

Brand Building in the Era of Mobility and Emergence of 'New Imagined Communities' : A Conceptual Analysis

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Abstract

This is a conceptual paper and is an attempt to explore the transitional effect of brand building in the new era of mobiles and the Internet. Transition and mobility have been the laws of nature and have been witnessed from time immemorial. However, the current and future generations are going to witness a transformation which redefines the idea of space and geographical territory. The prime mover of this transformation will be new media. To understand this transition well and to be in sync with the nuances of mobility will be crucial to organizational success in the 21st century. In this paper, we have discussed how organizations can form brand communities on the lines of Benedict Anderson's 'Imagined Communities'. The paper also highlights the fact that the phenomenon of mobility seen today is not just a consequence of an information explosion, but is also a result of the nature of new media (the Internet and mobile) and its impact on social constructs.

Keywords: communities, imagined community, mobility, brand, new media, internet, mobile, emerging market, convergence

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It wouldn't be wrong to say that we are moving towards a networked society which goes beyond physical connections and functions like an imagined territory created by the new media (the Internet and mobile). However, it is also important to note that in the context of India, there is a digital divide between rural and urban India, but the convergence of new media technology (the Internet, mobile phones, and integration of both) is bridging this gap by eroding physical barriers between the two. According to the Internet World Statistics, India has achieved a 10.2% Internet penetration at 12.1 crore users as of December 2011. Of this, 37% of the users access Facebook. India had the second largest Facebook users in Asia, followed by China, which had a total penetration of 38%. Penetration in Asia is 26.2%, and the rest of the world average is 41% (Sengupta, 2012). Total wireless subscriber base stood at 919.17 million at the end of March 2012. Broadband subscription reached 13.79 million in March 2012 (ITU World Telecommunication, 2011).

Everything, from the way we communicate, travel, work, to the way we access and share information has come to be defined by two words - instant and mobile. Transition and mobility driven by new media will create new opportunities for business houses to not only acquire new customers, but also to create an imagined extended family which can be a set of potential customers in the future. Technological advances in new media have created a world where people's involvement has become crucial at every front. People have stopped being just consumers but have also assumed the role of brand builders. It would be fair to understand what brought about this change - whether it was the sheer deluge of information available to people and the speed with which it can be accessed, or whether it was the nature of new media and its characteristics that has made this world so mobile.

Basic Premises

✍ **Medium is the Message :** In his pioneering work on media theory, *Understanding Media - The Extensions of Man*, Marshall McLuhan put forth the idea that the medium, and not the content it carries, must be the focus of research

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(McLuhan, 1964). The characteristics of a medium have a significant effect on the way society interacts and the way it is organized. For him, society has always focused on the content rather than the medium, while it is the medium that should be at the centre of our research. He suggested that the idiosyncrasies of a medium are far stronger and powerful in changing the way that society around us interacts and functions than the content carried by that medium. According to Harrison (2011) :

Marshall McLuhan, perhaps the best known and most controversial theorist of media evolution, urged us to focus on the effects of media technology on sensory perception, asserting that changes in media experience posed consequences for cognition, behaviour, and social order. (para 1, Harrison, 2011)

✍ **The Characteristics of New Media and the Concept of Mobility :** New media has brought about a revolution by the sheer speed itself. The Internet has allowed people across the globe to network like never before. It recognizes the consumer's penchant for exclusivity. It acknowledges this by presenting content that is customized to the core. New media is typically characterized by :

- ✍ Speed,
- ✍ Networkability (hypertext),
- ✍ User generated content,
- ✍ Variability of content (diversity and personalization), and
- ✍ Interactive nature.

✍ **The Changes in Social Order and Consumer Behaviour Brought About by New Media and the Subsequent Mobility :** While supporting McLuhan's theory of 'Medium as the Message,' Meyrowitz (1996, pp. 73-110) suggested that the medium itself and its characteristics are more powerful in shaping society than the content carried by the medium. Meyrowitz explained that at the micro level, the choice of the communication medium affects the course that different situations and interactions may take. At the macro level, the addition of a new medium to the existing media mix can alter social interactions and structures. He used the example of how the widespread use of the telephone has changed the role of letter writing and influenced the nature of social interactions in general. The same can be seen if we observe how society has evolved after the proliferation of mobile phones and the Internet. As Harrison (2011), suggested, the functioning of human brain changes with changes in media consumption and exposure to a new media mix.

Drawing from McLuhan's idea of medium as the message, Harrison said that the generation that grew up around print media had a set of cognitive abilities unique to them (Harrison, 2011). Similarly, the present generation of digital natives (Prensky, 2001), which has grown up surrounded by TV, the Internet, and mobile phones has developed different cognitive abilities, mastered new skill sets, and acquired lifestyles that are inherently different from the print and radio generation. One of the hallmarks of an Internet and mobile phone savvy generation is social networking. The success of Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, and Second Life says a lot about how new media users communicate and network. We believe that in the 21st century, people are at the core of all businesses. To add a step to it, we suggest that brands can explore the possibility of building communities in the virtual space where people not only connect, but also become a part of the extended family of the brand and contribute to it. The proposed community can go beyond the concept of brand community, and will also address the digital divide of India by bringing together the users of mobile phones and the Internet as a part of that community. We see this as an opportunity for the future where such communities can be transformed to take the shape of mega online communities helped by the convergence of mobile and the Internet. To explain this idea, we would like to talk about the idea of imagined communities given by Anderson (1983).

✍ **Anderson and Imagined Communities :** Anderson proposed the idea of imagined communities as long back as in 1983. According to him, nations that we see today are an outcome of imagined communities. These communities are social constructs borne out of the awareness in the minds of people that there are others out there with common goals and objectives. Each individual in this construct feels a part of the larger whole which is made of other individuals with

similar aspirations. For example, when India plays Pakistan at the Cricket World Cup, the Indian fans are a part of an imagined community of all Indian cricket fans put together. They all will probably never meet each other in person, but will feel belongingness to this community every time they set out to support their cricket team (Anderson, 1983).

We would like to explore the application of Anderson's idea in the context of online brand communities. However, the major question is, do online communities function like imagined communities? We would say yes. To some extent, online communities do operate on the same lines as Anderson's imagined communities.

In Anderson's imagined communities, the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion (p. 6). This seems to be what is happening on Twitter. Users could never know everyone on Twitter, but they are certainly aware of other users' presence, especially in their neighborhood of sources (Gruzd, Wellman, & Takhteyev, 2011, pp. 4-6).

In this context, let us see if online and offline imagined communities can be created for certain brands and if they can be sustained in the future with the help of new media and the subsequent mobility.

Imagined Brand Communities and Convergence of Technology

✍ **Creating Profitable Brand Communities in the Urban Context :** With increasing advertising clutter and the subsequent difficulty in retaining customers, brands must look at forming a community of consumers which is loyal toward the brand-name, understands it, feels associated with it, and shares similar sentiments with other consumers. For this, brands need to engage customers and make them feel like they belong to the brand. On the lines of imagined communities, brands can have a community of consumers which is loyal towards the brand-name, understands it, feels associated with it, and shares a similar sentiment with other consumers. Such communities will be able to help build brand equity, retain customers, engage them real time, and offer such experiences that delight them (Box 1). So, the idea of creating value and capturing profits can move beyond hosting ads, data collection and control, to creating superior customer experiences.

Box 1: Imagine visiting the Airtel or Vodafone website where every subscriber has an identity and is known by his 10 digit mobile number and is a part of the virtual world. The website can be integrated with various services such e-commerce, discussions and polls, and so forth. Such websites could also offer personalized calling plans and value added services and offer customization benefits.

Needless to say that techno-convergence between mobiles phones and the Internet will be instrumental in this regard. The urban customer is connected 24x7. He is mobile, vocal, and likes to contribute to systems and networks that he is a part of. He does not just consume, but also talks about his experiences. Such consumers can be made the brand advocates by ensuring that they have a great product or service experience. The marriage of mobile phones and the internet throws up a bunch of possibilities to engage the customer for life. Also, brands will have to create new forms of owned media. Such media will be characterized by hyper syndication and new platform aggregation to make it interactive in the real sense.

✍ **Ensuring the Success of Brand Communities :** To ensure the success of this concept, brand communities will have to go past creating a sense of membership and transcend to create a sense of communion and ownership. If brands can create an emotional connect amongst their community members, they can actually make such communities work. Another area that such online communities will need to focus on is the involvement of members in the activities of the community. Brands will have to engage the consumers not just for sending information brochures or extending promotional offers. They will have to get the consumers involved at a deeper level so that the consumers begin to feel that their contribution and opinion matters. Such efforts as creating a vibrant and engaging brand community must be seen from a futuristic perspective. We are looking at ways and methods to ensure that even 5-10 years down the line, the brand communities should be just as relevant. Furthermore, engaging consumers in the long term will ensure better customer life cycle management through customization of products and services.

It will not be an easy task to engage customers, but the onus would lie with the marketing teams across organizations to push creativity and come up new ways to delight customers. The power of these communities can be

enormous. The above-mentioned strategy looks suited to urban and semi urban towns with more Internet penetration and much better literacy rates. What about the emerging markets? Let us see this in the Indian context.

✍ **Brand Communities and its Managerial Implications – The Importance of Reputation Management :** We recently stumbled across the Facebook page of Vodafone India (a screenshot of which is shown in the Exhibit 1). Vodafone is one of the biggest telecom service providers in India. What you see on this page is a stream of complaints about customer service posted by Vodafone customers. After seeing the page, a few things become evident immediately :

- 1) Customers are completely unforgiving in dealing with bad service and go all out in venting their anger with a vengeance on social media platforms.
- 2) Customers not only air their complaints to bring it to the vendor's attention, but they do it with a mind to share their experience with other customers who may have had similar experiences. This is a clear example of how they associate themselves with other customers and see themselves as a part of this larger community formed by other customers.
- 3) Customers are impatient with slow service. An assurance on the lines of "we will get back to you soon" does not suffice at all. They want a solution, and they want it 'now'. Isn't this an outcome of new media and mobility? Would not have the same customer in a different day and age - with access to a different media mix - behaved differently?

Such cases which show the dynamics of imagined communities and their interactions with different brands say much about the importance of 'reputation management' in today's world. Top MNCs heed this phenomenon and have dedicated resources to take care of their reputation by ensuring effective communication with current and prospective customers. So, customer service is not just reactive, but is actively becoming proactive in order to subvert situations

Exhibit 1. Brand Communities and Reputation Management



The screenshot displays the Vodafone India Facebook page. At the top, there's a header with the Vodafone logo, the text 'Vodafone India', and tabs for 'Timeline' and 'Now'. A 'Like' button is on the right. The main content area shows a series of posts. The first post is from Shuva Nandy, who is disappointed with the internet connection and has recharged a 3G plan. Below it, Saurav Choudhury and Abhijit Gupta also share their complaints. Vodafone India's official page responds to these, offering assistance and providing contact information. The page also shows a post from Megha Chaturvedi Maurya, who is also having trouble with the internet connection. The page ends with a footer that says 'Vodafone India - Complaints - Requests - Enquires' and the website 'www.vodafone.in'.

Source : Adapted from Vodafone India (2013). Vodafone official Facebook Page.
Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/vodafoneIN>

where their brand's reputation may take a hit. So effectively, the nature of new media has and will continue to change the way customers voice their grievances. Not just that, new media will also determine the way the customers expect their issues to be resolved. The presence of imagined communities cannot be ignored, and the same has empowered the customer more than ever before. As a result, such communities have made organizations review their PR strategy and focus on their external communications in a more proactive fashion.

✚ **Exploring Brand Communities for Emerging Markets :** The number of claimed Internet users in rural India is expected to reach 45 million by December 2012. Mobile phones are fast emerging as an important point of Internet access in rural India. As of June 2012, there were 3.6 million mobile Internet users in India, a growth of 7.2 times from 0.5 million in 2010 (Singh, 2012).

Mobile phone penetration in the emerging markets is a huge opportunity to utilize this platform for extending a milieu of services to the local population. Mobile phones present an opportunity which, if sufficiently utilized, can throw up endless possibilities and write new success stories. There is no doubt about the fact that for most industries, especially FMCG and FMCD, emerging markets are the next big thing. An extensive distribution channel spread out across small towns and villages is crucial to attaining a good market share. While companies will experiment with new distribution methods, by using innovative below the line (BTL) and promotional campaigns year on year, there lies a huge opportunity for companies for making their own brand communities (see Box 2). Keeping in mind the next decade, the emerging markets are going to see a deluge of brands pouring in to grab a chunk of the market which promises big numbers. In such a situation, a brand community similar to an imagined community can be leveraged to combat a competitor's marketing inputs and strategies and ensure a steady stream of customers.

Box 2: Wouldn't it be great if Philips could not just sell electric bulbs but also campaign for rural electrification? Would it not be amazing to see a pharmaceuticals company not just promoting OTCs but also campaigning for hygiene and sanitation? How about an Amul talking to consumers about the health of women and the girl child? Such campaigns can become the hallmark of their respective brands.

✚ **Connecting Link and Future Ahead :** Emerging markets are characterized by poor connectivity. Mobile phones can change this. They can go where retailers and salesmen cannot. What is needed then is that one thread that can bind a varied consumer base together and make them feel belonged to that brand. How can this be achieved?

Small towns grapple with social issues such as healthcare, clean water availability, hygiene, sanitation, literacy, female infanticide, and so on. State help and other aids are not only insufficient, but difficult to disburse. However, with the advances in technology, mobile phones have reached where other facilities could not. Here lies the opportunity for brands to chip in and take up a social cause that is close to their philosophy. The premise here is that social issues in emerging markets can connect a large pool of consumers and the medium to connect them is the mobile phone. It is common to see local folk and daily wage workers in rural areas listening to music on their mobile phones. A typical user plays these songs on the go.

Imagine having a promotional ad for a product or a message for a social campaign bundled with a song download. The local cyber café/shop-owners can be incentivized to bundle the advertisement and the song together, and offer it to the consumer at a nominal price. The brand could subsidize the consumer's cost of downloading music/ringtones. Brands supporting social causes via a campaign could come up with creative ringtones, which are not just good to listen to, but also highlight a social message. Brands could also think of tying up with telecom service providers to organize this on an elaborate scale. Such campaigns can be freely customized to suit the most local needs. Brands can extensively use the mobile phone to communicate their campaign. Imagine a small jingle bundled with a popular Bollywood number that can be sent to prospective consumers every time they visit the local mobile store for a new download. Another way of reaching out to them would be through customized audio and text messages on their mobile phones, which inform and educate them about a new campaign. Brands will have to involve themselves with the issue with total commitment, or it may come across as just another marketing gimmick. The communication will need to be reflected in their products, salesmen, and retailers across consumer touch points.

The brand campaigns will have to be designed very carefully. There will be a lot of localization involved, which takes care of local sensitivities and sentiments. Such initiatives must transcend short-term goals to something bigger

that enables brands to create a community of consumers which stands for an issue that the community can empathize with. Using local dialects and engaging local role models and celebrities can be instrumental for the success of such campaigns.

Conclusion

We have discussed how consumers across urban and emerging markets can be formed into imagined communities. Such communities will capture incremental value for brands when looked at from a futuristic perspective. However, with time, there will be new hurdles too. Brand communities are prone to be transitory in nature. They may end up looking like a brand's Facebook page, which can boast of thousands of likes, but actually does not contribute substantially. An urban customer is attacked from advertising messages from all sides at all touch points. Brand communities will have to differentiate, stand out, and appeal to the consumers' emotions to establish a strong connection. Similarly, in the emerging markets, brands will need to manage the mobile phone stores and kiosks where customers visit for a recharge or a download. With time, the customers in rural markets will move towards smart-phones and mobile web, which would create opportunities for brands to integrate the existing brand communities across geographical areas and truly harness the phenomenon of mobility.

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