interaction opportunity and they do not really

worry about whether the information posted is credible, or not. Interestingly, the findings in South Africa support the findings by Tsai and Men (2013), which is a USA study; where perceived credibility was not significant in predicting engagement behaviours with the community.

For both countries, there was no relationship between consumers' online social interaction propensity and a sense of belonging. As such, this idea of a personal trait or characteristic to share information in the digital environment contradicts the significant findings of Park et al. (2015); and it tends not to support the notions of Blazevic et al. (2014) on the importance of the social dimension of this variable.

Looking at the peripheral variables to the main antecedents, the findings show that peer communication was only significant for Australia, as an influencing factor for online social interaction propensity. Thus, our reasoning that this variable could provide further exploratory power to a propensity for social interaction was not supported in an emerging country context; and it could be that consumers are more interested in communication with brands and firms; as this is still somewhat 'novel' in emerging countries, as was suggested by Nichols (2014).

However, the social media dependency variable does influence consumers' perceptions of the credibility of the Facebook posts in both these countries. This finding supports that of Rubin and Perse (1987) in terms of consumers engaging with the messages, as well as that of Jacob (2010), in relation to trust in the community. Additionally, our reasoning that social media dependency has an indirect effect on a sense of belonging through perceived credibility was only supported in the Australian model.

Turning to the relevant outcome variables in the model, the findings show that the direct relationship between a sense of belonging and continuance behaviour is not significant for South Africa or for Australia. This is an unanticipated finding, suggesting that even when an individual feels a sense of belonging to a firm's social media community, this is not necessarily

a sufficient condition to predict the fans' willingness to continue engaging with brand pages. A possible reason could be that it is very easy to join a brand community on social media and this often results in multiple memberships (McAlexander et al., 2002). Instead, a sense of belonging very strongly predicted involvement with the firms' products or service offerings through the Facebook site for both countries.

This finding provides some support for the argument of San Martin and Lopez-Catalan (2013) that consumer involvement relates not only to an involvement in the firm's offerings, but also to involvement with the technology facilitating such access. Applying such an interpretation, our findings seem to encompass this duality, that individuals can be involved with a firm's offerings and the facilitation of such offerings through social media technology, thereby reflecting the interactions in the social media community via the credibility of UCG and a sense of belonging.

Finally, it is noted that since the relationship between involvement and continuance behaviour is also strong for both countries, a sense of belonging can be argued, as having an indirect relationship through involvement. But these direct and indirect relationships need further testing; as they were not evident in previous studies, which only tended to deal with satisfaction as an outcome variable (e.g. Lin et al., 2014).

Based on the discussion of the findings, the study makes three contributions to theory. Firstly, it is the specification and the testing of a conceptual model on the antecedents to and the outcomes from a sense of belonging to a social media community, and by combining both social phenomena (brand communities and social network) the study addresses the research gap identified by Zaglia (2013) and Shi, Chen and Chow (2016). If the goal of firms having a social media site is to encourage higher levels of engagement with the community and the brand, then researchers need to place the community at the heart of their investigations.

Taking the findings into consideration, the results extend the theoretical lenses for research in marketing as we argue that the findings support framing the study in the sense of community theory to enhance researchers' understanding of the role of a sense of belonging in moving visitors from simply clicking "like" to a deeper sense of engagement with the firm's social media community and the flow-on effect to managerially relevant outcomes. Additionally, the study supports extant research applying this community-based theory in marketing contexts (e.g. that of Carlson et al., 2008) and it shows support for extending it to social media research and Facebook brand pages.

Thirdly, the study focuses on countries outside the northern hemisphere to contribute to marketing research on geographically diverse populations, in order to determine similarities and differences in a firm-based social media context. Finding support for regarding not only Facebook (Araujo and Neijens, 2012; Kemp, 2015), but also Facebook brand community pages as having global applicability. For international marketers' understanding, possible differences in their global followers' needs in terms of a sense of belonging to the brand community becomes important; if consumer engagement is the desired outcome: and even more so, if an international firm is now attracting brand followers from emerging markets, or markets in the southern hemisphere.

Several practical contributions are evident. The importance of having a moderator involved in the social media community is apparent from the findings. The role of this moderator is to ensure that UCG posted on the social media site is credible and this would not be likely to harm or upset members' sense of belonging to the community (Halji et al., 2014). However, this need for perceived credibility, that could be maintained by the moderator, was only relevant for Australia, but not for consumers in the emerging market of South Africa. Taking into account the strength of enjoyment in relation to a sense of belonging, South African consumers may believe that the credibility of posts can be taken at face value, and that they

should use other media or social sources to alleviate their concerns.

However, South African practitioners should not become complacent about the need to manage their firm's community-based UCG. For both countries, given that a sense of belonging to a firm's social media community is a strong antecedent to involvement with the firm's offering, then the moderator's role to ensure the credibility of posts becomes important for stronger engagement activities, particularly as there is little way that practitioners can measure whether their members are defecting to competing brands because of these concerns. It is therefore important that when page managers encourage users to comment (to increase involvement and provide entertainment), managers need to respond to the comments as well, not only to ensure an engaged community of fans, but also to validate the credibility of the comments or posts. An additional way to assist with the credibility or believability of users' posts is the use of "I like" "It's useful" buttons to rate other users uploaded content or the embedding of blogs of opinion leaders could also ensure more credible posts.

The power of peers or social influence is apparent in the Australian sample. Practitioners can use this to their advantage with "Refer-a-friend" or "Tag-a-friend" campaigns where members can gain rewards (for example, coupons or free shipping) if they convince a friend to join the brand page. By posting interesting snippets of content about current developments in the industry or topics that are relevant to the brand's audience, brands could drive engagement, but this would need to be via 'sharing', to harness the social power of peer communication.

As sense of pleasure in being part of the community was the most important predictor of a sense of belonging for both countries. To achieve aspects of pleasure, it may be necessary for firms' social media community managers to understand the role of practices that facilitate brand communities. For example, practices, such as welcoming new community members, and setting expectations (Schau et al., 2009) may contribute to this sense of enjoyment, which, in turn, creates a stronger sense of belonging to the community. Other marketing strategies could

include the use of games, visuals and humour. Images have proven to improve engagement, especially when they tell a story, or connect with the community members. Brands need to keep their fans' interests in mind, and make sure that the humour is relevant to their brand and audience. Marketing practitioners also need to encourage their fans to share photos or videos (For example on a given topic related to the brand or of the brand's products), this is a fun way to trigger engagement and dialogue. Hosting a contest or offering a giveaway to encourage more shares or submission would not only increase involvement, but also provide pleasure and excitement.

For local and international social media practitioners, the findings support the importance of ensuring that those who join the firm's Facebook community should feel a sense of belonging, in order to gain the benefits of stronger involvement with the firm's offerings through the site. Involvement could be the key to move consumers from passively following the brand to active engagement, as well as ensuring that consumers continue to visit and engage with the brand page. This could be accomplished by encouraging involvement with the brands' product and services on the brand pages via competitions, product reviews, instant polls, and suchlike. For example a contest to see which member posts the most creative 'unboxing' of a brands' product would not only increase involvement for members, but also create credible posts and provide entertainment value as well. Furthermore, to increase the involvement, it could be wise to link the fan page to the other social media platforms of the brand, working in conjunction to drive involvement. Another method to increase involvement is for brands to start a dialogue with their brand page community by asking questions and inviting a response. Using a call to action in posts, whether it's to prompt a comment, share, opt in, like or RSVP is yet another way to increase the level of involvement.

Many companies have begun using Facebook fan pages to enhance brand attractiveness, and social network sites have evolved into social-utility networks, creating promising business

opportunities. To this end, the managers of brand pages need to be aware of the factors motivating users to continue their patronization of such pages. Employing the strategies to increase involvement, as suggested above, can ensure that fans would to continue using and visiting brand pages and this adds value to the brand, such as lowering the marketing expenses, reaching a targeted audience, building brand loyalty, receiving instant feedback and gaining customer insights, to name but a few.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although social networks can be integrated with other traditional marketing channels, unlike traditional media that often need to be adjusted to a particular country, or culture, it seems as if social media users are more homogeneous and global in nature. It is evident that there is a movement towards a more globalised Facebook consumer, as is evidenced in the similar results obtained for four of the eight hypotheses in Australia and South Africa. Such findings support the notions of Facebook being a multi-cultural marketplace (Demangeot et al., 2015) and hosting global consumers in their social media communities (Pookulangara and Koesler, 2011). As such, the findings suggest that a more homogeneous approach could work well for international brand marketers, when developing content and posting strategies for their brand's Facebook pages. In conclusion, our study suggests that Facebook is becoming a truly virtual multicultural marketplace, regardless of the variation in consumers or countries' technology readiness, infrastructural limitation or uneven retail conditions, as suggested in Rippé et al. (2015) and Tanusondjaja et al. (2015).

As with all research projects, there are limitations but they can inform future research directions. We collected the data from only two countries; and future research should replicate the findings of this study in other countries for more valuable cross-cultural research. Secondly, the participants were not asked to use a specific brand community, or a firm's Facebook page

as a reference. Thus, further research should benefit from including the brand or firm in the model. From a theoretical aspect, the study only considered some of the antecedents and outcomes of a sense of belonging. Further research could expand on these factors, such as the influence of brand trust, group identity and social capital.

In summary, our results indicate that firms can benefit from consumers' sense of community via their involvement in brand Facebook pages. However, as these technologies continue to advance and diffuse further into society, we trust the findings reported in this study will contribute to the larger understanding of a sense of belonging in social network sites.

Acknowledgements

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