

Trust and Commitment Relationships in Virtual Brand Community

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Abstract

Due to the increasing level of influence of online communities in the digital marketing environment, it is highly important to understand how customer participation in virtual brand community relates to trust and commitment. Most studies in virtual brand community are devoted towards brand loyalty without measuring whether or not customers' attachment to the community mediates the interaction. Based on the trust-commitment theory, a research framework is proposed to examine these untested relationships between customer participation in virtual brand community, customer trust and commitment to the community, and trust and commitment to the brand. Potential contributions of the study are also discussed.

Keywords: *brand, brand community, trust, commitment*

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Virtual Brand Community

The advancement of the Internet provides new opportunities and challenges for marketing brands and products. The Internet is now commonly used for various purposes, including but not limited to conducting personal communication with other people (Goldsmith and Horowitz 2006) or getting information as the basis for making a purchase decision (Ratchford, Lee, and Taludkar 2003). Moreover, the Internet has provided new media for consumers to have social interactions with their relatives, friends, or other people who consume the same products as they do (Kozinets 2002). It is suggested that the social interactions occurring in the cyberspace drive the development of virtual brand community (Andersen 2005).

The concept of virtual community was introduced by Rheingold (1993) as a social aggregation of people carrying out public discussions long enough with sufficient human feeling to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace. People are involved in virtual communities to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual interactions, conduct business transactions, share knowledge, share emotional support, find suggestions for plans, gossip, feud, find friends and lose them, flirt, fall in love, or just have a lot of idle conversations (Rheingold 1991). Leimester, Sidiras, and Kcmar (2004) found that virtual community can be clustered into two types; namely commercial and non-commercial. Commercial community; also known as transaction community (Hagel and Armstrong 1997); is founded, managed, and controlled by a firm for commercial purposes. Meanwhile non-commercial community; or commonly known as consumer community or community of information neighborhood (Burnett 2000); is founded, managed, and controlled by consumers or a third party for personal purposes.

A virtual brand community consists of attributes that basically extend those of real communities suggested by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001). According to Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002), virtual communities are marked by several characteristics. First, virtual communities have shared interests. The shared interests may relate to a particular product (Saab car, or Harley Davidson, for instance), an affliction (such as children with cancer), or a demographic attribute (single working women living in metropolitan area). Second, as in real communities, most virtual communities create and use shared rituals, traditions, languages, social roles, and norms of interaction which represent vital social processes. These processes support the reproduction of the values and meaning of the community which are then transmitted within and beyond the community (Muniz and O'Guinn 2002). Third, virtual community members share the feelings of "we-ness" (Muniz and O'Guinn 2002) or consciousness of kin (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002). The feeling refers to an intrinsic connection toward other members and a collective sense of separation from non-members (Wellman and Gulia 1999). Fourth, active participation of the members creates the content of the virtual community, which plays an important role in shaping the community's identity and character, determines its influence on members, and establishes the social status of individual member in the community (Werry 1999). Finally, in virtual communities, communication content is more important than nonverbal expression and social characteristics since it has strategic role as the community's shaping force which allows individual members freedom to express themselves (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002, Spears and Lea 1994).

Literature Review

One of the most essential elements for the formation and sustainability of virtual community in the long term is member participation. Not only does it develop group cohesion (Casalo et al 2007), but it also increases the value of the community for members and supports the members' identification with the community (Algesheimer et al., 2005). Koh and Kim (2004) suggest that greater levels of participation allow members to obtain emotional support from other members and to disseminate ideas and knowledge rapidly. In the case of the Macintosh virtual community (Belk and Tumbat 2002) or Sun Microsystems' Java center (Williams and Cothrel 2000) for example, the existence and sustainability of the communities are highly dependent on the participation of their members in lurking, asking or answering questions, and posting or commenting notes. Bettencourt (1997) argues that participation can be considered as voluntary behavior. Since it is not a compulsory action which should be performed by members, frequency and extent of participation in a virtual community may be reduced or even terminated relatively effortlessly (Bagozzi and Dholakia 2002).

Member participation is defined as the degree to which a member is involved in the community (Dabholkar 1990). Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) suggest that the nature of member participation in a virtual community can be measured by first, the amount of time members participate in the community activities and second, the extent to which members actively interact with other members in the community. Differentiating these two dimensions is important since they reflect different extents of members' commitment to and their activities in the community. For example, community members may be online for hours just for lurking or observing other members' activities. But they may also be online for only half an hour to post valuable information. These two different types of participation contribute differently in adding the value of virtual community. For this study, member participation is defined as the degree to which a member is actively involved in the virtual brand community.

Participating more actively in virtual brand communities will enable consumers to be more acquainted with the brands. High familiarity with the brands will enable consumers to be capable of dealing with various problems associated with the usage of those brands (Casalo et al 2007). Consumers can also find support in using the brand's products (Flavian and Guinaliu 2005) as a consequence of the existence of moral responsibility among the community members in helping other members to use the product correctly (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). It is very common that members discuss how to use the products, to modify, maintain, and repair them in virtual communities and hence, the uncertainty of being satisfied in using the brand's products will be decreased. These members or consumers with adequate experience in the information search, decision making, and consumption process can be considered as experienced consumers (Braunsberger and Munch 1998). Members or consumers who have experience with a brand can produce an emotional bond with it which can yield greater trust in the brand (Ha and Perks 2005). More specifically, Shankar et al. (2000) and Kania (2001) propose that experience with the web; which provides online brand communities; affords consumers with enjoyable and meaningful experience with the brand which leads to brand trust. Online communities are also found to affect customer loyalty and purchase intention (Kim et al. 2004). Based on these literatures and supported by involvement-commitment theory (Beatty, Homer, and Kahle 1988; Crosby and Taylor 1983), it is proposed that participation in virtual brand community will affect customer trust in the brand and the community. It is also suggested that participation will have an impact on customer commitment to the brand and to the community.

Trust is defined as a belief held by consumers that a partner will perform actions that will result in positive outcomes for them as well as will not take unexpected actions that result in

negative outcomes (Anderson and Narus 1990). Morgan and Hunt (1994) propose that trust exists when one party has confidence in a partner's reliability and integrity. The study investigates two types of trust; namely community trust and brand trust. Delgado-Ballester, Munuera-Aleman, and Yague-Guillen (2003) define brand trust as consumers' confident expectations of the brand's reliability in situations entailing risk to them. This study follows how Ha and Perks (2005) describe brand trust, which is the willingness of consumers to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function. The formation and maintenance of brand trust in an online marketing environment is very critical, considering the extreme volatility markets with decreased product differentiation (Papadopoulou et al. 2001; Urban et al. 2000). Borrowing the definition of trust proposed by Delgado-Ballester (2001), this study defines community trust as a feeling of security held by members in their interaction with a community based on the perception that the community is reliable and responsible for the interests of consumers. In a virtual community, trust in the community can be developed by greater level of member participation in the virtual community (Casalo et al 2007). Members actively involved in the interactive activities held by the community will obtain insight into how to communicate effectively in the online society since they know the specific characteristics of the community; such as the language or ethics applied in it. The familiarity of shared rituals and traditions resulting from participation in the community will promote the members' trust in the community.

Many studies consider trust to be an important antecedent of long-term relationship commitment (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Doney and Cannon 1997). Commitment is defined as an enduring desire to sustain a valued relationship (Moorman, Zaltman, and Deshpande 1992) and a tendency to resist changes (Pritchard, Havitz, and Howard 1999). It plays a very strategic role in the formation of consumer loyalty and behavioral intention (Garbarino and Johnson 1999; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Pritchard, Havitz, and Howard 1999). This study examines two types of commitment, namely commitment to the brand and commitment to the community. Community commitment is defined as strong and positive feelings of attachment to a community (Beatty and Kahle 1988; Jang et al. 2008). Meanwhile, brand commitment is defined as strong and positive feelings of attachment to a brand (Beatty and Kahle 1988). Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006) suggest that brand-related behaviors are consequences of community-related behavior. Hence, in conjunction with the commitment-trust theory (Morgan and Hunt 1994), it is hypothesized that brand trust has a significant effect on brand commitment and so too does community trust on community commitment.

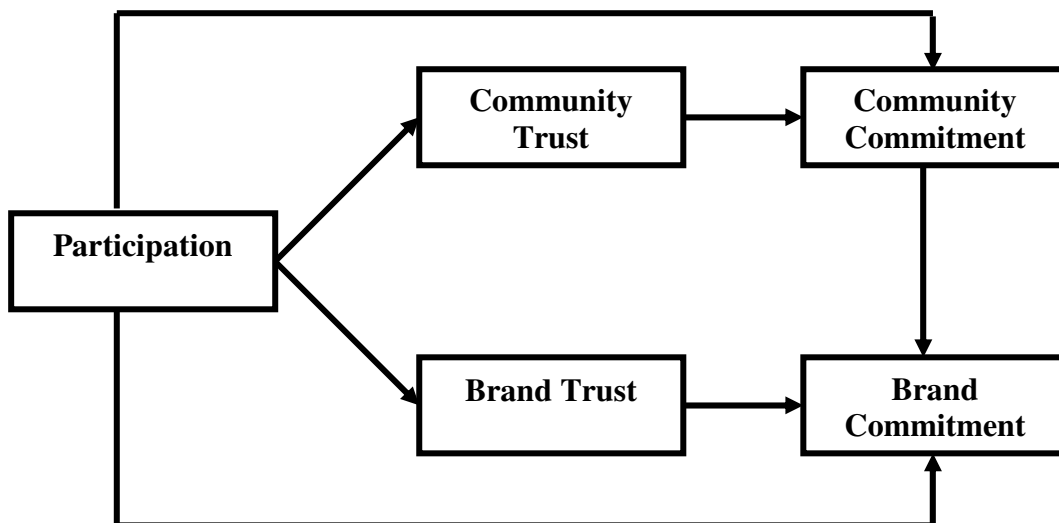
Research Gap

There have been numerous studies of trust and commitment relationships in the context of consumer-brand relationships (e.g. Chauduri and Holbrook 2001, Hess and Story 2005, Fournier and Yao 1997, Fournier 1998) and buyer-seller relationships (e.g. Doney and Cannon 1997, Wilson 1995, Cannon and Perreault 1998, Sirdeshmukh, Singh, and Sabol 2002), but little work combining trust (in the brand and in the community) and commitment (to the brand and to the community) with member participation in a virtual brand community. This study expects to fill in the research gap and to make a link between virtual brand community participation, community commitment, brand trust, and brand commitment.

Proposed Research Framework

The research proposes a framework as depicted in Figure 1 as an extension to the study of Casalo et al (2007).

Figure 1: Proposed Framework of Member Participation in Virtual Community



Specifically, it proposes the following research statements to be empirically examined:

1. Participation in virtual brand community will have a positive relationship on (a) customer trust in the community, (b) customer commitment to the community, (c) customer trust in the brand, and (d) customer commitment to the brand
2. Customer trust in the community will have a positive effect on customer commitment to the community
3. Customer trust in the brand will have a positive effect on customer commitment to the brand
4. Customer commitment to the community will have a positive effect on customer commitment to the brand

The framework also suggests these following mediations:

1. Customer trust in the community mediates the relationships between participation in virtual brand community and commitment to the community
2. Customer trust to the brand mediates the relationships between participation in virtual brand community and commitment to the brand
3. Customer commitment to the community mediates the relationship between participation in virtual brand community and commitment to the brand

Research Methods

Data will be collected from members of the Macintosh virtual communities through online survey. The questionnaire will be developed using established scales. The scale to measure customer participation in the community will be adapted from Bettencourt (1997). The measurement of brand trust and community trust will adapt scales from Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman (2001). The scale from Beatty and Kahle (1988) will be used to measure brand commitment, and the scale from Mowday et al. (1979) which was adopted by Good et al. (1988), Johnston et al. (1990), and Michaels et al. (1988) will be used for measuring community commitment.

Research Significance

The proposed study will make a number of contributions. Firstly, research to date has only examined the impact of participation in a virtual brand community on brand loyalty. Studies that explore the consequences of customer participation on community trust, community commitment, brand trust, and brand commitment in a single comprehensive concept are very limited. Therefore, further investigation is needed to extend the understanding of how the brand commitment development works in relation with participation in virtual brand community.

Another contribution is that the study presents a conceptual framework that extends Casalo et al.'s (2007) model. The direct influence of participation in a virtual community on community trust, community, commitment, brand trust, and brand commitment has been discussed in the model. In addition, the framework accounts for possible mediating relationships between these variables. Therefore, the study potentially contributes to the marketing and consumer behavior literatures as well as the managerial practices by increasing our understanding of the strategic impact of virtual brand community through a new framework that incorporates the mediating relationships of trust and commitment.

Findings of the study are likely to be strategically beneficial for managerial perspectives. The study might encourage marketers to consider observing virtual brand community to obtain consumer insights. Firms' marketing communication budget might consider shifting their marketing communication budget from focusing on traditional advertising campaign to paying attention more to what people post on virtual community; or even to developing online community on their own official websites.

Research Limitations and Future Directions

The research is bound by a number of limitations. First of all, motivation to participate in the virtual brand community may vary among members and what motivates them may affect the extent of commitment to the brand and to the community (Dholakia et al. 2004). This research ignores the influences of motivation in member participation behavior which should be investigated in the future study. Furthermore, there are two types of participation behavior in virtual brand community; which are active and passive participation (Shang et al. 2006). Since this study observes only active participation, future study may examine whether the different types of participation have different effect on brand trust and commitment.

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