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Consumer Engagement Behaviors in Brand Communities of Social Networking Sites

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ABSTRACT

Many companies have realized the enormous potential of social networking sites and have invested considerable resources in encouraging consumer engagement behaviors in brand communities of social networking sites. In this study, we attempt to propose a research model that explains how consumer engagement behaviors in brand communities of social networking sites affect brand loyalty. The research model is empirically tested with 201 Facebook users. The results provide supports to our research hypotheses and illustrate the importance of consumer engagement behaviors in social networking sites in building brand loyalty. Findings of this study are expected to provide useful insights for emarketers to develop brand loyalty through consumer engagement behaviors in online social networks as well as for researchers to better understand the relationship between consumer engagement behaviors in online brand community and consumer behavior.

Keywords

Social networking sites, consumer engagement behaviors, online brand community, brand loyalty, word of mouth, Facebook

INTRODUCTION

Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and other similar social networking sites provide online social spaces where consumers connect and share their purchasing experiences of branded products and services with their friends, personal contacts, and other acquaintances. Many companies have recognized the value in building and promoting consumer-brand relationships through encouraging consumer engagement behaviors in online brand communities of these online social platforms. The success of these online social platforms however depends on whether consumers are willing to participate and promote online brand communities. Many companies have invested considerable resources in encouraging consumer engagement in online social platforms. In a recent report by Forrester Research Inc., 95% of marketers claimed that they will invest in social media or at least maintain their same level of investment, despite the current downturn in the global economy; and by 2014, it is estimated that companies will spend \$3.1 billion annually on social media.

The significance of social networking sites has not gone unnoticed by the academic community. A few studies have provided initial insights into consumer engagement behaviors in online social platforms (e.g., Cheung and Lee 2012; Chu and Kim 2011; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004; Lorenzo-Romero et al. 2011). However, existing publications have not yet analyzed the impact of consumer engagement in online brand communities, and perhaps partly as a consequence, we have limited theoretical understanding of the relationship between consumer engagement behaviors in brand communities of social networking sites and consumer behavior (e.g., brand loyalty). The main objective of this study is to explore the relationship between consumer engagement behaviors in brand communities of social networking sites and consumer behavior. Particularly, we develop and empirically test a research model that explains how consumer engagement behaviors in brand communities of social networking sites affect brand loyalty (i.e., brand commitment, purchase intention and word of mouth intention). This study will advance the existing literature on online brand community and provide researchers with insights for further research on consumer engagement behaviors in brand communities of social networking sites. Furthermore, the results will inform emarketers the value of encouraging consumer engagement in this new type of online brand communities.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The next section addresses the theoretical foundation of the research model. The third section presents the research model and hypotheses. The fourth section describes a survey study of users of Facebook

brand communities to empirically test our research model. The fifth section presents the results of our empirical study. Finally, the paper is concluded by discussing the implications for both research and practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this paper, we attempt to develop and estimate a research model that explains how consumer engagement behaviors in brand communities of social networking sites affect brand loyalty. The model draws on marketing studies of brand communities (e.g., Bagozzi and Dholakia 2006; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001), as well as user participation in computer-mediated technologies (e.g., Dholakia et al. 2004; Jang et al. 2008; Shang et al. 2006).

Brand Loyalty and Online Brand Communities

In today's highly competitive business environment, keeping consumers happy and maintaining a long-term relationship with them has long been an important business strategy. According to the relationship marketing literature, brand loyalty is one of the key relationship marketing outcomes. This concept can be conceptualized into behavioral loyalty and attitudinal loyalty (Jacoby and Kyrner 1973). Behavioral loyalty means that consumers will continue to purchase products or services from the same supplier. Attitudinal loyalty refers to consumers' commitment or preferences when considering unique values associated with a brand (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001). Brand community building has been recognized as an effective approach for developing and maintaining consumer relationships. Prior studies have found that greater integration in a brand community creates brand loyalty and establishes long-term relationships with potential consumers (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). With the advent of the Internet and as more consumers become adept at using the Internet, companies are developing online brand communities through a company's website, online portal, or social networking site. However, a review of prior literature revealed that the theoretical understanding of brand loyalty in the online environment is limited. Only few researchers have empirically shown that brand loyalty can be developed through participation in online brand communities (Dholakia et al. 2004; Jang et al. 2008; Shang et al. 2006). An online brand community is usually defined as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based upon social relationships among admirers of a brand in cyberspace" (Jang et al. 2008, p. 57), and can be classified into two major groups based on the criterion of who hosts them. Consumer-initiated communities are voluntarily built by consumers, and company-initiated communities are built by the company that owns the brand.

Consumer Engagement Behaviors in Online Brand Communities

Consumer engagement is an important concept; however, it is understood in a very vague and unsystematic way. Marketing practitioners tend to focus on the interactions and behavioral aspects of engagement. For example, Peterson and Carrabis (2008) derived a total engagement index by adding the values for each engagement category, including click depth (content clicked on), loyalty (no. of return visits over a longer period of time), recentness (no. of return visits over a shorter period of time), duration (time of session), interactivity (actions taken with content-downloading, posting, attending a video/audiocast), and subscription). In the academic literature, although many marketing studies with constructs carrying the "engagement" label, the definition, dimensionality, and operationalization of customer engagement are inconsistent and mixed. Based on Cheung et al. (2011), three key ways to conceptualize customer engagement are identified:

- Customer engagement as a process: Bowden (2009) postulated customer engagement as a psychological process that leads to the formation of loyalty.
- Customer engagement as behavioral manifestation: van Doorn et al. (2010) defined customer engagement as "the behavioral manifestation from a customer toward a brand or a firm which goes beyond purchase behavior. (p.254)".
- Customer engagement as psychological state: Patterson et al. (2006) drew on a variety of parent disciplines including social psychology and organizational behavior and defined customer engagement as a psychological state that is characterized by a degree of vigor, dedication, absorption, and interaction.

The rising popularity of social networking sites has created a new social platform for consumers to connect and share their enthusiasm about their favorite brand with their friends, personal contacts, and other acquaintances (Hennig-Thurau et al 2010; Trusov et al. 2009). Consumers can freely join their favorite brand communities in social networking sites and participate in brand communities through ongoing communication processes (e.g., providing positive comments on pictures and videos related to the brand or company, and the like). Researchers have employed various research approaches and theories such as social network analysis (e.g., Trusov et al. 2009, 2010), social contagion (e.g., Aral 2010), customer value measurement (e.g., Kumar et al. 2010), netnography (e.g., Catterall and Maclaran 2002), and motivational theories (e.g., Dholakia et al. 2010), to investigate consumer participation in online communities. In the current research project, we will attempt to enrich the

existing literature by exploring the role of consumer engagement behaviors in brand communities of social networking sites, as well as identifying its relationship with brand loyalty.

RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

Building on prior literature, we propose our research model and identify the relationships among the key constructs. Particularly, we attempt to explore how consumer engagement behaviors in brand communities of social networking sites affect brand loyalty. A brand community in a social networking site represents a specialized, non-geographically bound online community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand in social networking sites. Consumers can freely join their favorite brand communities in social networking sites and engage in brand communities through ongoing communication processes (e.g., providing positive comments on pictures and videos related to the brand or company, and the like). These behavioral expressions of consumers reflect consumer engagement behaviors in brand communities of social networking sites. Though consumer participation in an online brand community can include both posting and lurking behaviors (Shang et al. 2006), we focus on active consumer participation and promotion (consumer engagement behaviors) in brand communities of social networking sites. Figure 1 depicts our research model.

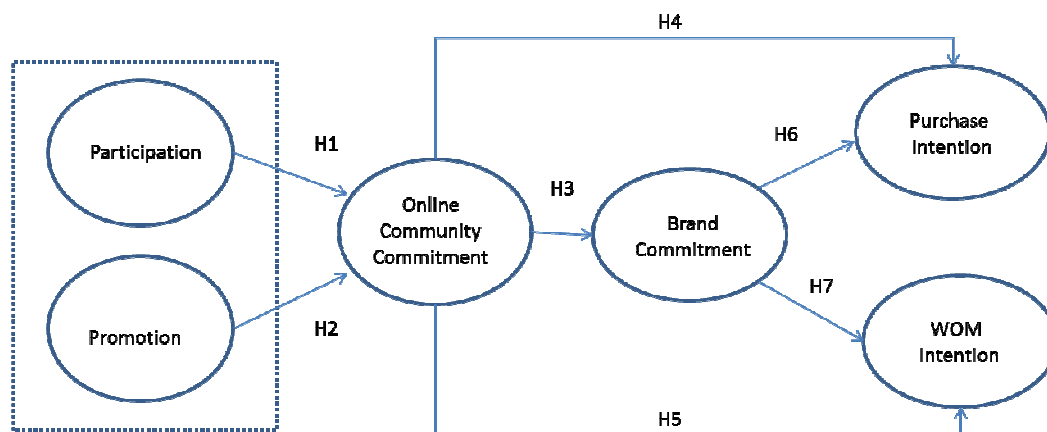


Figure 1: Research Model

Formation of Online Community Commitment

Online community commitment refers to the psychological attachment to an online community (Betterncourt 1997; Morgan and Hunt 1994). The concept of online commitment is especially important as members are increasingly relying on the online platform to gather information. In addition, they can easily switch to other alternative online platforms by just clicks (Zhang et al. 2009). Prior studies have found that consumer engagement behaviors in online communities enhance their interpersonal relationships and a sense of community (Kim et al. 2008; Madupu and Cooley 2010). By actively participating in brand community related activities, members can recognize other like-minded people and thus develop online community commitment. Therefore, we have the following hypotheses:

H1: Participation will have a positive effect on online community commitment

H2: Promotion will have a positive effect on online community commitment

The Impact of Online Community Commitment on Brand Commitment

Brand commitment focuses on a feeling of attachment to certain brands and companies, and is considered as an attitudinal loyalty. According to social identity theory, once members are committed to an organization, they will commit themselves to actions that support the organization (Dutton and Dukerich 1991). In other words, once a member feels commitment to an online brand community, it is more likely that s/he will develop positive attitude and behavior toward the brand. Thus, we believe that when a member's online community commitment is established, brand commitment as well as purchase intention will be formed. In addition, some researchers (e.g., Bettencourt 1997, Dick and Basu 1994) have argued that consumer

commitment further leads to proactive behavior, including positive word-of-mouth. Therefore, we have the following hypotheses:

H3: Online community commitment will have a positive effect on brand commitment

H4: Online community commitment will have a positive effect on purchase intention

H5: Online community commitment will have a positive effect on word of mouth intention

Brand Loyalty in Brand Communities of Social Networking Sites

To explore the value of consumer engagement behaviors in brand communities of social networking sites, we include both attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty in our research model. In addition, we attempt to test the interrelationships in the context of brand communities of social networking sites. In the current study, behavioral loyalty means that consumers will purchase products or services from the same brand, as well as will spread positive word of mouth about the brand. Attitudinal loyalty refers to consumers' commitment or preferences when considering unique values associated with a brand. Prior literature has already showed that attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty are highly correlated (McAlexander et al. 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Members who have deep commitment to the brand would have a preference for the brand and thus higher intention to purchase the brand (Gruen, Summers, and Acito 2000), as well as to promote the brand (Westbrook 1987). Therefore, we have the following hypotheses:

H6: Brand commitment will have a positive effect on purchase intention

H7: Brand commitment will have a positive effect on word of mouth intention

METHODOLOGY

In this section, we describe the data collection method and measures, as well as report the profile of our sample.

Data Collection

We tested our research model with Facebook users in Hong Kong. Facebook is one of the most popular social networking sites among young people in Hong Kong. A large portion of the students in local universities have a Facebook account and use Facebook frequently. We collected the data through posting an invitation message with the URL to the online questionnaire on a number of Facebook groups (student groups). To encourage participation, we offered lucky draw prizes of local supermarket coupons. Several screening questions were used to ensure that the respondents were active Facebook users and had joined Facebook Fan Pages.

Measures

The constructs of interest to this study were purchase intention, word of mouth intention, brand commitment, online community commitment, participation, and promotion. All measures used in this study have been validated in prior studies (see Appendix A). Minor changes in the wordings were made so as to fit into the current investigation of Facebook Fan Page. All constructs were measured using multi-item perceptual scales.

Sample Profiles

A total of 201 questionnaires were collected in the current study. Among the 201 respondents, 57% were female and 43% were male. A majority of the respondents (82.6%) aged 17-25. Most of the respondents were students (73.1%) and had a bachelor degree or above. 33.8% respondents used Facebook more than 7 hours every week and 51.8% used Facebook 1-6 hours every week. All respondents joined online brand community in Facebook. 32.8% of respondents joined 1-5 Facebook Fan Pages, 28.4% joined 6-10, and 22.9% joined 11- 20. 45.3% of the respondents reported that they visited Facebook fan page 1-2 times per week and 32.3% visited 3-4 times per week in the last month. Among those Facebook fan page members, 44.3% spent only less than 1 hour and around 39.9% spent 1- 2 hours per week in the Facebook Fan Pages. Most of respondents reported that they have been Facebook fan page members for less than 1 year (70.7%).

RESULT

We used Partial Least Squares (PLS) approach to test the research model in current study. PLS is one of the most widely used Structure Equation Modeling (SEM) techniques in IS research, as it enables researchers to analyze both the measurement

model and the structural model simultaneously. In addition, PLS technique does not require data to have a multivariate normal distribution and is less demanding on the sample size (Chin 1998). SmartPLS 2.0 software was used during the data analysis process. Following the two-step analytical procedures (Hair et al. 1998), we first examined the measurement model for its psychometric properties and then evaluated the structure model.

Measurement Model

Examination of the measurement model involved evaluations of reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of our measures. We assessed reliability by using Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability. A composite reliability of 0.70 or above and Cronbach's Alpha of greater than 0.7 are deemed acceptable (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). As shown in Table 1 and 2, both Cronbach's Alpha and composite reliability meet the recommended threshold.

Construct	Cronbachs Alpha
Online Community Commitment	0.89
Purchase Intention	0.94
WOM Intention	0.93
Brand Commitment	0.88
Participation	0.89
Promotion	0.90

Table 1: Reliability of Measures

Constructs	Item	Item Loadings	Mean	STDEV
Online Community Commitment (OCC) CR=0.92; AVE=0.75	OCC1	0.83	4.50	1.44
	OCC2	0.91	4.73	1.27
	OCC3	0.93	4.65	1.31
	OCC4	0.89	4.85	1.45
Purchase Intention (PI) CR=0.96; AVE=0.90	PI1	0.93	5.83	1.32
	PI2	0.95	5.88	1.40
	PI3	0.96	5.93	1.26
WOM Intention (WOM) CR=0.96; AVE=0.88	eWOM1	0.92	5.41	1.31
	eWOM2	0.92	5.43	1.22
	eWOM3	0.95	5.50	1.28
Brand Commitment (BC) CR=0.93; AVE=0.81	BC1	0.90	4.94	1.18
	BC2	0.93	5.21	1.37
	BC3	0.87	5.68	1.28
Participation (PP) CR=0.93; AVE=0.82	PP1	0.85	4.43	1.55
	PP2	0.93	4.01	1.53
	PP3	0.94	4.03	1.55
Promotion (PM) CR=0.94; AVE=0.83	PM1	0.91	4.60	1.57
	PM2	0.94	4.69	1.58
	PM3	0.89	5.03	1.24

Table 2: Convergent Validity

Convergent validity indicates the extent to which scores on one scale correlate with scores on other scales theoretically designed to assess the same construct. It is assessed by using the composite reliability (CR) and the average variance extracted (AVE). The minimum acceptable values for CR and AVE are 0.7 and 0.5, respectively (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Table 2 summarizes the item loading, composite reliability, and average variance extracted standard deviation of the

measures of all the constructs. All the measures exceed the recommended critical levels, with the composite reliability ranging from 0.92-0.96 and the AVE ranging from 0.75-0.9. Furthermore, all the item loadings are more than 0.70 and are considered to be significant. Thus, the convergent validity is supported.

Discriminant validity is the extent to which the measurement is not a reflection of other constructs. It is verified by low correlations between the measure of interest and the measures of other constructs (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Discriminant validity of the measures is also demonstrated when the squared root of the average variance extracted for each construct is higher than its correlations with all other constructs (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Table 3 shows that the square root of average variance extracted for each construct is higher than the correlations between the constructs and all other constructs. Therefore, the discriminant validity of the measures used in the current study is demonstrated.

Table 3 Variable Correlation (Note: Diagonal elements are square roots of the average variance extracted)

	Online Community Commitment	Purchase Intention	WOM Intention	Brand Commitment	Participation	Promotion
Online Community Commitment	0.87					
Purchase Intention	0.62	0.95				
WOM intention	0.72	0.75	0.94			
Brand Commitment	0.67	0.77	0.77	0.90		
Participation	0.70	0.47	0.48	0.48	0.91	
Promotion	0.78	0.64	0.73	0.60	0.67	0.91

Structural Model

The model was estimated using PLS approach (bootstrap re-sampling procedure). Figure 2 depicts the overall explanatory power, the estimated path coefficients (all significant paths are indicated with asterisks), and the associated t-value of the paths. The structural model explains 66.5% of the variance in “Online Community Commitment”, 44.8% of the variance in “Brand Commitment”, 61% of variance in “Purchase Intention” and 66.6% of variance in “WOM Intention”. The results also indicate that all the paths are statistically significant at 0.01 significance level.

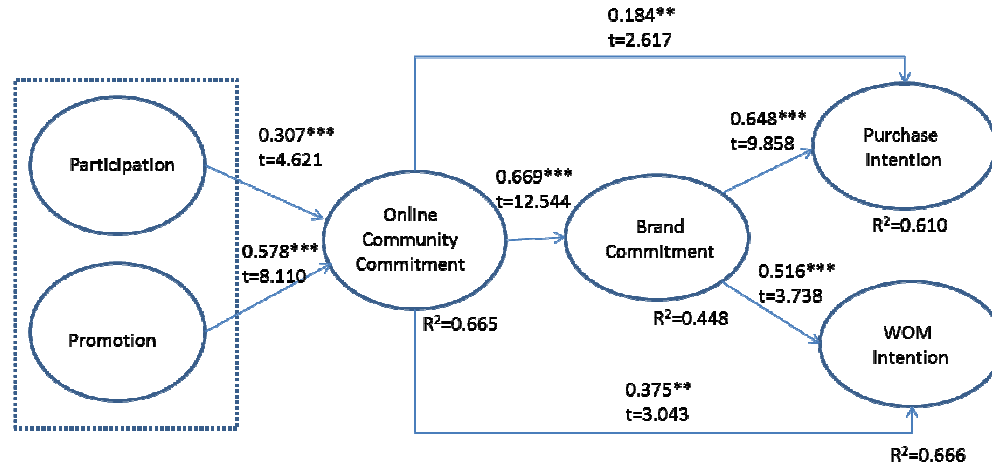


Figure 2: Structure Model

Both participation and promotion exhibit strong and significant impacts on online community commitment, with path coefficients of 0.307 and 0.578 respectively (at 0.001 significance level), supporting *H1* and *H2*. Online community commitment is an important variable influencing brand commitment with path coefficients of 0.669 (at 0.001 significance level). Meanwhile, online community commitment also has direct influences on both purchase intention and WOM intention with path coefficients of 0.184 and 0.375 respectively (at 0.01 significance level). Thus, *H3-H5* is also supported. Finally, brand commitment has a strong impact on both purchase intention and WOM intention, with path coefficients of 0.648 and 0.516 respectively (at 0.001 significance level), supporting *H6* and *H7*.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, we attempt to explore how consumer engagement behaviors in brand communities of social networking sites affect brand loyalty. Based on prior literature, we believe that consumer engagement behaviors, including active participation and promotion of the online brand community, influence consumers' brand commitment as well as their consumers' behavior of purchase and word of mouth. Our conceptualization has been corroborated by our empirical results.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This study contributes to existing studies on online brand community in three important ways. First, previous research on online brand community focuses mostly on the motives of consumer engagement behaviors, the results of this study provide important insights into the impact of consumer engagement behaviors in online brand communities on consumer behaviors (i.e., brand loyalty). Second, this study shows that social identity theory can be extended to explain the relationship building process in online brand communities. Third, this study is timely to enhance our understanding of the seemingly universal phenomenon of consumer engagement behaviors in online social networks, including online brand communities of social networking sites (Facebook Fan Page). Our findings show that if consumers are actively engaging in an online brand community, they are very likely to form sense of belonging to the community (online community commitment), and results in favorable attitude and behavior towards the brand. The findings of this study provide companies with a new way to think about the value of engaging consumers in their online brand communities and how they should invest their marketing resources.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite these contributions, we acknowledge the limitations of this study. First of all, the data was collected from a convenience sample (student groups) with high usage experience with Facebook. The level of consumer engagement may be significantly differed from other sample groups. Thus, generalization of the findings should be made with caution. Second, we have not considered the actual purchase and word of mouth behavior in this study. The power of brand commitment in predicting actual behavior is obviously an important area requiring more attention. A longitudinal study is highly recommended for future research on this topic. Third, this study was conducted in Hong Kong, which belongs to collectivistic culture. Therefore, culture may bias the development of online brand community in this study. This is because people from collectivistic culture tend to be affected by social influence more than people who belong to an individualistic culture as is more common in Western countries. Future cross-cultural studies should further examine these issues.

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Appendix A

Constructs	items	Source
Online Community Commitment (OCC)	OCC1. I feel a strong sense of belonging to this online brand community. OCC2. I enjoy being a member of this online brand community. OCC3. I am very committed to this online brand community. OCC4. I will recommend this online brand community to my relatives or friends.	Lin (2007)
Participation (PP)	PP1. I actively participate in the brand community's activities. PP2. I often provide useful information for the online brand community members. PP3. I often help the online brand community members who seek support or help from other members.	Koh and Kim (2004)
Promotion (PM)	PM1. I talk to other members or non-members about benefits of this online brand community. PM2. I often introduce my friends to this online brand community. PM3. If friends or relatives were to search for this kind of community, I would definitely recommend this one.	Koh and Kim (2004), Algesheimer et al. (2005)
Brand Commitment (BC)	BC1. I am psychologically attached to this brand. BC2. I am a loyal customer of the brand. BC3. I want this brand to be continuously successful.	Kim et al. (2008)
WOM Intention	WOM1. I would like to introduce this brand to other people. WOM2. I would like to say positive things about this brand to other people.	Kim et al. (2008), Srinivasan, et al. (2002).

(WOM)	WOM3. I would like to recommend this brand to anyone who seeks my advice.	
Purchase Intention(RI)	PI1. I intend to buy this brand in the near future. PI2. I would actively search for this brand's information in order to purchase it. PI3. I intend to keep purchasing this brand.	Wu and Sukoco (2010), Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001).

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