



Brand community participation in Taiwan: Examining the roles of individual-, group-, and relationship-level antecedents[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study extends brand community research by proposing and testing a model of user participation in brand communities. The authors conceptualize three levels of antecedents of brand community participation (individual, relationship, and group) based on qualitative results and an extensive literature review. The empirical analysis derives from data pertaining to car brand communities in Taiwan and supports most of the hypotheses. However, some differences emerge between Taiwanese and Western car brand users with regard to relationship-level factors. In addition, perceived critical mass accounts for some social mechanisms that underlie members' decisions to participate in the brand community. Finally, a quantile regression analysis extends prior literature by showing that different rules of exchange motivate brand users, depending on their participation levels. The paper discusses the managerial implications of these findings as well as several important research issues and avenues.

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1. Introduction

Even in unresponsive marketing environments, [Muñiz and O'Guinn \(2001, p. 412\)](#) define a brand community as "a specialized, nongeographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among users of a brand" which offers a fresh, effective, and vital means to forge deep, enduring, affective bonds between consumers and brands ([Thompson and Sinha, 2008](#)). This consumer-centric, co-creative, and relational approach increasingly is heralded as a pillar of brand differentiation and sustainable competitive advantage ([Thompson et al., 2006](#)). Marketing scholars dedicate considerable effort to understanding the process of brand community cultivation (e.g., [Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006](#); [McAlexander et al., 2002](#); [Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001](#)) with the growing recognition that a brand community creates value in the exchange process.

A key feature of this process is brand community participation, defined as the extent to which a member actively engages in community activities and interacts with other brand community members. Community participation motivates members to integrate into the community by encouraging them to participate in shared rituals and

traditions, thereby perpetuating the community's history, culture, and consciousness. Participation ensures a community's long-term growth by attracting new members and strengthening the foundation of older members. Brand managers also can benefit from community participation that offers valuable insights into potential product design improvements and new product development opportunities ([Algesheimer et al., 2005](#)).

Previous research on brand communities suggests various outcomes of brand community cultivation. For example, [McAlexander et al. \(2002\)](#) posit that community participation encourages multifaceted relationships (i.e., between owners and the community, as well as between customers and the brand) that exert direct, positive, and long-term influences on brand loyalty. [Thompson and Sinha \(2008\)](#) also find that higher levels of participation increase consumers' likelihood of adopting a new product from the preferred brand while decreasing their likelihood of adopting new products offered by competitive brands. However, [Muñiz and O'Guinn \(2001, p. 427\)](#) caution managers that brand communities could "pose enormous rumor control problems," and [Algesheimer et al. \(2005\)](#) find that normative pressure results in reactance, which can have negative effects on consumers' behavioral intentions.

Such studies tend to focus on the outcome variables of community participation and contrastingly this paper attempts to understand the factors that influence users to engage in brand communities. Community participation involves complex, interpersonal exchange processes, so this study focuses on individual- and relationship-level determinants, as well as traditional group-level factors. [Wasko and Faraj \(2005\)](#) investigate individual, relational, and group-level factors influencing voluntary knowledge contributions but cannot confirm whether

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empirical findings in computer-mediated knowledge exchange networks extend to offline brand communities in a study of contribution behavior in electronic networks of practice. Therefore, this study aims to enhance understanding of the antecedents of brand community participation and extend prior research by simultaneously investigating three levels of participation factors.

Moreover, no prior research examines member brand community participation outside Western societies, though factors of group participation that are effective in one national culture may lead to different outcomes or even be inappropriate in another. For example, considerable evidence suggests that Asian cultures are more group oriented than the United States (Hofstede, 1980; Schwartz and Bardi, 2001). Several relationship management studies (e.g., Atuahene-Gima and Li, 2002; Redding, 1993) suggest that, compared with Western societies, Chinese societies exhibit a lack of trust of people outside the family. Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1998) also stress the need to validate models developed in one country (often the United States) in other countries.

As Atuahene-Gima and Li (2002) observe, many Western businesses fail in Chinese societies because their managers do not understand individualized behavior and instead assume everyone responds similarly to marketing programs. Accordingly, the present study offers a cross-validation of the link between multidimensional drivers and brand community participation in an Asian-Pacific national culture, Taiwan.

2. Conceptual framework and hypothesis development

The proposed conceptual framework (Fig. 1) addresses several research gaps. This section offers a brief review of literature pertaining to community participation, as well as the theoretical rationale for the causal relationships in the proposed model.

2.1. Brand community participation

In this study, the definition of brand community participation and its components derives from a literature review and in-depth interviews with community members. The motivation for developing the qualitative research method stems from the urgent need for a better understanding of brand community participation and specific measurement ideas. The community participation construct therefore includes two components: member–member interaction and member–activity involvement.

First, member–member interactions, which are critical to community development (e.g., Algesheimer et al., 2005; Wasko and Faraj, 2005; Wasko et al., 2004), refer to the extent to which community members interact with one another through frequent interpersonal contacts, bidirectional communication, and mutual help. Such interaction is integral to brand community participation, because interpersonal communication provides opportunities for community development through the creation of cultural capital and the diffusion of rituals and traditions (McAlexander et al., 2002; Wasko et al., 2004). Consumers become more comfortable and secure in the knowledge that many like-minded others are “out there” through interactions.

Second, member–activity involvement refers to the extent to which members actively participate in a brand community's activities, which should influence the evolution of the social system—“an interacting collectivity that has ongoing patterns of scripts, rules, norms, values, and models” (Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002, p. 416). Preliminary qualitative research indicates that by participating in a challenging off-road adventure—a ritual, annual community activity—both veteran and novice members of a driving community attain greater affinity with one another, as well as a collective sense of difference from others not in the community. Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) also find that members reconsider the brand, the community, and their role in the community as a result of their collective memories (i.e., accumulated member–

activity engagements). Concentrated activities can encourage integration and provide further growth opportunities for the community even participating in geotemporally.

2.2. Individual-level antecedents of community participation

2.2.1. Extraversion

Prior research consistently links extraversion to both emotional experiences and cognitive performance (Tamir et al., 2002). Extraverts are gregarious, assertive, emotionally positive, active, and sociable, whereas introverts tend to be aloof, timid, and socially withdrawn (Watson et al., 2000) according to the five-factor personality model. Lucas et al. (2000) suggest that extraversion entails a longing for intimacy and close interpersonal relationships, excitement seeking, and a tendency to share information or ideas freely with others. Tamir et al. (2002) posit that extraverted people tend to develop friendships more easily and thus create a larger social network and obtain more social support than do people who are shy and retiring. Highly extraverted consumers usually experience positive emotions (Watson et al., 2000) and display these emotions during community activities, from which they derive greater satisfaction because of their cross-member relationships.

H1. Extraversion relates positively to (a) member interaction and (b) activity involvement.

2.2.2. Need for affiliation

Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that the need for affiliation is a personality attribute that corresponds to people's desire for social contact and their tendency to receive social rewards from harmonious relationships. Hill (1987) suggests four social rewards are particularly relevant to the desire for social contact: (1) positive stimulation, because affiliation provides enjoyable affective and cognitive stimulants; (2) attention, or the potential to enhance feelings of self-worth and importance through praise and greater attention to oneself; (3) social comparison, which involves the capacity to reduce ambiguity by acquiring self-relevant information; and (4) emotional support or sympathy. In turn, this study posits that the need for affiliation relates to community participation; members with a high affiliation motive want to belong, and community participation provides an opportunity to express and satisfy this desire.

H2. The need for affiliation relates positively to (a) member interaction and (b) activity involvement.

2.3. Group-level antecedents of brand community participation

2.3.1. Identification

Identification refers to a person's self-conception, according to the defining features of a self-inclusive social category (e.g., brand community) that renders the self stereotypically “interchangeable” with other group members and distinct from outsiders (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003). This identification enables an individual member to participate actively in the brand community to maintain a positive, self-defining relationship with other community members. Furthermore, self-esteem increases to the extent that a person's ego-ideal overlaps with that of others in the community, and acting in a way similar to how another acts or wants the person to act reinforces that person's self-esteem (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002). Tajfel (1981) argues that as social identification increases, people feel more connected to and interdependent with other members, feel good about the group, and experience strong attachments. This connection becomes more affectively toned—a “hot” cognitive reaction rather than “cold” recognition of membership—when members incorporate the group into their social identity, “together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). McAlexander et al.

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