

**ONLINE BEHAVIOUR OF LUXURY BRAND ADVOCATES: DIFFERENCES  
BETWEEN ACTIVE ADVOCATES AND PASSIVE LOYALISTS**

**Poramate Kanthavanich, Business and Management Research Institute, University of  
Bedfordshire UK**

**Annie Danbury, Business and Management Research Institute, University of  
Bedfordshire UK**

**Guy Parrott, Business and Management Research Institute, University of Bedfordshire  
UK**

Corresponding Author:

Annie Danbury  
Business and Management Research Institute  
University of Bedfordshire  
Park Square  
Luton  
LU3 3JU  
UK  
Email: [annie.danbury@beds.ac.uk](mailto:annie.danbury@beds.ac.uk)  
Tel: +44 1582 74 3037

## **ONLINE BEHAVIOUR OF LUXURY BRAND ADVOCATES: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ACTIVE ADVOCATES AND PASSIVE LOYALISTS**

### **ABSTRACT**

The study aims to identify online behaviours of luxury brand advocates referring to differentiation between active and passive loyalists. A netnographic approach was used to observe groups of luxury handbag advocates. Key findings include an identification of engagement manifested in positive word of mouth and enthusiastic brand recommendation. Advocates routinely share their love of particular brands, openly expressing joy and sharing heightened levels of self-esteem. Engaged passive loyalists tend to share less with peers, but instead celebrate their purchases more personally.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Online brand advocates have become a major influence in luxury handbag purchase decisions. They engage and form activities in online blogs and forums to exchange opinions, feelings and recommending brands/products they cherish. There are large numbers of luxury handbag fans who almost religiously access blogs and forums or join online brand communities where they 'lurk' hungry for more information on the brands/products they are interested in. 91% of people buy on the recommendation of brand advocates (Keller, 2005). Bughin et al. (2010) also found that word-of-mouth (WOM) from brand advocates influences 20-50% of purchase decisions particularly when buying luxury products. Brand advocates take a more active role in consumption and seek hedonistic and experiential aspects of consumption (brand/product experiences) which they can share with other consumers (Simmons, 2008, Gambetti and Graffigna, 2010). Although much attention has been dedicated to brand advocacy research (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002, 2003; Muniz and Schau, 2005; Kim et al., 2008; Jang et al., 2008; Di Maria and Finotto, 2008) investigations into online brand advocates in specific categories are less abundant.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The objective of this study is to discover and identify key online advocacy behaviours of luxury handbags advocates via text conversations and pictures posted by active advocates and thereby recognise differences between active brand advocates and passive brand loyalists. This study aims to add to those insights of online advocacy behaviours addressed by Di Maria and Finotto (2008), Kim et al. (2008), and Jang et al. (2008).

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Brand advocacy is an extreme form of loyalty (Christopher et al., 1991; Peck et al., 1999). A brand advocate has been defined as "someone who actively recommends you to others and does your marketing for you" (Peck et al., 1999:45). Schultz (2000) defined brand advocates as committed customers with emotional bonds displaying a high level of engagement. Two categories of brand advocates can be observed; either employed by brand owners or those who independently become advocates. Self-appointed advocates are actively supporting the brand from a genuine love for the brand. They express their advocacy behaviour through WOM and by openly recommending the brand to others. This significant behaviour differentiates them from passive loyalists who also cherish their brands, but do not display their devotion in public. The literature suggests that brand advocates initially develop their

advocacy behaviours from high levels of brand love, brand engagement and attitudinal loyalty (Amine, 1998; Bowden, 2009; Fournier, 1998).

### **Brand Love**

Brand love is “the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular brand” (Bergkvist and Bech-Larsen, 2009:506). Batra et al. (2012) discover that brand love relates to intrinsic rewards, a feeling of passion, an emotional bond, investment of time and money, and use of the beloved brand to express current and desired self-identity (2012:3). These components well apply to the case of luxury handbags because brand advocates connect/associate themselves with luxury handbags through identity, personality and emotion. This connection is known as self-brand connection (Fournier, 1998). Therefore brand advocates display high levels of brand ‘love’ and integrate brand identity and personal identity together. It has been suggested that a high level of brand love urges brand advocates to openly expressing a variety of advocacy behaviours with a willingness to invest their time and money into luxury handbags (Albert et al., 2007; Batra et al., 2012; Fournier, 1998). Brand love is more specific than brand engagement because it creates strong desire (passion) for the brand. Often brand advocates express their feelings (passion) for luxury handbags as “love at first sight” (Batra et al., 2012). This means that feelings of love may happen suddenly but brand engagement is about gradually growing emotional bonds and connections over a period of time.

### **Brand Engagement**

Brand engagement refers as an individual’s emotional connection with particular products or brands (Bowden, 2009; Hollebeek, 2011). It is “an on-going emotional cognitive and behavioural activation state in individuals” (Gambetti and Graffigna, 2010:804). In the context of this study, brand advocates show high levels of brand engagement because they use luxury brands/handbags as a means to express themselves and to fulfil their self-esteem (Goulding, 2003). This type of engagement can be termed as self-brand connection which means that brand advocates include favourite brands as part of their self-concept (Spratt et al., 2009). As a result active brand advocates promote high levels of brand engagement culminating in ‘worship’ and a contribution to very positive WOM.

### **Attitudinal Loyalty**

Attitudinal loyalty or true brand loyalty is defined as “a feeling of attachment to a certain set of brands” (Jang et al., 2008:62). It involves a consistent pattern of purchase behaviour of a specific brand over time and a favourable attitude towards the brand (Quester and Lim, 2003). Unsurprisingly, it has been suggested from the concept of the loyalty ladder (Christopher et al., 1991; Peck et al., 1999) that brand advocates have the highest level of loyalty.

### **Luxury Handbag Advocates**

Luxury handbag advocates tend to be active and develop strong emotional bonds with the brands/products in this category. They use luxury brands/handbags to convey or to create their self-concept (identities and personalities) (Solomon et al., 2006). Moreover, active advocates seek hedonic values, pleasure, brand/product experiences and ways to fulfil self-esteem from consuming luxury handbags (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Wiedmann et al., 2009). Sharing their experiences with their peers represents an important outlet for their self-esteem. The more active brand advocates gain a higher satisfaction quotient when discussing their beloved brands/handbags. Active advocates eagerly contribute or create brand related activities by supplying comments, opinions and experiences with luxury handbags (Muntinga et al., 2011). Contrastingly, passive loyalists may see consuming luxury brands/handbags as a

way to fulfil a more personally-centred desire and so may not need to express their support or recommend the brand to others. They quietly consume activities/conversations among the other community members, behaviour also described as “lurking” (Muntinga et al., 2011).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used netnography (Kozinets, 2010; Xun and Reynolds, 2010) to observe online brand advocates in The Purse Forum (TPF). This is an open forum set up by a group of luxury handbag fans who read, exchange, and post their opinions and feelings. TPF was started in 2005 and has more than 332,000 members. Similar to other online fashion sites such as The Bag Forum and The Fashion Spot, TPF demonstrates strong group cohesion, sense of community, consciousness of kind, moral responsibility, and shared norms and practices (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002). It is well structured with sub-forums categorised under luxury brand names. This study focused on the self-selected role of active brand advocates who frequently log in and participate in discussions/conversations often posting pictures. The content of their posted conversations and pictures frankly convey their feelings, direct experiences with the brand and personal opinions to particular handbags. Some advocates also posted negative feedback, minor disappointments or disagreements indicating that they are unlikely to be paid to promote the brands.

The research process was iterative and based on data gathering over a 20 month period. Phase 1 involved non-participant observation (lurking) of community rules and practices and most importantly brand advocates’ behaviours from their conversations, discussions, pictures including the language they use (Kozinets, 2010; Xun and Reynolds, 2010). Data from Phase 1 identified behaviours of online advocates and informed phase 2 that aimed to gain more insights of the reasons for exhibiting positive WOM and recommending the brand/product via participant observation and a series of questions asking active brand advocates to reveal their reasons for exhibiting WOM and recommending the brand/product. The data gained from both phases included text complemented with images of luxury handbags and brand advocates displaying their purchases. The conversations featured common English mixed with abbreviations which are used to facilitate chat. Capital letters capture feelings/emotions. All data gathered were thematically coded (Strauss, 1987) and resulted in key themes. The data represent the brand advocates’ point of view (Brewer, 2000; Gummesson, 2003; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The followings key and ‘core’ themes emerged from the netnographic observations:

### High Level of Brand Engagement

Active brand advocates have a high level of brand engagement which is known as self-brand connection (Bowden, 2009; Brodie et al., 2011; Fournier, 1998). They express brand engagement through their usernames i.e. “Prada Psycho”, “Balenciaga-boy”, “guccidiva” and “LVDevotee”. In other words, they integrate brand-identity and personal identity. Some advocates use an image of a handbag from the brand they love as their profile picture. Self-brand connection is also demonstrated in conversations e.g.:

peaceonearth “I like Gucci a lot, it’s the modern classic. I can wear my Gucci handbag with a pair of jeans and look very casual and wear the same bag with a nice dress and look so elegant and chic”. 17 May 2010

Bag-terfly “I would be a Bottega Veneta...a classic yet sophisticated kinda way”. 23 August 2010

Such posts show that brand advocates deeply engage with the brand through self-identity, personality and declare themselves as a brand person. Observations find that today’s brand advocates have more than one identity/personality. So they prefer to buy multiple brands or have a set of favourite brands to suit their multiple selves and serve various social contexts:

scaredycat “Variety is the spice of life...while I would consider myself mostly an LV girl; I do admire and buy other brands”. 5 April 2011

hotshot “having a selection of bags by different designers gives you an identity of your own”. 9 April 2011

The above extracts demonstrate that brand advocates enjoy multiple brands and they can be advocates for several brands at the same time.

### **Proud To Show Off**

Brand advocates are proud and enjoy posting pictures of their handbags. They want to exhibit themselves to the public or in front of the group as core brand fans. They also form activities inviting and encouraging other members to post pictures of their latest purchases and handbags collections such as ongoing threads “come & share your November 2011 Chanel purchases”, “Your Diors in action” and “Space for guys modelling their Hermès”. Evidence shows that brand advocates love to see and share photos of their handbag collections. For example, two of Louis Vuitton (LV) advocates admire LV collection which was posted by “momoftwins”:

LVjudy “your collection is STUNNING! CONGRATS!!!”. 2 June 2011

FreshLites “On my goodness, please post more! Love your collection”. 2 June 2011

### **Advocacy Behaviours in Both the Online and Offline World**

It is frequently observed that brand advocates express their positive WOM in an online world by recommending the brands/handbags and sharing latest news on the brands or newly launched items such as:

aprillsrin “Oh I helped one of my friend getting her LVs. I recommended the style to her and guide her through LV site. Whenever she called, it was about LV. I was like her personal SA [sale assistant].

Brand advocates worship their beloved brands which cause them to defend the brands when there is negative comment, e.g.:

thenurse “personally I didn’t like the article as it was so lousy written. I don’t feel bad about the price of Hermès bags. The article is just written in stupidity and without any references”. 14 June 2010

Active brand advocates also extend their advocacy to an offline world. Evidence shows that they arrange group outings in their areas to have meals together or shopping trips. The meetings are facilitated by brand advocates themselves which clearly shows a high level of devotion to the brand and need for interaction. After the trips, brand advocates will post their photos to share with other members.

The above behaviours also agree with Muntinga et al. (2011) that active advocates eagerly contribute or create brand related activities. Particularly extreme advocates facilitate group meetings at their own expenses, simply because they want to promote their favourite brands. Oppositely, passive loyalists only observe and barely participate in the activities on the forum. This is shown by the numbers of people who view discussion topics and the actual number of members who post feedbacks to the discussion. This evidence differentiates active advocates from passive loyalists who secretly consume or lurk around the forums.

### **A Willingness To Share**

The behaviours of showing pictures, recommending and spreading positive WOM suggest common characteristics of brand advocates in terms of their willingness to share experiences and feelings of love and joy for the brands/products. Those behaviours are seen as hedonic and are a way to fulfil their self-esteem. The extracts below demonstrate that brand advocates are willing to share their love for the brands:

poonski “It feels great having people around you that shares the same taste in something you genuinely love”. 14 April 2011

miacillan “I’m so thrilled to share my joy with you”. 25 June 2010

misstuberose “Allow me to share my JOY with you All”. 28 April 2010

Evidence indicates that active brand advocates enjoy interactions and share their feelings and opinions. This is the reason they voluntarily join in TPF community to socialise with like-minded members. The behaviours in the findings are key behaviours of online advocates of luxury handbags and expressions of their love for the brands. Also their willingness to share positive WOM, recommending and defending the brand together distinguish them from passive loyalists.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Self-selected brand advocates voluntarily promote and defend the brand and act as market mavens (Solomon et al., 2006) or experts in luxury handbags. They promote genuine and positive opinions on the brands/products. They display a willingness to share, a unique attribute of active advocates who enjoy socialising/presenting themselves as brand devotees to their peer group (Simmons, 2008). Generally, consumers perceive luxury handbags as exclusive and unique items which will make them “different” from others. Contrastingly, brand advocates encourage other consumers to buy similar bags to them. In fact, they feel more complete when bags they own are desired by others and are placed on a “must-have” list. In doing so, active advocates can be differentiated from passive loyalists who tend to internalise their feelings and emotions and don’t engage in online community activities. This study found that brand advocates can also advocate multiple brands. They often embrace a set of brands they are loyal to as this effectively provides them with more brand/product experiences to enjoy and share with their peers.

Active advocates seek a deeper engagement with their brands effectively building a long-term relationship with the brands. As brand advocates actively support multiple brands at the same time, brand owners should recognise these behaviours in order to keep their brands attractive by inventing new fashion trends, facilitating brand communities and inviting brand advocates to engage in brand events. Such activities will keep active advocates spreading positive WOM and recommending the brand to others.

## REFERENCES

- Albert, N., Merunka, D. and Valette-Florence, P. (2007). When consumers love their brands: exploring the concepts and its dimensions, Journal of Business Research, 61, 1062-1075.
- Amine, A. (1998). Consumers' true brand loyalty: the central role of commitment, Journal of Strategic Marketing, 6, 305-319.
- Batra, R., Ahuvia, A. and Bagozzi, R. P. (2012). Brand love, Journal of Marketing, 76, 1-16.
- Bergkvist, L. and Bech-Larsen, T. (2009). Two studies of consequences and actionable antecedents of brand love, Journal of Brand Management, 17(7), 504-518.
- Bowden, J. L. H. (2009). The process of customer engagement: a conceptual framework, Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice, 17(1), 63-74.
- Brewer, J. (2000). Ethnography, Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Brodie, R. J., Ilic, A., Juric, B. and Hollebeek, L. (2011). Consumer engagement in a virtual brand community: an exploratory analysis, Journal of Business Research, 1-10.
- Bughin, J., Doogan, J. and Vetvik, O. (2010). A new way to measure word-of-mouth marketing, McKinsey Quarterly, [Online] Available at: <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?vid=3&hid=113&sid=6574f0f7-90b6-48cb-8a33-ce612579edad%40sessionmgr104&bdata=JmF1dGh0eXBIPXNoaWImc2l0ZT1laG9zdC1saXZlJnNjb3BIPXNpdGU%3d#db=buh&AN=49470282> [Accessed on 7 August 2010].
- Christopher, M., Payne, A. and Ballantyne, D. (1991). Relationship marketing: bringing quality, customer service and marketing together, Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann Ltd.
- Di Maria, E. and Finotto, V. (2008). Communities of consumption and made in Italy, Industry and Innovation, 15(2), 179-197.
- Fournier, S. (1998). Consumers and their brands: developing relationship theory in consumer research, Journal of Consumer Research, 24(4), 343-373.
- Gambetti, R. C. and Graffigna, G. (2010). The concept of engagement: a systematic analysis of the ongoing market debate, International Journal of Market Research, 52(6), 801-826.
- Goulding, C. (2003). Issues in representing the postmodern consumer, Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal, 6(3), 152-159.
- Gummesson, E. (2003). All research is interpretive, Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing, 18(6/7), 482-492.
- Hirschman, E. C. and Holbrook, M. B. (1982). Hedonic consumption: emerging concepts, methods and propositions, Journal of Marketing, 46, 92-101.
- Hollebeek, L. D. (2011). Demystifying customer brand engagement: exploring the loyalty nexus, Journal of Marketing Management, 27(7-8), 785-807.
- Hudson, L. A. and Ozanne, J. L. (1988). Alternative ways of seeking knowledge in consumer research, Journal of Consumer Research, 14, 508-521.

- Jang, H., Olfman, L., Ko, I., Koh, J. and Kim, K. (2008). The influence of on-line brand community characteristics on community commitment and brand loyalty, International Journal of Electronic Commerce, 12(3), 57-80.
- Keller, E., (2005). The state of word of mouth, 2005: The Consumer Perspective' Conference paper, In The Word-of-Mouth Marketing Association Summit, Chicago, 29-30 March 2005. Illinois.
- Kim, J. W., Choi, J. Qualls, W. and Han, K. (2008). It takes a marketplace community to raise brand commitment: the role of online communities, Journal of Marketing Management, 24(3-4), 409-431.
- Kozinets, R. V. (2010). Netnography: doing ethnographic research online, London: SAGE.
- McAlexander, J. H., Schouten, J. W. and Koenig, H. F. (2002). Building brand community, Journal of Marketing, 66, 38-54.
- McAlexander, J. H., Kim, S. K. and Roberts, S. D. (2003). Loyalty: the influences of satisfaction and brand community integration, Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice, 11(4), 1-11.
- Muniz, A. M. and O'Guinn, T. C. (2001). Brand community, Journal of Consumer Research, 27, 412-432.
- Muniz, A. M. and Schau, H. J. (2005). Religiosity in the abandoned Apple Newton brand community, Journal of Consumer Research, 31,737-747.
- Muntinga, D. G., Moorman, M. and Smit, E. G. (2011). Introducing COBRAs: exploring motivations for brand-related social media use, International Journal of Advertising, 30(1), 13-46.
- Peck, H., Payne, A., Christopher, M. and Clark, M. (1999). Relationship marketing: strategy and implementation, Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann Ltd.
- Quester, P. and Lim, A. L. (2003). Product involvement/brand loyalty: is there a link?, Journal of Product and Brand Management, 12(1), 22-38.
- Schultz, D. E. (2000). Valuating a brand's advocates: the added values for a brand lie in its consumers, Marketing Management, 9(4), 8-9.
- Simmons, G. (2008). Marketing to postmodern consumers: introducing the internet chameleon, European Journal of Marketing, 42(3/4), 299-310.
- Solomon, M., Bamossy, G., Askegaard, S. and Hogg, M. K. (2006). Consumer behaviour: a european perspective, 3<sup>rd</sup>ed. New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Sprott, D., Czellar, S. and Spangenberg, E. (2009). The importance of a general measure of brand engagement on market behaviour: development and validation of a scale, Journal of Marketing Research, XLVI, 92-104.
- Strauss, A. L. (1987). Qualitative analysis for social scientists, Cambridge: Cambridge university press.

- Wiedmann, K. P., Hennigs, N. and Siebels, A. (2009). Value-based segmentation of luxury consumption behaviour, Psychology and Marketing, 26(7), 625-651.
- Xun, J. and Reynolds, J. (2010). Applying netnography to market research: The case of the online forum, Journal of Targeting, measurement and Analysis for Marketing, 18(1), 17-31.