

The dark side revealed: insights and implications from online brand communities

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to present a comprehensive review of the literature on the dark side of online brand communities, identifying the dominant themes [determinants of the dark side in online brand communities (OBCs)] in the literature and proposing ways to advance the literature in this area.

Design/methodology/approach – This study reviewed 72 scholarly articles published between 2009 and 2024 in peer-reviewed journals. A descriptive and thematic analysis of dark-side literature is presented.

Findings – The contribution of this scoping review lies in identifying the dominant themes in the literature on the determinants of the dark side of online brand communities, proposing management strategies and identifying future research directions for advancing the literature. Six main themes of the dark side of online communities were extracted: information dynamics, group dynamics, unethical practices and brand transgression, provocation and schadenfreude, brand activism and hate and disengagement.

Practical implications – Firstly, this study highlights the need for brands to engage in the active moderation of OBCs to maintain information credibility and manage information overload. Secondly, to ensure an inclusive community environment for all members, brands need to foster a balanced forum culture and moderation that discourages heterogeneity.

Originality/value – This study is unique in conducting an in-depth analysis of the literature on the dark side of online brand communities, an area that has received little attention. This review offers new insights that would help brands effectively manage negative aspects of customer behaviours in online brand communities. For managers, this review enables brands to improve their image, reputation and customer value.

Keywords Online brand communities, Dark side, Branding, Deviant behaviour, Trolling

Paper type Literature review

1. Introduction

Online brand communities (OBCs) are specialized, non-geographical user groups that form around brands through online platforms to achieve a collective or shared goal (Liang *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2023). Despite the positive or bright aspects of these communities, there is growing recognition of their dark or negative side (Dong *et al.*, 2024). Researchers indicate that OBCs may become platforms for the dissemination of misinformation, cyberbullying and other deviant behaviours (Golf-Papez and Veer, 2022; Gong and Wang, 2022). The “dark side” of OBCs refers to the negative or deviant behaviours customers engage within OBCs. Group dynamics, customer experiences and brand’s actions or policies

are some of the key reasons for customers to engage in anti-brand or deviant behaviours (Behl and Jain, 2023; Özbölük and Dursun, 2017). Unlike the bright side, where positive interactions foster community engagement and brand loyalty (Bilro and Loureiro, 2023), the dark side adversely impacts the trust and cooperation among members (Liao *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, when customers engage in deviant behaviours in OBCs, brands suffer from reduced credibility and higher negative word of mouth (Dineva *et al.*, 2017).

Research on the dark side has identified various customer deviant or negative behaviours that are detrimental to both the community and the brand. These behaviours include both direct and indirect negatively valenced behaviours such as discrediting, deriding, regretting, dissuading, endorsing competitors, trolling and warnings others (Azer and Alexander, 2020; Behl and Jain, 2023; Demsar *et al.*, 2021). While prior

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