

How Brand Communities Operate: An Attempt to Build an Integrated Framework*

Shen Jie

Institute of Psychology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China
Graduate University Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China
shenjie930@163.com

Wang Yong

Institute of Psychology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China
wangy@psych.ac.cn

Abstract

A brand community is a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand. By employing mainly social behavior theories (e.g., Social Identity Theory), existing studies have tried to identify how a brand community forms, develops, and functions. Findings indicate that community participation can result in brand identity and, consequently, can maintain and improve brand loyalty; therefore, it can be regarded as an effective customer loyalty maintenance device. We will attempt to build an integrated framework, based on existing research and relevant theories, to describe and depict how a brand community works. We also argue that more relevant variables such as self-esteem, self-awareness, and social identity threat, should be incorporated into research on brand communities. Finally, cultural differences must be taken into account in indigenous research.

Keywords: brand community; social identity; social capital; loyalty

1. Theoretical background

1.1. Community

Owing to its various definitions, we consider community to be an organization consisting of individuals or sub-groups with aggregating intention and mutual responsibility [1][2]. To Gusfield,

community can be considered as both a traditional territorial community (e.g., a neighborhood, town, or region) and a relational community concerned with human relationships (e.g., religious groups, fan clubs) [3]. However, there is no essential difference between the two categories concerning the emotion and affection of their members to community [4].

Anderson proposed the concept of imagined communities to describe the fact that members understand that there are other members of the community, just like them, in other far-away places [5]. After virtual communities emerged [6], members in them tended to share their experiences and solve problems together using the Internet [7]. Different from a brand community, some researchers identified the peer-to-peer problem solving community (P3 community) to define communities that involve information about different brands rather than a particular one [8].

1.2. Brand community

Muniz et al. define a brand community as a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand [4]. They argue that brand communities exhibit three core components: (1) shared consciousness, (2) rituals and traditions, and (3) a sense of moral responsibility. Shared consciousness, or consciousness of kind, refers to the intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another, and the collective sense of difference from others not in the community. Rituals and traditions are used to

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Correspondence should be E-mail to Wang Yong: wangy@psych.ac.cn

perpetuate the history and culture of the community, and a sense of moral responsibility leads to community-oriented actions, such as sharing information about the products offered by the brand and encouraging fellow members to remain loyal to the brand and community.

2. Previous studies

Many product categories have been involved in brand community research, including vehicles [4][9][10][11], motorcycles [12][13], personal computers [14][15], software and hardware [16][17], watches [18], theme parks [19], and sports groups [14].

Muniz et al. argue that a brand community can be both a traditional territorial community and a relational community [4]. Consumers may join a community due to brand preference, and then participate in online communication or brand-relevant activities. Some researchers believe that brand relationship will affect an individual's brand loyalty and willingness to participate in a community [9][20], and believe that a brand community can increase consumer satisfaction [21]. However, Algesheimer cautions that normative community pressures in a brand community could generate reactance and endanger the loyalty [9].

Shared consciousness can result in oppositional brand loyalty [4]. Luedicke and Schembri have revealed a "dark side" of brand communities: users of certain brands (e.g., Hummer and Harley-Davidson) are inclined to consider and declare that the competing brand and its users are inferior [10][13]. However, this is not the case for members with overlapping identities—that is, those who simultaneously possess memberships in competing communities. More specifically, active participation of these members may somehow lead to competing brand purchases [17].

3. Theoretical explanations

3.1. How brand community forms: Social identity

Social Identity Theory is employed to justify ethnocentrism in intergroup behavior, including in-group favoritism and out-group derogation [22]. Tajfel defines social identity as the individual's self-awareness that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of the group membership [23]. As for brand communities, there are three components of social identity (cognitive, evaluative, and emotional) [24] that significantly bring about brand identity and purchase behavior [12]. Therefore, we can cautiously say that a

brand community is in part based on social identity [15].

Social identity consists of three processes: social categorization, comparison, and positive distinctiveness. Cayla and Eckhardt argue that consumers from different countries build some kind of similar bond—that is, shared consciousness—in imagined communities through social categorization [25]. More specifically, consumers probably would identify with a "psychological brand community" without certain social interaction [19], which indicates the rationality for community construction.

Accordingly, people are apt to apply the positive distinctiveness principle to exaggerate intergroup differences in special dimensions for acquiring positive self-evaluation and promoting self-esteem. Community members tend to consider the competing brand and its users to be low-grade [17]; those with a higher level of brand identity are likely to verbally attack the competing brand and its users, or experience schadenfreude when the competitor suffers [14]. However, if an individual fails to benefit from comparison with the out-group, he or she may face a threat to social identity [26]. Consumers with low brand identity or loyalty are inclined to use social mobility strategy and turn to a competing brand. Correspondingly, brand advocates may choose ways of social creativity to bring in new comparing dimensions (e.g., product appearance) to keep on top, or even use social competition strategy and cause conflicts [17]. Generally speaking, social identity is conducive to enhancing group cohesion and perpetuating the community.

3.2. Why consumers participate

3.2.1. Uncertainty Reduction Theory. A brand community is based on social identity, thus, repeated participation of the admirers of a brand is the key to success. Hogg and Terry argue that the dominant motivation of social identity is to reduce perceived uncertainty [27]. Morgan and Hunt define uncertainty as an individual's confidence when he or she predicts and solves problems with his or her own ability [28]. In the view of the Uncertainty Reduction Theory, difficulties in processing uncertainty result in the search for extra information [29].

Mohr and Spekman proposed four dimensions of communication quality: relevance, frequency, duration, and timeliness [30]. In a brand community, activeness and duration of membership both have a positive correlation with brand identity and loyalty [21]. Furthermore, relevance and timeliness are related to moral responsibility, while offering help to other members in trouble may be rituals and traditions of

mature communities. Recently, Adjei, Noble, and Noble proposed that effective communication reduces a consumer's perceived uncertainty, and contributes to positive decision-making [31]. Subjective uncertainty reduction ought to be a prominent motivation of community participation.

3.2.2. Theory of Planned Behavior. Some researchers use the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) to probe consumers' motivation. TPB is based on the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) [32], and assumes that behavior intention, which is codetermined by attitude, subject norm, and perceived behavioral control, influences an individual's behavior in company with perceived behavioral control [33][34].

Somehow as a common sense, attitude has something to do with behavior. Nonetheless, the effect of subject norm depends on how serious the individual perceives the social pressure to be. To be more precise, members are likely to become increasingly active in order to satisfy group expectations [12]. However, an individual may become upset or disturbed and even exit the community if he or she perceives the normative community pressure to be too serious [9]. Perugini and Bagozzi proposed the Model of Goal-directed Behavior (MGB) to supplement TPB [35]. According to MGB, members having transcendent customer experiences will experience positive anticipated emotions regarding community activities, which encourages participation [20].

3.3. What brand community outputs: Social capital

Some researchers assume that it is the continual participation of consumers that creates values—specifically, social capital—for a brand community [36]. Given the diversity of its definitions, social capital can be defined as an aggregate property that exists in an interpersonal relationship and social structure, and is owned by internal individuals [37][38][39]. Coleman proposed its five forms: (1) obligation and expectation, (2) information network, (3) norms and effective punishment, (4) authority relation, and (5) social organization [38].

Mathwick et al. emphasize that to rookies, a brand community means mainly information value (information network), but it means social support (social organization) to veterans [8]. Mature communities with sufficient regular members who possess more social capital than visitors are more attractive to outsiders because of their capacity for offering communal resources. And owing to inalienability of social capital, the “richer” members

are, the less likely they are to become “betrayers.” Therefore, to some degree, social capital reinforces brand identity and shared consciousness.

“Obligation and expectation” substantially include reciprocity and volunteerism [40], which can generate the trust to brand communities. Putnam emphasizes that trust, as a critical element of social capital, can make communication more effective [39] and also contributes to positive decision-making [31]. Trust can also improve community participation and social identity [21], and is hopefully able to generate moral responsibility among community members. To sum up, we can deduce that to individuals, social capital can be deemed as pay and gain for participation, but it means the output of loyalty maintenance device to brand communities.

3.4. Loyalty maintenance device: Social practice

As a loyalty maintenance device, a brand community's main function is not to acquire new consumers, but to promote the loyalty of existing users. Given that there are many different theories focusing on different aspects of this device, we make an attempt here to integrate the relevant theories in the framework of the Social Practice Theory.

Bourdieu proposed three elements of Social Practice Theory: field, habitus, and capital [41]. A field is a setting in which agents and their social positions are located, and in which people maneuver and struggle in pursuit of desirable resources. When regarding brand community as a field, social identity is its cornerstone. Secondly, habitus can be understood as a structure of the mind characterized by a set of acquired schemata, sensibilities, dispositions and taste. With communication and participation, a member's perceived value turns gradually from extra information to social support [8]. With a cultured habitus, consumers get involved in this field. Finally, capital is what people in a field struggle for, which includes economic, cultural, and social capital. Economic capital primarily works for brands in the way of repeat purchases. Cultural capital may exist in the shape of community culture or even brand culture co-created by consumers and companies. As an aggregate property, social capital accumulates in a brand community and provides public resources to internal members.

In summary, a social community is an automatic loyalty maintenance device, with Social Practice Theory as its “shell,” social identity as its “engine” to form the field, and habitus of uncertainty reduction and planned behavior as its “gear” and “lever,” which effectively makes its “outputs” (capital—mainly, but

not limited to, social capital) from particular “inputs” (consumer participation).

4. Discussion and future research

Researchers employ various kinds of social behavior theories (e.g., Social Identity Theory) to identify and interpret brand community. We attempt to build an integrated framework through borrowing ideas and learning from classical theories and existing studies. Correspondingly, the disadvantages are easy to identify: there is a lack of in-depth discussion about referring theory, and the integrated framework needs to be verified by empirical research.

In the meantime, to probe and clarify the mechanisms of how a brand community forms, develops, and functions, we suggest that future study should carefully consider the following aspects:

(1) Introduce variables such as self-esteem and self-awareness: Since the nature of a brand community is social identity, its fundamental motivations including self-evaluation and self-esteem cannot be ignored. Kim and Drolet recently asserted that self-awareness and the attention an individual pays to social status may affect his or her decision-making [42].

(2) Concentrate on social identity threats: All brands can be victims of negative events. By focusing on the key point that differentiates loyal and swaying consumers at the crucial time, we are able to put forward feasible implications about brand community construction and management.

(3) Amend and perfect sampling techniques: Most existing research has started with, but are limited to, the very same brand community and ignore the crowds of loyal consumers still staying outside for unknown reasons. This kind of deviation may contaminate past research, and even jeopardize existing conclusions.

(4) Take cultural differences into consideration: The conception of a brand community, as well as relevant social behavior theories, derives from the west. Given the widely acknowledged discrepancy between individualism and collectivism, a cross-culture study may reveal a more comprehensive picture.

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