NAVIGATING ONLINE BRAND ADVOCACY (OBA): AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS

Violetta Wilk, Paul Harrigan, and Geoffrey N. Soutar

This study answered a call for an investigation into the way in which consumers advocate for brands online, which was termed Online Brand Advocacy (OBA). An analysis of 1,796 online posts on two different types of online community forums was undertaken. It was found that "I Love <Brand>" was insufficient to constitute OBA, which seems to be an elaborate, purposeful, and impactful online statement in support of a brand. OBA has key aspects that seem to group into cognitive, affective and virtual visual dimensions, suggesting online brand management needs to be multi-faceted. Research and managerial implications are presented.

Brand advocacy has generally been seen as the active promotion, support for or defense of a brand by a consumer to other consumers (Jillapalli and Wilcox 2010; Keller 2007; Park and MacInnis 2006). It is often described as a positive outcome of a strong consumer-brand relationship; seen through the lens of consumer-brand identification and seeded within Social Identity Theory (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar and Sen 2012; Kuenzel and Halliday 2008; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003). Facilitated by a myriad of online communication platforms and channels, it is in the process of online socializing and networking, specifically through online consumer-to-consumer (C2C) communication, that consumers give rise to brand advocacy. Thus, when brand advocacy occurs online, it might be termed Online Brand Advocacy (OBA).

Despite an increasing interest in OBA (Leventhal et al. 2014; Parrott, Danbury and Kanthavanich 2015; Wallace, Buil and De Chernatony 2012), its conceptualization, dimensionality, and measurement are unclear. Some have argued OBA is unique and differs from offline brand advocacy and have pushed for further investigation (Graham and Havlena 2007) and others have suggested there is a need to improve our understanding of how

consumers advocate for brands online (Divol, Edelman and Sarrazin 2012; Urban 2005). This research responded to these suggestions by taking an exploratory view of OBA.

Consumers advocate for brands online through brand-related User-Generated Content (UGC) (Smith, Fischer and Yongjian 2012) that allows organizations to *"extend their reach beyond their immediate circles of influence"* (Owyang and Lovett 2012, p. 14). Online UGC has distinct characteristics that are different than those found in offline communication (e.g., communicators can be anonymous, as givers and receivers of information may be identified only by usernames) and such information is quick-to-act-on, easily accessible for an indefinite period of time, and has global reach. OBA is clearly undertaken in a unique setting and, just as electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) has been differentiated from offline WOM (Breazeale 2009; Cheung and Thadani 2012; Chu and Kim 2011; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004), OBA deserves to be explored and assessed.

Today's consumers intertwine their online and offline activities through the use of social media, and this has clear implications for marketers (Aksoy et al. 2013b). According to Keller (2007, p. 451) *"we should think of consumers as primarily supportive of brands and companies, in the sense that they want to help connect good brands with good friends."* Not surprisingly, C2C brand communications influence consumers' behavior (Adjei, Noble and Noble 2010; Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006; Keylock and Faulds 2012). Thus, organizations need to implement new online brand management and customer management strategies. However, organizations need to have a better understanding of OBA if they are to do this effectively, which led to the present study.

Violetta Wilk (Ph.D. Candidate, University of Western Australia), UWA Business School, The University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia, violetta.wilk@research.uwa.edu.au.

Paul Harrigan (Ph.D., Ulster University), Associate Professor of Marketing, UWA Business School, The University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia, paul.harrigan@uwa.edu.au.

Geoffrey N. Soutar (Ph.D., Cornell University), Winthrop Professor, UWA Business School, The University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia, geoff.soutar@uwa.edu.au.

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Despite the importance of online brand conversations, prior research has focused on brand advocacy at a general level and has treated OBA as a subset, rather than reflecting on its nature and scope. Further, prior research has not led to a clear, widely accepted definition of OBA; therefore creating confusion. Consequently, this research was undertaken to explore OBA. The article's aim is to provide initial insights into OBA's characteristics and to understand the full extent of OBA by looking at OBA posts in online brand- and open-communities. Such online communities are influential online consumer communication platforms (Kim et al. 2008; Muniz Jr. and O'Guinn 2001). This article also suggests future lines of enquiry and provides practical recommendations to guide marketing practitioners and strategists. Before discussing the study itself, the next section outlines the prior research that informed it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand advocacy is favorable communication about a brand, the recommendation of a brand to others, or the defense of the brand when it is attacked (Keller 2007; Park and MacInnis 2006). Some see general brand advocacy as the extent to which people are willing to spend time and effort to actively recommend and support a brand (Jillapalli and Wilcox 2010). Some have suggested brand advocacy is analogous to positive WOM or recommendations by highly involved or connected consumers (Jones and Taylor 2007; Wragg 2004). Further, recent research has indicated brand advocacy is a relational behavior (Melancon, Noble and Noble 2011) and is also seen as social advocacy (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Keylock and Faulds 2012). General brand advocacy is often viewed as being freely given by satisfied customers, who go out of their way to evangelize a brand they have experienced to others (Fuggetta 2012). These definitions of general brand advocacy are summarized in Table 1.

Research posits brand advocacy may be examined through Social Identity Theory (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar and Sen 2012; Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Kuenzel and Halliday 2008), which suggests the self-concept is composed of a personal identity (representing idiosyncratic personal characteristics) and a social identity (encompassing salient group characteristics) (Tajfel and Turner 1985). This is underpinned by identification (i.e.' the perception of oneness with or belongingness to a social referent [such as a brand] and experiencing its [the brand's] successes and failures as one's own) (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Such consumer-brand identification is a form of social identification that occurs through a "cognitive state of self-categorization" (Bergami and Bagozzi 2000, p. 557). As individuals perceive themselves to be psychologically intertwined with a social group (for example, a brand

Table 1
Brand Advocacy Definitions

Definition Summary	Source
The extent to which a consumer is willing to spend time and effort to actively recommend and support a brand.	(Jillapalli and Wilcox 2010)
Freely given by satisfied customers who go out of their way to evangelize the brands they have experienced to others.	(Fuggetta 2012)
Undertaken by highly involved customers who are active in endorsing the brand (through high involvement and WOM).	(Wragg 2004)
Positive word-of-mouth or recommendations by highly involved or connected to the brand consumer.	(East, Hammond and Lomax 2008, Jones and Taylor 2007)
A type of relational worth behavior.	(Melancon, Noble and Noble 2011)
Social brand advocacy: A recommendation of a brand to others, defense of a brand when it is attacked or recruiting of potential customers.	(Bhattacharya and Sen 2003, Keylock and Faulds 2012)
Physical brand advocacy: Exhibiting brand-related artefacts.	(Adjei, Noble and Noble 2010, Mael and Ashforth 1992)
An active engagement that involves a satisfied and engaged customer spending more effort in promoting a brand.	(Keller 2009)

Note: Only a sample of the definitions considered as part of this study is showcased in the above table.

or an online community), strong identification fosters actions and behaviors that support that group's interests (e.g., consumers supporting one another by providing insights into the brand(s) talked about in online discussion forums). Consequently, consumer-brand identification has been linked to favorable outcomes, including greater cooperation (Ashforth and Mael 1989), brand commitment (Bergami and Bagozzi 2000), brand loyalty (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003), positive WOM (Kim, Han, and Park 2001) and brand advocacy (Stokburger-Sauer, Ratneshwar and Sen 2012). Further, recent work into the "digital self" by researchers, such as Belk (2013, 2014), and Kuenzel and Halliday (2008), invites investigations in this area.

The traditional Push-Pull marketing model has been replaced by a Trust-Advocacy framework (Lorenzon and Pilotti 2008), which suggests brand advocacy can be the key to breaking through the clutter of marketing messages (Matzler, Pichler and Hemetsberger 2007). Today's consumers are active and want to control the buying process, preferring to learn about brands so as to make informed decisions prior to purchase (Urban 2005), often through WOM (East, Hammond and Lomax 2008). Consumer connectedness is often driven by networking, socializing and information exchange opportunities and capabilities on virtual, online platforms, such as networking sites, online communities, blogging sites, and online shopping sites (Brown, Broderick and Lee 2007, Smith, Fischer and Yongjian 2012). However, little attention has been given to understanding brand advocacy in online platforms; although a recent study highlighted the need for their further exploration (Parrott, Danbury and Kanthavanich 2015).

OBA can be found in various online platforms, such as social networking sites (SNSs) (e.g., Facebook or Twitter), online opinion platforms (e.g., tripadvisor.com), and discussion forums in online communities (e.g., epicski.com). OBA has been described as viral or connected marketing (Kirby and Marsden 2006) and sometimes defined as WOM arising from Facebook "Likes" and online recommendation to "Friends" (Wallace, Buil and De Chernatony 2012), customer brand engagement on Facebook (Hausman, Kabadayi and Price 2014) or "following" a brand on Twitter (Bulearca and Bulearca 2010). It is also evident when consumers use YouTube to post new product information (Ferguson 2008), discuss brands on their blogs (Chu and Kamal 2008), or in online reviews (Karakaya and Barnes 2010).

Online brand recommendations have a positive impact on online purchases (Fagerstrøm and Ghinea 2011). Some have cautioned that a customer who clicks on "Like" or "Follow" may not have a strong connection to that brand (Keylock and Faulds 2012), as they may be enticed to do so by free products or special discounts. However, the UGC and, thus, the C2C communication in online community discussion forums are usually *"created outside of professional routines and practices"* (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, p. 61). Such communication can be the most influential source of information for some purchases, as it is perceived as originating from a less-biased source (Lee, Park and Han 2008). This suggests online community discussion forums are suitable platforms through which to explore OBA. OBA is often discussed in terms of eWOM or consumer-brand engagement (CBE). However, if eWOM and OBA are the same, then is OBA given by people who have not experienced or owned the brand? eWOM includes any online communication between people about anything or any topic, including online reviews (Karakaya and Barnes 2010; Park and Kim 2009), online opinions (Cheung, Lee and Rabjohn 2008), and online recommendations (Cheong and Morrison 2008). Does this suggest positively-valenced eWOM is analogous to OBA? eWOM has also been analyzed in various ways, including hedonic versus utilitarian (Voss, Spangenberg and Grohmann 2003), attribute-value based versus simple recommendation (Lee et al. 2008), and cognitive versus affective (Wu and Wang 2011; Yap, Soetarto and Sweeney 2013). However, it is unclear if these dimensions apply to OBA.

Further, OBA seems to be closely related to CBE, which Brodie et al. (2013, p. 107) defined as "*specific interactive experiences between consumers and the brand, and/or other members of the community.*" OBA seems to fit this definition, but may be the behavioral outcome of CBE. CBE research talks about "immersion, "passion," and "activation" (Hollebeek 2011) and about similar dimensions to those examined by eWOM researchers (i.e., cognitive processing, affection, and activation) (Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie 2014); again posing the question as to whether OBA can be looked at this way.

OBA has many different manifestations and the terms used for these OBA examples are shown in

Table 2. Given the many references to "eWOM advocacy," which this study considered (only a sample of these is provided in Table 2), it is understandable that researchers wanting to measure OBA (e.g., Wallace, Buil and De Chernatony 2012) often use WOM measures, although some have called for a separate OBA measure (Graham and Havlena 2007). Clearly, much work is needed if we are to better understand OBA.

This study's aim was to explore brand advocacy occurring in online C2C communication to determine whether OBA is unique. The research questions driving this study were: 1) what are the characteristics of brand advocacy in online C2C communications?; 2) are these characteristics different to those found in general (offline) brand advocacy definitions?; and 3) if there are unique characteristics, how do these aspects define OBA?

THE STUDY

The netnography procedure suggested by Kozinets (2010) and online-sourced big data was used. Two hundred C2C active and publicly available discussion threads (with 1,796 posts) from two different online communities were examined. A content analysis was

seen as appropriate, as it offered a systematic and objective way through which to compare content for a large number of UGCs (Kolbe and Burnett 1991; Smith, Fischer and Yongjian 2012).

We acknowledge previous researchers' definitions of online community types (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Porter 2004; Yahia 2005). However, we differentiated between two online communities, namely:

1. An Online Brand Community (OBC), which is owned, managed, and sponsored by a brand, although the community's discussions are driven by members. The community's aim is to engage customers with the owner's brand without restricting these discussions, which are brand and nonbrand related, and focused on topics of common interest.
2. An Online Open Community (OOC), which is independent of any brand affiliation. It is owned and managed by consumers and may be financially supported by advertising revenue. It brings together consumers with a common product category or interest, and tries to provide a forum for information and support on topics of common interest that can include brand-related discussion.

Table 2
OBA Representations

OBA examples	Source
User Generated (brand) Content (UGC)	(Cheong and Morrison 2008, Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, Smith, Fischer and Yongjian 2012)
Social network (brand) advocacy	(Hausman, Kabadayi and Price 2014, Wallace, Buil and De Chernatony 2012)
Social media (brand) advocacy	(Hoffman and Fodor 2010, Keylock and Faulds 2012)
Facebook: brand engagement	(Coulter et al. 2012; Hausman, Kabadayi and Price 2014)
Facebook: recommendations and "Like"	(Hausman, Kabadayi and Price 2014; Lipsman et al. 2012; Wallace, Buil and De Chernatony 2012)
Twitter: recommendations and "Follow"	(Bulearca and Bulearca 2010; Chamlertwat et al. 2012; Smith, Fischer and Yongjian 2012)
Positive online statements by influencers/ opinion leaders	(Booth and Matic 2011; Leonard 2012)
YouTube: posting videos and new product information	(Ferguson 2008; Smith, Fischer and Yongjian 2012)
Online recommendations	(Cheong and Morrison 2008; FagerstrØm and Ghinea 2011)
Customer brand engagement online	(Brodie et al. 2013; Hausman, Kabadayi and Price 2014; Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie 2014)
Online brand advocates	(Fuggetta 2012; Kirby and Marsden 2006; Parrott, Danbury and Kanthavanich 2015)
Brand influential blogs	(Chu and Kamal 2008; Creamer 2005)
Online reviews	(Karakaya and Barnes 2010; Park and Kim 2009)
eWOM advocacy	(Cheung, Lee and Rabjohn 2008; Chu and Kim 2011; Ferguson 2008; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Yap, Soetarto and Sweeney 2013)
Consumer-to-consumer (C2C) (brand) communication	(Adjei, Noble and Noble 2010, Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006; Keylock and Faulds 2012)

Note: Only a sample of the sources considered as part of this study is showcased in the above table.

One hundred discussion threads (1,060 posts from 437 unique usernames) were taken from an OOC (bub-hub.com.au), while 100 discussion threads (736 posts from 430 unique usernames) were taken from an OBC (huggies.com.au). Both are hosted on their own online platforms and are leading, Australian-based online communities which provide online support to parents with young children. The data were collected between November 2014 and February 2015. This length of time was deemed sufficient, as no new insights were being generated. This reasoning is in line with the "thematic/data saturation" notion, which was achieved when no new insights into unique OBA characteristics were being uncovered (Gaskell 2000; Green and Thorogood 2004). Brand advocacy in the threads included discussions about local and international brands and ranged from low-involvement products, such as baby formula and hygiene products, to high-involvement products, such as prams and family cars.

The QSR NVivo and Leximancer programs were used to examine the online posts to see if OBA was unique (Hutchison, Johnston and Breckon 2010; Sotiriadou, Brouwers and Le 2014). Their use enabled an elaborate exploration of the data and each contributed toward understanding OBA by providing a unique perspective. QSR NVivo, by allowing researcher driven coding of data, enabled, for example, an identification of proactive and reactive OBA types, while Leximancer's program-driven seeding process identified themes that otherwise might have gone unnoticed, such as the positive-negative dual brand comparison.

The online discussion threads were imported into QSR NVivo as MS Word documents and classified according to the type of online community from which they originated. In the concept identification stage, distinct events in the data were identified and intensively scrutinized, after which meaning labels were attached to the identified segments (Hutchison, Johnston and Breckon 2010). Creating nodes (codes) and storing text related to the concept represented by each node, provided an understanding of what consumers were saying about brands and, more specifically, how they were advocating for brands in online discussions. While time consuming, this researcher-driven coding process enabled the inclusion of the researchers' insight and an interpretation of meaning to occur at the coding stage rather than at the analysis stage as is the case when using Leximancer.

A Coding Stripes Analysis (Figure 1) helped to compare nodes (emergent concepts) and to visually depict how these nodes related to one another. This enabled a search for intersecting coding and to identify text coded to more than one node; detecting connections between emerging concepts. For example, the most commonly referenced node and one of interest was "Positive brand mentions," which included all positive mentions of a brand name in the posts. The Coding Stripes Analysis ensured that the "Positive brand mentions" node was depicted alongside nodes that most frequently cooccurred with it, highlighting important OBA characteristics.

As noted earlier, a Leximancer-driven analysis, which uses blocks of text to identify concepts and themes through an iterative process of seeding word definitions from frequencies and cooccurrences (Sotiriadou, Brouwers and Le 2014) was also used. Words are "concepts" that form clusters called "themes". The most frequently cooccurring concepts are clustered together and are grouped by theme circles that represent the cluster's main ideas (Cretchley, Rooney and Gallois 2010). Leximancer-driven themes are named from the most prominent concept in the cluster. In Figure 2, the theme names were researcher-given so as to better reflect their concepts. The size of the themes is not representative of the importance of the themes; rather it is indicative of the concepts' cooccurrence with other concepts. The theme colors show the importance of each theme, with themes heat-mapped from hottest to coolest (i.e., red is the "hottest," most prominent theme; purple is the "coolest," least connected theme).

A two-in-one Leximancer-driven analysis provided the Concept Map shown in Figure 2, where tags identified common themes in each of the two communities. Prominence Scores (PSs) were also computed. A PS of 1 or more was considered sufficient to identify unique and important OBA characteristics and, for compound concepts, a PS of 3 or more was deemed satisfactory. This Leximancer-produced Concept Map minimized researcher bias in driving the findings reported in this article.

"Brand mention" emerged as the key theme that linked other themes. The "Positive communication" theme was most closely related (i.e., had the highest connectivity to the "Brand mention" theme), suggesting that whenever a brand name was mentioned, it was

Figure 1
QSR NVivo Coding Stripes Analysis
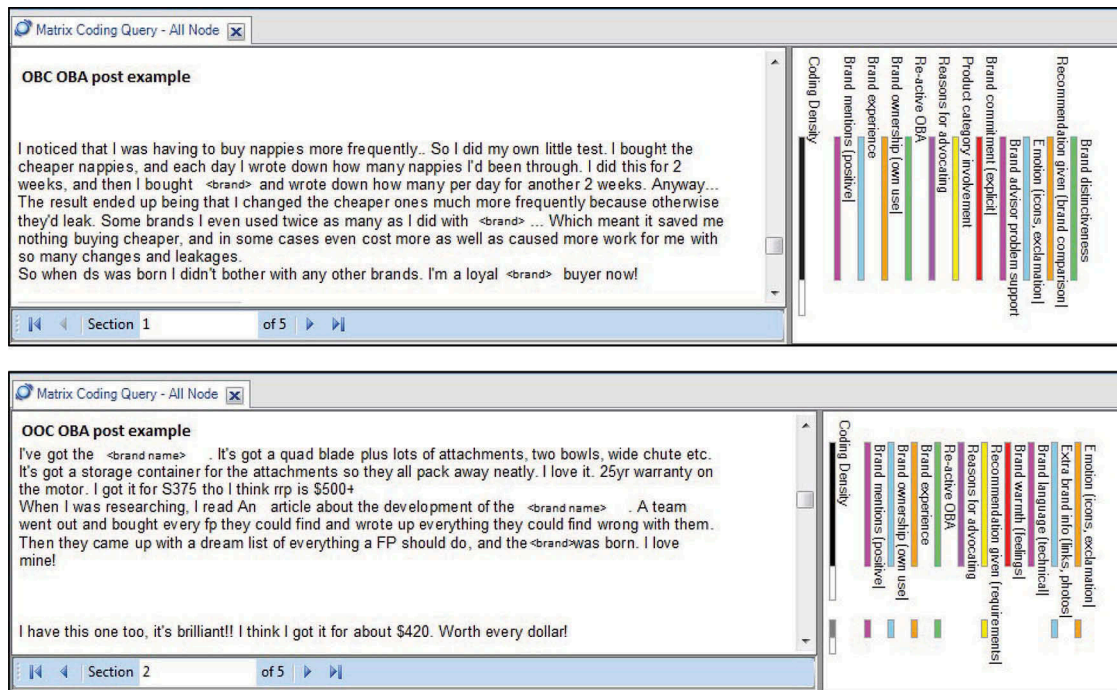
usually mentioned positively. Two compound concepts ("Positive brand mentions" and "Negative brand mentions") were seeded to pinpoint positive and negative brand mentions.

FINDINGS

OBA was found to be an elaborate construct with roots to offline brand advocacy, but with distinct online communication aspects. The data suggested OBA posts included cognitive characteristics (such as brand knowledge and how to get more information about a brand) and emotional characteristics (such as words like "love," "adore," and "the one") that were often supported by virtual visual cues (such as emoticons and brand imagery). An OBA post seems to be a persuasive attempt of a nonincentivized, voluntary brand advocate to positively position a well-liked brand to another, prospective customer of the brand, suggesting ways through which OBA might be defined.

The Seven OBA Aspects

OBA was characterized by cognitive, rational characteristics, as brand advocates (OBA givers) and prospective consumers (OBA receivers) were brand-information savvy. Recent eWOM research suggests cognitive message components can influence message persuasiveness (Lee and Youn 2009; Wu and Wang 2011; Yap, Soetarto and Sweeney 2013).

These components have also been investigated in CBE research (Brodie et al. 2013; Hausman, Kabadayi and Price 2014; Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie 2014). However, the constituents identified here seem unique to OBA. To illustrate the nature of OBA, quotes from various threads are provided next. These examples were transcribed as they appeared in the discussion forums, with spelling mistakes, lack of punctuation and grammatical errors.

Endorsement

OBA posts were recommendations based on the advocate's experience and ownership. As shown in Figure 2,

Figure 2
The Leximancer Two-in-One OBA Concept Map

there was a clear identification of self through the use of words such as "my" "I," and "we" with "have" and "having." The OBA post was a nonincentivized and voluntary endorsement of the brand by a current or past customer, and was either proactive (endorsing the brand without prompting by another consumer) or reactive (endorsing the brand due to a question or specific recommendation request by a prospective consumer).

The QSR NVivo analysis, summarized in Figure 1, suggested "Brand experience," "Brand ownership," "Recommendation given based on requirements," and "Recommendation given based on brand comparison" were key OBA elements in both online communities. Such endorsement portrayed the advocate's attempt to position the brand in a positive way by identifying an attribute, feature, characteristic, or provided value for "money," and made the brand prestigious, superior, or "best". The Leximancer-driven analysis, shown in Figure 2, suggested a brand advocate would often describe a brand as being superior using words such as "best," "better," and "great". For example:

"I find the <hygiene brand> ones are best. Have tried numerous others and they all seem so thin in comparison."

The Brand's Best Interest

OBA posts were more than just brand recommendations. OBA posts were written to represent the brand's best interest online. OBA seems to be favorable online communication on behalf of the brand, in defense of the brand or as general support for the brand, by a current or past customer. Such mentions were generally classified as "Brand mentions (positive)" in this research and, as illustrated in Figure 1, positive brand mentions were the key layer upon which OBA posts were expressed. Further, the Leximancer-driven analysis, found brand advocates used expressions such as

"I've had no problems" and *"it's always worked great for me"* in their OBA posts. For example:

> *"<Pram brand > ☺ I've had mine for 3 years and no punctures. If you're jogging on rough surfaces I would definitely get a pram specifically designed for running. The <pram brand > has better suspension, larger wheels and a handbrake. Also has a soft structured hammock style seat, so the seat swings side to side with the movement of running and bumps, which means a smoother ride for bub."*

Notably, no "watchdog comments," in which a consumer reading the OBA post would suggest comments were untrue (Larson and Denton 2014), were identified.

Knowledge

OBA posts were vivid showcases of in-depth cognition and an intimate knowledge of the brand portrayed as advice to others. The advocate often demonstrated they knew everything and anything there was to know about the brand. Notably, advocates were able to refer prospective customers to information sources if they did not have sufficient information themselves. The Leximancer Concept Map suggests OBA posts referred to "online reviews," virtual consumer groups on Facebook or other "websites." In their OBA posts, advocates illustrated their involvement and interest in the brand (brand involvement) and discussed things such as availability, sales, product updates, and the correct use of a brand to get optimum performance. They also often used brand-specific, technical language.

> *"I've got <food processor brand >. It's got a quad blade plus lots of attachments, two bowls, wide chute etc… I love it! 25 year warranty on the motor. I got it for $375 tho I think the rrp is $500+. When I was researching I read an article about the development of the <food processor brand>. A team went out and bought every fp they could find and wrote up everything they could find wrong with them. Then they came up with a dream list of everything fp should do, and the <food processor brand> was born. I love mine!"*

Advocates were also involved and interested in the product category, and had knowledge of other brands' price, quality, and functionality. Figure 1 shows "Product category involvement" is a key feature of OBA posts, while Figure 2 shows "money," "value," "price," and "quality" were prominent in OBA posts.

> *"<Nappy brand A>!!! Always!!!… Tried <nappy brand B> crap! A friend gave me a pack of <nappy brand C> and they're really bulky, very poor fit and I took it off my DD [dear daughter] after about five minutes! The most i've ever paid for a box of <nappy brand A> is $30…many other brands don't seem to hold as much fluid so you then go through more. Sometimes <nappy brand A> work out cheaper!"*

Other online sources providing more brand information were referred to within OBA posts. References to online resources, such as "website," "reading (online)," "google," and "local group (online)" were important features of OBA, as highlighted in Figure 2. Posts frequently included references to online reviews or other forums that had positive statements about the advocated brand.

> *"My stash is <nappy brand> http://www.<brandname-weblink>.com.au Have a look on Facebook if you are on there, there are a couple of <nappy brand> groups like buy and sell, as well as <nappy brand> review groups where you can ask questions and get info you need. Also try http://<weblink>.com.au/…☺"*

Advocates also provided "extra unrequested brand information." Figure 1 suggests the extra details included links to a brand's website, photos of products, locations of distribution outlets, discount prices, and availability.

> *"It is cheaper to buy <pram brand> from <online distributor brand> and use a mail forwarder to get it to Australia. I bought it on sale at <online distributor URL> and all up it was only $180 delivered."*

Reasoning

OBA posts featured strong rationales. Persuasive arguments lay behind the recommendation and support for the brand, reflecting the advocate's reasoning and beliefs about the brand. This led to elaborate positive brand statements based on evidence from brand experience and ownership. Such statements often outlined a brand's functionality, attributes, benefits, quality, and value for money, explaining why the advocate was a fan of the brand, why the brand was the "best" or "better" than competitors, and/or why a prospective customer should "give it a try."

> *"I did my own little test. I bought the cheaper nappies, and each day I wrote down how many nappies I'd been through. I did this for 2 weeks, and then I bought <nappy brand> and wrote down how many per day for another 2 weeks. The result ended up being that I*

changed the cheaper ones much more frequently because otherwise they'd leak. Some brands I even used twice as many as I did with <nappy brand>."

Positive-negative brand mentions based on brand comparisons often underpinned OBA posts. The Leximancer analysis showed positive-negative brand mentions had a high PS on OBA posts in both online communities and Figure 2 clearly shows the positive-negative brand mentions in theme "Brand mention.". Three types of positive-negative brand mentions permeated OBA posts, namely:

a. Advocacy despite shortcoming through a positive-negative brand mention that underlined an aspect of honesty and transparency in such OBA posts. It featured positive aspects of the advocated brand and honest insights into its negative aspects. Despite this, the brand was suggested to be superior to other brands.

  "These <brand>bottles are expensive but they are the best bottles on the market in my opinion anyway!!! My daughter is great on these bottles but she wasn't very good on any other bottles."

b. Brand comparison between brands (positive-negative brand mention between brands).

  "I had the <car brand A> and boy was it thirsty. Just driving around the CBD and suburbs and a tank only lasted around 8 days and it was $90 to fill!! Also it was bought new and as soon as the 3 year warranty was up things started breaking. It cost me $1,800 to replace the central locking on 2 doors!... I traded it in for a <car brand B> brand and am so happy. Great fuel economy, fantastic service and beautiful car! I would definitely go <car brand B> over <car brand A> any day just IMO [in my opinion]."

c. Brand comparison within a brand and between brands (positive-negative brand mention within and between brands).

  "I used to use <nappy brand A> for a bit but <nappy brand B> are the best trust me especially during teething it is worth it you don't want your baby anymore miserable! ...definitely worth <nappy brand B> buy in bulk and it adds up to the same as the cheap nasty ones!"

The reasoning within OBA posts often included the advocate championing the idea for the prospective consumer to try the brand to find out it is the "best."

  "Free samples of different brands made me a <baby hygiene product brand> mum - I couldn't get on with others... it is worth trying the different samples."

OBA posts featured referral to other users of the brand as credible endorsers. Offline sources, such as friends, local groups (offline), experts, and places of authority (e.g., hospital) mentioned in OBA posts suggested the advocated brand was also used and/or recommended by other individuals, groups, or institutions. Sometimes these sources were highly visible and/or had credibility in the offline community (e.g., hospital or a local mothers' group). For example:

  "<Vitamin brand>. This was suggested by my midwife after I had DS [dear son] and had low iron and within weeks my iron level was back to normal."

OBA is also characterized by strong affective, emotive, and passionate characteristics that depict the consumer's fondness for, adoration of, and positive emotion toward the advocated brand. As shown in Figure 2, positive valence was evident across both online communities through words such as "love," "best," "great," and "prefer". These words were fundamental to OBA posts, as they expressed the advocate's fondness for the brand. OBA posts were emotionally-laden and their intensity was evident in the way they were written. The OBA expression was clear and bold when elaborating about an advocated brand's superiority. OBA posts were stories of satisfied consumers using a brand and these stories often related memorable brand experiences. Online brand advocates display their passion and affection for the brand in their OBA posts and this emotion may make their OBA relatable.

Love

OBA posts displayed strong positive attitudes, affection and feelings for the brand; and seeing it as part of one's life. "Love" was the most frequently used word in OBA posts in both online communities. For example, on the OOC "positive brand mention and love" ranks very highly as a compound concept. However, "love" was not the sole descriptor. Some other frequently used words were "adore," "the one," "great," "best," and "prefer".

"We have <car brand> and absolutely LOVE. Heaps of anchor points for car seats, plenty of boot space, easy to drive, seems good value for petrol, haven't had one problem with it. Also love the sliding doors on both sides - major selling point for me!"

Experience

OBA posts showcased the advocate's hands-on experience and ownership of the brand and were characterized by storytelling. Experiences and ownership were often described with a sense of pride and references to previously received acknowledgments from others for using the brand. OBA posts were usually written from a first person point of view ("mine," "my" "ours") and included examples of own brand use and, often, examples of the use of other brands against which the advocate compared the advocated brand.

"I have a <safety monitoring system brand >, which I've used for both my children, and am still using now for my 8 month old. I love it. Really happy with it. For me the breathing (apnoea) monitor was crucial, as peace of mind. It is really sensitive, and has never malfunctioned. It has alarmed a few times, and when I rushed into her room to check on her last time, she was choking … It has a temperature monitor, and you can set alarms for too cold or too hot…It is portable and lightweight, I take it wherever we go."

Virtual visual cues or message characteristics were featured prominently in OBA posts in both online communities; although as a group, they were more prominent on the OBC. These visual aids helped consumers depict feelings associated with the advocated brand that otherwise might have been difficult to portray in online communication. These visual components supported the cognitive and affective dimensions of OBA posts. Virtual visual cues were often used as if to replace the lack of face-to-face interaction, as consumers (brand advocates and OBA recipients) communicated in an informal and direct way, as if they were speaking to someone offline.

Visual Cues

Virtual visual indicators were used to show affect for the brand, support, strengthen the argument for the brand, showcase the brand, and discourage the use of competing brands. These cues included:

a. *Facial expressions* were provided through emojis and emoticons that were common in OBA posts. Emoticons were the most visible virtual visual aid used. Smilies (☺) seemed to be the favored emoticon and emoji.

   "<Retailer brand A> baby sale on thurs has <nappies brand> 2 for $66 aswell! so if u cant get to a <retailer brand B> that maybe a better option for some ☺…. and yes its country wide im in WA we all have the same sales ☺ "

b. *Attenuation of expression* through the use of capital and bold lettering and exclamation marks was extremely important and seen in most OBA posts. This highlighted a need to put intended OBA message in the right way. Exclamation marks (!!!), and capital and bold lettering (e.g., I LOVE <BRAND>) were often used by online brand advocates to portray excitement, happiness, thrill, uniqueness, and a heightened positive emotion. They were also used to express disappointment with a trialed competitor brand. Often, these written visual aids were a call-to-action (e.g., urging others to buy the brand) and were used to express the emotion or importance intended by the online brand advocate.

   "I find <nappy brand A> at night are great for my 8mth old. <Nappy brand B> are the NASTIEST!!! leak through EVERY TIME even if the nappy has been on only an hour in some cases. i will not use them at night anymore as every time i did DS [dear son] would wake up soaked."

c. *Brand look* obtained by attaching or embedding photos or images of the brand in the OBA post was a key feature of online advocacy. Such photos were often embedded in the OBA post, attached as a file that could be clicked to be viewed, or links were provided to other websites containing images of the brand. These images showed, for example, what the brand looked like, what features it possessed, sizes or colors and, generally, helped people visualize what the advocated brand had to offer, sometimes in situ.

   "Just a few pics off my phone that show <pram brand> out and about!;-) < photo 1> < photo 2> < photo 3> < photo 4>."

d. *Community-semantics*, which are "online slang" or acronyms particular to the community (for example: DS (dear son), FF (forward facing car seat)) suggested the informality and directness of the OBA expression. These community semantics reflected members' familiarity with the online community's etiquette and communication style, and were an important feature of OBA posts.

"I've just purchased a <baby carrier brand>…. Have used it so much already and wish I had bought it sooner. DS [dear son] is 18 months and around 11kgs and I think he is quite tall but he still fits in it no worries ☺ ."

DISCUSSION

"I Love <Brand>" and understated brand suggestions or vague recommendations (eWOM) did not provide a full picture of the OBA found in discussion forums in the online communities studied. The findings suggest OBA is unique, elaborate, information-laden, and instigated by consumers highly engaged with the brand and with other consumers online. With indications that consumers act on OBA posts (follow-up posts by consumers who had purchased the advocated brand, and links between "looking online" and "purchasing"), the findings illustrate that OBA is "persuasive," "explicit" (with reasons being given), and has "full-frontal rhetoric," as suggested by Ehrenberg (2000, p. 418). Virtual visual aids, such as emoticons and images of advocated brands, play a very important role in OBA posts.

Building on eWOM (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Yap, Soetarto and Sweeney 2013) and CBE research (Brodie et al. 2013; Hollebeek 2011; Hollebeek and Chen 2014), we found OBA was a three-dimensional construct with cognitive, affective, and virtual visual characteristics, where knowledge of and affection for an advocated brand underpinned OBA posts. These dimensions had seven aspects that were particular to OBA (endorsement, acting in the brand's best interest, knowledge, reasoning, love, experience, and virtual visual cues). OBA seems to bridge the communication and interaction between consumer-to-consumer (eWOM) and the engagement between consumer-to-brand (CBE) information. OBA is a reaction to an online discussion (reactive OBA in the form of a discussion post), or an online statement provoking brand discussion and/or reaction from other consumers (proactive OBA in the form of a

discussion starter post). OBA seems to be the behavioral portrayal of CBE online that is purposeful (an endorsement, in the brand's best interest), elaborate (brand information-rich and affection-rich), and impactful (is acted upon by recipients).

An OBA post is an insightful statement about an advocated brand that displays the advocate's knowledge of and passion for the brand, supporting previous research that examined eWOM message persuasiveness (e.g., Yap, Soetarto and Sweeney 2013). OBA posts were rational (cognition, knowledge of the advocated brand) and emotional (passion for the advocated brand) (Wu and Wang 2011); hedonic (pleasant, gratified brand experience) and utilitarian (insights into the advocated brand's functionality and effectiveness) (Voss, Spangenberg and Grohmann 2003); and had argument quality (e.g., comprehensiveness of brand information) and source credibility (e.g., online brand advocate's expertise and trustworthiness through own experience) (Cheung, Lee and Rabjohn 2008). OBA givers (brand advocates) provided "extra information," showing they were brand-information savvy through their OBA communication. OBA posts were stories told by brand advocates online, based on their experiences from using and owning the brand. These posts often featured extra brand information that showed the extent of the advocate's brand knowledge, strengthening their advocacy statements. OBA is not a simple recommendation. It is given by a consumer who has experienced (used) and owned a brand, unlike eWOM, where experience and ownership are not necessary (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004).

OBA in the discussion forums was underpinned by frequent positive-negative brand comparisons in and/or between brands, not seen in eWOM or CBE research, further differentiating OBA. Positive-negative brand mention within a brand, which was termed "advocacy despite some shortcoming," occurred when positive and negative aspects of the advocated brand were highlighted and were key cognitive features that suggested honesty and transparency. This has not been reported in eWOM or CBE research, where messages are seen as positively *or* negatively valenced (Hollebeek and Chen 2014; Yap, Soetarto and Sweeney 2013), but not as both positively *and* negatively valenced. Previous researchers have found customers pay more attention to the cognitive insights and consumption patterns of their fellow customers (Berger and Schwartz 2011; Hinz et al. 2011); thus the cognitive OBA dimension may be

important to how OBA is received by prospective customers and OBA's connection to people's purchase decisions.

The affective OBA dimension was positively valenced, as brand advocates used words such as "love," "great," "best," "better," "prefer," "happy," and "the one." These words were fundamental to OBA posts, as they expressed the advocate's fondness for the brand. Although "I Love <Brand>" was not, in itself, sufficient, it was a crucial part of OBA posts, as it concisely and clearly portrayed its underlying core meaning. Advocates were unafraid to use "love" to show their fondness for a brand, which is consistent with prior research that showed brand love underpinned consumer-brand relationships (Albert and Merunka 2013; Leventhal et al. 2014). "Love" was more prominent in OBA posts in the OOC, perhaps because brand advocates felt a need to be bolder and more vivid in an open online setting where, unless their OBA "cut through" the clutter of posts, posts may go unnoticed or lose their impact. However, in an OBC setting, the relationship between consumers and the brand is already established and consumers are aware of their fondness for the brand, what the brand is or what it offers, which means there may not be a need to prominently say "I love" in OBA posts.

Virtual visual cues, such as emoticons, are an important component of OBA posts. Visual online message characteristics have received some recent attention (Hogenboom et al. 2013; Schamp-Bjerede et al. 2014), but have not been studied widely. Emoticons, embedded or attached photos, and lettering all play an important part in OBA. Smilies (☺), in particular, were prominently used in OBA posts. These were used frequently and freely, and helped to communicate in the online environment, where face-to-face interaction is limited. Visual OBA characteristics seemed to play a vital role in enforcing the cognitive and affective dimensions of the OBA message, providing reinforcement and attenuation (Schamp-Bjerede et al. 2014). Further, community-specific semantics, language and jargon also played an important part in OBA posts, showing consumer's familiarity with the community.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study provided insights into brand advocacy in online C2C communication, extended recent online brand advocate research (Parrott, Danbury and Kanthavanich 2015) and answered the call to improve our understanding of how consumers advocate for brands online (Divol, Edelman and Sarrazin 2012; Graham and Havlena 2007; Urban 2005). "I Love <Brand>" or an unjustified, simple recommendation by way of positive eWOM, was not sufficient to explain OBA, which had seven aspects particular to online conversation about brands, suggesting OBA should be seen as a separate construct.

OBA was found to be an elaborate, positive statement about a brand, with strong and unique cognitive and affective characteristics supported by virtual visual cues. OBA seems to be an expression of customer-driven influence through which customers' verbal and nonverbal communication might affect prospective consumers' attitudes and behaviors (Aksoy et al. 2013a). Online brand advocates (brand information givers) and online brand information seekers (potential customers) were found to be brand-information savvy, engaging in online C2C discussions about brands involving OBA.

These findings are important to researchers, practitioners and strategists, as they provide clarity about how consumers advocate for brands in online forums and how OBA might affect consumers' behavior.

Research Implications

This study highlights some clear conceptual implications for researchers. Recommendations for future research are presented in the subsequent paragraphs and are grouped under the following headings: OBA on different online platforms; OBA and its antecedents; and, OBA and its effect on online and/or offline purchase behavior.

OBA on different online platforms

OBA exhibited distinct characteristics in different online communities (i.e., OBC and OOC). As social media includes various types of online interactions (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, online communities, blogging sites) and each platform has its unique architecture, culture, and norms, with users interacting in different ways and producing site-specific content (Smith, Fischer and Yongjian 2012; Wallace, Buil and De Chernatony 2012), future research should explore how OBA differs on various online platforms (e.g.,

social networking sites) and investigate the cumulative value of OBA through integrated marketing efforts.

Researchers should also investigate incentive-driven OBA (e.g., on social networking sites such as Facebook, companies may reward consumers who "Like" their brand with special offers or discounts (Lipsman et al. 2012; Naylor, Lamberton and West 2012)) and nonincentivized OBA. Further studies should examine consumer-managed OBCs and brand managed OBCs (Aksoy et al. 2013c; Almeida et al. 2013) to see whether there are differences in the ways consumers advocate brands on these sites.

OBA and Its Antecedents

OBA is likely to be seeded within strong attachment, commitment, and loyalty to a brand that is underpinned by affection, often depicted as brand love (Carroll and Ahuvia 2006). OBA posts often included explicit expressions of love, loyalty, and commitment to the brand with such statements as *"I love <brand> and I wouldn't use anything else."* and *"I'm a loyal <brand>buyer now!"* This is consistent with previous studies that showed brand love supports consumer-brand relationships (Albert and Merunka 2013; Leventhal et al. 2014); however, this needs to be explored further. Specifically, there is a need to see how brand love and affective brand constructs permeate online C2C brand discussions. OBA has relational worth elements (Melancon, Noble and Noble 2011) and may be seen as a vehicle through which loyal customers represent a brand's best interests online, by speaking favorably on behalf of the brand, defending and supporting the brand and its existing customers, and recommending the brand to potential customers online.

OBA and Its Effect on Online and/or Offline Purchase Behavior

Consumers' online behavior is complex and there seems to be a relationship between "looking online" and "purchasing". This study found evidence that OBA influences prospective consumers who "look online," receive OBA, and respond by purchasing the advocated brand, supporting previous insights into online communications and their influence in purchase behavior (Adjei, Noble and Noble 2010; Bagozzi and Dholakia

2006; Keylock and Faulds 2012). OBA posts seem to influence prospective customers. The Leximancer produced analysis showed connection between words like "look," "online," and "purchase," suggesting a relationship between "looking online" and "purchasing." Further, an in depth analysis of the discussion threads found many OBA posts influenced OBA recipients (prospective customers) as indicated in their follow-up responses: *"I just brought this [brand advocated within the discussion thread]. Can't wait for it to arrive in the post!!!"* and *"I did end up getting <brand advocated within the discussion thread> and my baby took to them with no problems."* This finding supports earlier research showing that C2C communication influenced brand purchases (Adjei, Noble and Noble 2010; Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006; Keylock and Faulds 2012), although these studies did not identify OBA. Further investigation is invited into OBA's impact on recipients' online and offline behavior to see whether and under what conditions OBA leads to purchase (Adjei, Noble and Noble 2010; Hoffman and Fodor 2010).

Managerial Implications: Strategy, Management and Execution

This study is the first of its kind to provide insight into OBA that marketing practitioners and strategists might use to inform their brand strategy, management, and online execution decisions (Owyang and Lovett 2012). These OBA aspects should assist organizations in assessing their brand's online "health" and in tracking online brand performance over time (Gopinath, Thomas and Krishnamurthi 2014). The seven OBA aspects identified suggest some parameters practitioners might use to see whether customers are advocating their brands online and to measure the extent to which brand-specific OBA is undertaken (Graham and Havlena 2007). The findings have clear implications for strategists who might use these insights to harness and leverage the goodwill, energy, wealth of knowledge, and influence that online brand advocates exhume in OBA communication, and to develop strategies to further stimulate the affective consumer-brand bond. By understanding OBA, practitioners and strategists would be better equipped to:

1. Identify online brand advocates and target them with special offers or with trials of new products, with the aim of further consumer-driven brand

advocacy online. Kirby and Marsden (2006, p. 57) point out that when companies make their consumers feel like they are part of the brand family *"not only is the affective bond with the brand deepened, but also brand advocacy is stimulated and made easy to measure."*

2. Identify the extent to which consumers are advocating for the brand within online communities. The seven markers offer a way for gauging how elaborate the OBA post is and therefore some insight into potentially stimulating OBA-rich discussion within online communities. In order to stimulate OBA, brands could either initiate conversations about certain "hot topics" or develop advertising creative executions which would integrate some aspect of a "hot topic." For example: a discussion starter on a parent-support online community might be "Baby at home safety tips" which could lead to discussion about baby-safety related products and thus OBA for brands offering such products.

3. Assess the extent of OBA undertaken by brand advocates in nonbrand managed online communities, such as open forums and therefore identify whether there is a need to establish an online brand community (if one does not exist already) to create opportunities for consumers to advocate in a brand-managed environment (Cothrel 2000). A company might decide that there is sufficient amount of OBA undertaken in general, open online communities, and therefore a better way to utilize their marketing funds would be to leverage off of that online conversation and to strategically position online advertisements within those open online communities or to establish brand presence on other online platforms, such as Instagram or Snapchat. For example, epicski.com is an OOC for snow-holiday makers, skiers, and snowboarders around the world. Its online forum is rich in OBA for various brands in the snow-holiday making and snow-sports product categories. Companies and sponsors that advertise on this online community purposefully target its members by leveraging brand-related conversations. For example, advertisements promoting family-cover holiday insurance appear alongside discussion threads on these topics.

4. Leverage other marketing efforts with online advertising placement or online offer promotions to support consumer-driven OBA in online discussion forums. Such an integrated marketing effort is likely to improve brand awareness and, potentially, brand performance (Raman and Naik 2004) (as in the epicski.com example).

5. Identify online discussion topics that inspire OBA, and use these in online advertising (as in the epicski.com example).

6. Think beyond. See whether the company has created sufficient online opportunities for consumers to effectively communicate about their brand and thus undertake OBA on more than just one online platform. This may include an online marketing strategy with several online brand-to-consumer communication and C2C communication avenues such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat, online communities, and online forums. For example, the Sony PlayStation Online Community (playstation.com) is an OBC that connects gamers. Rife in UGC and OBA, the community is integrated with PlayStation's social media channels on YouTube and Twitter. Convenient purchase-point consumer touchpoints are featured, enabling customers to upload new product features and in-game clips directly online. This integration assures a proactive customer service of existing customers and a more convenient and easy online purchase journey for prospective consumers. Sony is able to monitor its brand, to involve existing customers in testing and launching of new products, and in turn its members can engage in C2C communication including OBA.

7. Offer multiple online purchase-touchpoints shortening the "journey" between OBA (i.e., a prospective customer reading an OBA post) and online purchasing (i.e., a prospective customer reacting to the OBA post and actually purchasing the brand), thus making the purchase decision a more convenient and efficient one for the prospective consumer (as in the playstation.com example).

Kirby and Marsden (2006, p. 57) have argued "brand advocacy drives brand growth." Consequently, the OBA insights presented above are undeniably important to brand and marketing managers and strategists.

Overall, this big data exploratory study based on the exploration of 1,796 online posts from two different

online communities advances our understanding of OBA by providing initial insights into the way in which consumers advocate for brands in online settings, specifically in online discussion forums on online brand- and open- communities. There is a need for further investigation into OBA on other online platforms and for insights into how organizations should integrate these platforms to increase brand awareness and purchases, as well as to better inform their brand strategies.

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