Super-Heroes at Your Service: Business Communities Inspiring Creativity to Mitigate Crisis

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Small business owners (SBOs) face unique identity challenges when providing services during the current global pandemic. To maintain services, SBOs must modify strategies. Using social identity and organizational identity theories as a theoretical lens, we introduce the concept of SBO identity and investigate the owners' journey through early crisis management. We employ an inductive, qualitative approach using netnographic, survey, and interview data in the context of VR-photographers in residential real estate. Our data reveal that SBOs question their essentiality, creating role conflict. We find that business communities offer a social alliance, verification, and sensemaking that can promote creative strategy changes and adaptive capabilities. This creativity can inspire SBOs to take on a new identity of a "super-hero," where they assist to bring normalcy and sustain the market while keeping others safe.

Introduction

The recent pandemic crisis influences the fabric of daily life for all individuals. While many firms are feeling the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, small business owners (SBOs) are feeling a substantial impact (Eggers, 2020). Although some are eligible for governmental support, many small businesses do not have the deep pockets to sustain their business and may shut their doors to never be reopened. Arguably, crisis brings on a unique anxiety form that pushes SBOs to have an identity crisis, creating role conflict when questioning the essentiality of their role.

The study of SBOs has received little attention in the marketing literature, yet the complex nature and divergences from larger organizations make this a robust and important context to study and offers an opportunity to build new theories (Tan et al., 2007). Furthermore, research recognizes communities can support consumers' identity projects, but less research has explored how this can assist SBOs' identity management and strategic changes during a crisis. This research investigates the following research questions: 1) How do SBOs react and modify strategies to maintain services during a crisis? and 2) How do business communities influence strategic changes?

We take an inductive qualitative approach to investigate these research questions using the enabling lens of social identity and organizational identity theories. Using netnographic data of a private online forum in addition to qualitative survey responses and interviews, we investigate the context of Virtual Reality (VR)-photographers in the residential real estate industry. Through this discovery-oriented approach, we find that business communities offer SBOs opportunities to share learnings that can promote creative strategy changes and adaptive capabilities. SBOs that undergo role conflict may be motivated through social alignment within the SBO community to take on a new identity and associated practices. Contingent upon verifications and intergroup discrimination, the SBOs confidence and productivity of this new identity vary.

Method

To investigate our research questions, we take an inductive, qualitative multi-method approach to assist in our conceptual development. We investigate this phenomenon in the context of residential real estate photographers, who have their own businesses, and use an emerging technology of virtual reality (VR)-tours. We scraped relevant data from an online business community, consisting of 221 discussions with 1,001 posts total, by searching for topics related to the terms: COVID, corona, or pandemic. As recommended in a netnography approach, we also captured offline data within the context (Kozinets, 2019). This included survey data from members in the community and a prospect list shared with us by the community forum owner. Additional data included narrative interviews from four SBOs within this market context, lasting on average 56 minutes.

Findings

As a result of the COVID-19 crisis, many are left with questions of what will be the new normal. Our exploration of SBOs' engagement with business communities offers a timely contribution to the crisis management literature and the services literature. Our findings suggest that online business communities offer SBOs in service industries an opportunity to build their creativity to manage a crisis beyond formalized learning capabilities (Wyer et

al., 2010) and take on a new identity of a "super-hero" to support the marketplace and others in the community. There is an opportunity for business innovation to be a positive result emerging from COVID-19 (Waldron & Wetherbe, 2020). The VR-photographers' innovation is apparent in the form of increased technology use to sustain desired exchanges, not only in real estate but also in a wide array of industries, including retail, entertainment, and food and beverage service. What we recognize, however, is a larger positive of SBOs using business communities to expand their adaptive capabilities (Day, 2011). The adaptability of SBOs' identity and strategies may help create expanded opportunities for not only their business but also vastly different experiences for how the global community lives and works (Eggers, 2020).

By leveraging social identity theory as an interpretive lens, we introduce the conceptualization of SBO identity to the services and small business literature. Furthermore, in recognizing the SBOs influence within online business communities, we respond to Pantano et al.'s (2020) call to understand how small businesses can help others cope with the crisis and support the economy. Following Berger et al.'s (2006) recognition that not all individuals pursue social alliance or social communities to facilitate identity management, our data reveal that SBOs may benefit from attaining support from business communities during the times of crisis. By engaging through a business community, the collective strategy (Wang et al., 2020) and identification (Berger et al., 2006) results in a collective SBO identity and associated practices. The attainment of the new identity for SBOs offers ontological security (Giddens, 1984), which can enable their productivity. Identity synergy of employees can reinforce organizational identity (Fombelle et al., 2011), and as we see through the exploration of an online business community, that synergy among SBOs may strengthen a recently adopted identity. In the case of a pandemic crisis, SBOs' newly adopted "super-hero" identity is a transient response, and their identity project will continue to evolve along with the crisis.

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