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BRAND IMAGE OF USERS AND NONUSERS

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ABSTRACT

EVE Online is a massively multiplayer online game (*MMO*) published by the Icelandic game developer, CCP. *MMOs* are games that allow a great number of players scattered all over the world to play together via the Internet. The current study aims to measure EVE Online's brand image among three different groups: 1) users, 2) non-users who either claim or do not claim to be fans of the brand. Two hypothesis were tested. The first stated that users of EVE Online have a more positive image of the brand than non-users. The hypothesis was not supported by the data and the overall brand image did not differ between the two groups. However, when brand image statements were investigated more closely, a pattern emerged which showed that users were more likely than non-users to agree with positive statements about the brand. The second hypothesis stated that non-users who claim to be fans of the brand have a more positive image of the brand than non-users who do not claim to be fans. The hypothesis was not supported by the data but which exhibited the same pattern which showed that non-users who claim to be fans were much more likely to agree with positive statements about the brand than non-users who do not claim to be fans.

INTRODUCTION

EVE Online is a science-fiction sandbox player-versus-player (*PVP*) game. This means that the theme and content of the game are greatly influenced by science-fiction and include space travel, futuristic technology and more. A sandbox game is a game in which minimal limitations are placed on the players, allowing them to explore and even make changes to, a virtual world without having to follow a set plot or linear progression. Finally, a player-versus-player game is a game in which interactive conflicts between two or more players occur.

The game is set in space, about 20,000 years from now, after mankind begins exploring and colonizing it. When creating their avatars, players choose one of four races who all descended from mankind (EVE Community, n.d.). They then explore space, develop their avatars and interact and work with other players in groups called *corporations*. These are then a part of larger player networks or *alliances*. Players also engage each other in combat, war, economic struggle and more.

Massively multiplayer online games are games that allow a great number of players scattered all over the world to play at the same time via the Internet. *MMOs* are not a single genre of games as they can vary greatly in theme and content. One popular kind is massively multiplayer online role-playing games (*MMORPGs*). In such games, players create a character, also known as an avatar, control his or her behavior and interact with other players through a virtual world (Zhong, 2011). These games are different from role-playing games where players play by themselves, or in small groups, for two

reasons: first, the number of players is much greater, and secondly, unlike in smaller games, the virtual world in *MMORPGs* continues to exist and evolve even when the players are offline, meaning, the virtual world is *persistent*.

The topic of this paper is the brand image of the increasingly popular Icelandic *MMO*, EVE Online. The aim of the current study is to assess whether there is a difference in EVE Online's brand image between three groups: 1) users and 2) non-users who either claim or do not claim to be fans of the brand.

The current study is an extension of Ehrenberg and colleagues' studies on the differences of brand images between users and non-users but differs from previous studies in two respects. Unlike many previous studies on this topic (see Bird and Ehrenberg, 1970; Bird, Channon and Ehrenberg, 1970), the current study does not focus on typical consumer or grocery products. Secondly a new group is added: fans of the brand.

BRAND IMAGE AND USAGE

The model of customer-based brand equity (*CBBE*) is an attempt to explain the relationship between consumers and brands (Wood, 2000). The main focus of the model is on the *added value* which a brand name or symbol adds to a product or service. In essence, the model aims to explain how brands are differentiated in the minds of consumers. The idea is that if a brand has a positive brand equity, it will be chosen for purchase at a much higher rate than brands which have negative brand equities. It follows that a positive *CBBE* has become a desirable outcome which marketers strive for.

Measuring *CBBE* can be done by measuring its sources, brand awareness and brand image. The aim of brand image research is often to predict future consumer behavior – if the brand has a positive *CBBE* it should follow that consumers are more likely to purchase it (Romaniuk, 2001). Gaining an insight into future consumer behavior can help marketers make strategic decisions about the brand, such as defining target groups and brand positioning (Keller, 1993). However, very little is known of the relationship between brand image and future behavior (Romaniuk, 2001). Findings by Ehrenberg and colleagues (Barwise and Ehrenberg, 1985; Bird and Ehrenberg, 1970) suggest that brand image is much more closely related to current (or even past) behavior, meaning, consumer responses to brand-image measurements are systematically influenced by the consumer's past history with the brand (Romaniuk, Bogomolova and Riley, 2012). When studying brand image by measuring consumer reactions to brand associations, practitioners often fail to take this usage factor into account (Castleberry and Ehrenberg, 1990).

This relationship between the consumer's history with the brand and brand image is evidenced by the fact that the proportion of people who react favorably towards a brand is highest among its current users (Bird et al., 1970). However, current behavior is not the only predictor of positive reactions towards a brand. It has been found that former users of a brand tend to react more positively towards it than those who have never tried it (Romaniuk, 2001). The proportion of people who react favorably towards a brand is lowest among those who have never tried it (Bird et al., 1970). All responses to brand image associations seem to be related to current or past behavior in a predictable manner (Romaniuk et al., 2012).

Bird and Ehrenberg (1970) noted that not all users of brands have positive attitudes towards it and not all non-users have negative attitudes towards it. Many non-users react favorably towards a brand while many users do the opposite. However, the incidence of this is very low and it has been shown systematically that usage is a reliable predictor of brand image (Romaniuk, 2001).

If brand image measurements are skewed because of the influence of usage levels, it follows that the same happens to CBBE, meaning brands with larger market-shares will have a more positive brand image and a more positive CBBE than brands with smaller market-shares. This means that CBBE is a reflection of the brand's market-share, and not a driver of it (Romaniuk et al., 2012).

At any rate, brand image and CBBE are highly influenced by current and past usage of brands (Castleberry and Ehrenberg, 1990). On a theoretical level, the implication of this is that in order for brand image or CBBE measurements to be unbiased, the usage levels or market-shares of the brands being measured must be factored into the calculations (Romaniuk et al., 2012). On a practical level, it would seem that marketers are wasting time by focusing their efforts on improving brand image and *CBBE* when they should first and foremost be focusing on growing their customer base (Sharp, 2010).

With the preceding discussion in mind, the first hypothesis is:

H1. Current users of EVE Online have a more positive image of the brand than non-users.

There are consumers who are passionate about brands (Sharp, 2010). They have been called brand fanatics, or even evangelists (Singh and Sonnenburg, 2012). Here, they will be referred to simply as brand fans. These consumers either buy the brand more frequently than other consumers or devote a larger proportion of category purchases to the brand than to competitors' brands (Nenycz-Thiel, Beal, Ludwichowska, G. and Romaniuk, 2013). In the case of brands that do not necessarily represent repeat buying, such as services, computer software and other, fans may be defined as those who devote a large amount of time and effort to the brand, either to usage or other activities such as content creation (Muniz and Schau, 2011).

Brand communities are specialized communities, based on a structured set of social relations between admirers of a specific brand. The community is not bound by geography (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). Brand communities allow consumers to communicate with each other, share experiences, distribute information and assist each other in using the brand (the existence of consumer help discussion forums is an example of this). Within many brand communities, collective value creation takes place (Schau, Muniz and Arnould, 2009). Companies can benefit from supporting consumers in this process (Muniz and Schau, 2011).

With the preceding discussion in mind, the second hypothesis is:

H2. Non-users who claim to be fans of EVE Online have a more positive image of the brand than non-users who do not claim to be fans.

METHODOLOGY

This is a quantitative study where an online questionnaire was used to measure the brand image of EVE Online among three different groups: 1) users and 2) non-users who either claim or do not claim to be fans of the brand.

Participants

The population of interest was EVE Online's target group. Completed responses were obtained from 2,911 individuals. The majority (69.7%) of participants were between the ages of 20 and 30. The mean age of the sample was 27.9 years (*standard deviation* = 6.49).

Current users of EVE Online are 2,471 (84.6%), non-users 439 (15.0%) and 12 (0.4%) answers were missing. Of the 439 who are non-users, 398 claim to be fans of the brand.

Questionnaire

An online questionnaire was created. It was designed using the results of ten qualitative interviews with individuals in EVE Online's target group as well as information from CCP about the brand's positioning. Because the study included splitting the participants into groups, not all participants answered all questions and participants who said yes to specific questions were then asked follow-up questions.

The first two questions in the questionnaire ask about participants' age and gender. This was done to filter out responses from individuals who do not fall within the definition of EVE Online's target group. The next part of the questionnaire includes 22 statements intended to measure brand image. Participants indicate how much they agree or disagree with each statement on a 7 point Likert scale, where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = somewhat disagree, 4 = neutral, 5 = somewhat agree, 6 = agree and 7 = strongly agree.

Lastly, the questionnaire includes questions about whether the participants consider themselves to be fans of the game.

The questionnaire was pretested to assess whether participants were able to understand and respond to the items without difficulty. Three items were changed based on the participant's comments.

Procedure and data analysis

The questionnaire was posted online and distributed via social media and email during the period of August 2nd – August 21st, 2013. It was also published on the official Facebook page for EVE Online on August 6th.

In total, 4,145 participants answered parts of the questionnaire. 100 (2.4%) answers were invalid because the respondents were female. 455 (11%) answers were excluded because the respondents did not fall within the specified age range and a further 668 (16.1%) were excluded because the respondents answered less than 50% of the survey.

The hypothesis were tested by using a confidence interval method. Total scores for the image statements were calculated and compared between groups. One-way ANOVAs were also performed to see which and how many of the statements produced significant results between groups.

RESULTS

The image statements were categorized as either representing positive or negative brand associations based on how they were portrayed and discussed in the ten qualitative interviews with individuals from EVE Online's target group. Whenever an individual expressed either a positive or negative statement about EVE Online, they were asked to explain it further and eventually, the 22 statements were categorized into two groups of 11 positive and 11 negative statements.

The first hypothesis stated that current users have a more positive image of the brand than non-users. To test the hypothesis, a total score was calculated for the image statements for both users ($n = 2471$) and non-users ($n = 439$). This was done by first reverse-scoring the negative image statements and then calculating an unweighted average for all items. The average for users was 4.29 with a 95% confidence interval of 4.23 – 4.35. The average for non-users was 4.15 with a 95% confidence interval of 4.00-4.30. Since the confidence intervals overlap, the hypothesis is not supported.

A one-way ANOVA was performed to see how many, and which, of the image statements produced a statistically significant difference between users and non users of the brand. The results showed that there were significant differences for 14 out of 22 items. Even if the brand image of users does not differ significantly on the whole, there are significant differences between the two groups for 6 out of 11 positive image statements.

The second hypothesis stated that non-users who claim to be fans of EVE Online have a more positive image of the brand than non-users who do not claim to be fans. To test the hypothesis, a total score was calculated for the image statements for both non-users who claim to be fans of the brand ($n = 398$) and non-users who do not claim to be fans of the brand ($n = 41$). This was done by first reverse-scoring the negative image statements and then calculating an unweighted average for all items. The average for non-users who claim to be fans of EVE Online was 4.18 with a 95% confidence interval of 4.02 – 4.34. The average for non-users who do not claim to be fans of the brand was 3.87 with a 95% confidence interval of 3.49 – 4.25. Since the confidence intervals overlap, the hypothesis is not supported.

A one-way ANOVA was performed to see how many, and which, of the image statements produced a statistically significant difference between the two groups. The results showed that there were significant differences for 12 out of 22 items. Even if the brand image of non-users who do not claim to be fans of the brand and non-users who do claim to be fans does not differ significantly on the whole, there are significant differences between the two groups for 9 out of 11 positive image statements.

DISCUSSION

Based on findings by Ehrenberg and colleagues (See Barwise and Ehrenberg, 1985; Bird and Ehrenberg, 1970; Castleberry and Ehrenberg, 1990) that consumers' usage of brands heavily influences their propensity to give favorable responses towards it in brand image studies, the first hypothesis stated that users of EVE Online would have a more positive image of the brand than non-users. This hypothesis was not supported by the data. There was not a significant difference in overall brand image between users and non-users. However, there were significant differences between the groups for six out of 11 of the positive image statements. This would suggest that even if users do not have a more positive brand image on the whole than non-users, they do tend to agree more with positive statements about the brand. This is consistent with the growing literature on the effect which a consumer's relationship with the brand has on his or her tendency to react favorably towards it (Nenycz-Thiel et al., 2013).

There are groups of consumers who are passionate about brands and might even "preach" the gospel of the brand (Singh and Sonnenberg, 2012). These brand fanatics, or fans, often connect with each other in brand communities. The computer game industry is an especially appropriate venue for such communities to exist. Users already form a community within the virtual reality of the game which is

then extended to other online spaces, where users and non-users alike can join and connect with each other. Moreover, new forms of collaboration and co-creation are taking place between developers and user communities in the video game industry (Arakji and Lang, 2007). Many video game developers have opened up parts of their content to users to modify (also known as “modding”) according to their own wishes. Developers are also dependent on user feedback in order to fix problems and add features which are in demand. These factors all create good environments for brand communities to exist within.

Based on the idea of these passionate consumers, the second hypothesis stated that non-users who claim to be fans of the brand will have a more positive image than non-users who do not claim to be fans. This hypothesis was not supported by the data. However, the same pattern as before emerged here and there were significant differences between the two groups for 9 out of 11 positive brand image statements. This means that even though the brand image between the two groups did not differ on the whole, non-users who are fans of the brand were much more likely to agree with positive image statements about the brand.

The results of the authors’ research and many before it (See Bird and Ehrenberg, 1970; Romaniuk et al., 2012) have established a predictable relationship between behavior (usage) and brand image. In spite of the fact that the data analyzed was not able to provide support for the hypothesis, analyzing the positive image statements specifically showed a relationship between usage and the tendency to agree with positive brand image statements. This means that the consumer’s relationship with the brand will be a reliable indicator of how he or she reacts towards the brand in brand image measurement studies.

For decades, marketers have focused their efforts on building positive brand images and positive brand equities in order to grow their customer bases. However, it is apparent that a positive brand image and positive brand equity are the results, not drivers, of market-share (size of customer base). It follows then that in order to achieve such brand goals as brand equity, the marketer must first and foremost focus on growing the customer base. This is done primarily by acquisition strategies because even large brands lose customers on a daily basis (Sharp, 2010). So, by focusing on acquiring new customers, marketers will grow their customer bases and by extension of that, build more positive customer-based brand equities which will then help maintain their brands’ market positions (Sharp, 2010).

A limitation of the authors’ research was that the focus was on a single brand. Should any similar studies be repeated, it would be of importance to try to gather data about more than one brand on the market, and to reach non-users at a higher rate. A second limitation was the study did not use a probability sample so the results cannot be generalized to EVE Online’s target market as a whole. It needs, however, to be pointed out that the research questions revolve around differences in image. The authors believe that the research’s results are a good indication of those differences.

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