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Relationships among community interaction characteristics, perceived benefits, community commitment, and oppositional brand loyalty in online brand communities

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ABSTRACT

To stand up for the brands they support, members of brand communities develop “oppositional brand loyalty” towards other rival brands. This study identifies how the interaction characteristics of brand community affect the perceived benefits of community members, and whether the perceived benefits cause members to develop community commitment, as well as the relationship between community commitment and oppositional brand loyalty. This study examined members of online automobile communities in Taiwan, and obtained a total of 283 valid samples. The analytical results reveal that interaction characteristics of brand community make members perceive many benefits, with “brand community engagement” being the most noticeable. Furthermore, hedonic, social, and learning benefits are the main factors to form community commitments. When members have community commitments, they will form oppositional brand loyalty to other rival brands. Based on the analytical results, this study provides suggestions to enterprises regarding online brand community operations.

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1. Introduction

Enhancing customer loyalty by relational marketing or building customer relationships is an important issue for both researchers and practitioners (Berry, 1995; Zinkhan, 2002). A brand community is a community formed by a group of consumers with shared interests in a brand. The underlying mechanism for building a brand community can be illustrated through the “community triangle” which links a brand with its customers, customers with other customers, and customers with non-customers (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). A brand community can influence member perceptions, behavior and even loyalty. For businesses, brand communities play an important role in developing customer brand loyalty via relational marketing (Andersen, 2005). Brand communities also provide an effective channel for promoting a brand (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koening, 2002), giving customers deep impressions of brand stories or culture, and collecting important information such as customer opinions about the products or services of the brand (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001).

The prevalence of the Internet is making people increasingly reliant on the Internet for communication. Due to the characteristics of the Internet, such as no time and geographical constraints, high information transparency, and multi-party communication, online brand communities follow a different pattern to real world ones (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008). Members of online brand communities can easily share consumption experiences and interact with each other, and consequently can influence the brand choices and loyalty of other community members (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu, 2010; Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013). Online brand communities also allow access by non-members. Even without interaction with existing members, information shared within the community may influence non-members to have the same brand consciousness as community members, further strengthening their brand preference and intention to participate in brand activities (Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008). That is, the Internet has facilitated the development of brand communities and amplified their influence. Meanwhile, how to build online brand communities and use them to collect and influence member ideas has become important to business marketers.

To consolidate the market status of their preferred brand, members of a brand community may express negative views or even exhibit adversarial behavior towards rival brands (Muniz & Hamer, 2001; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Thompson & Sinha, 2008). Such sentiment is known as oppositional brand loyalty. The behavior of consumers with oppositional brand loyalty is confined to their preferred brand. For instance, they tend to search for their favored brand products and avoid purchasing rival brands. Moreover, such consumers attempt to defend their brand choice by expressing hostility towards rival brands or consolidating their relationship with other community members. Oppositional brand

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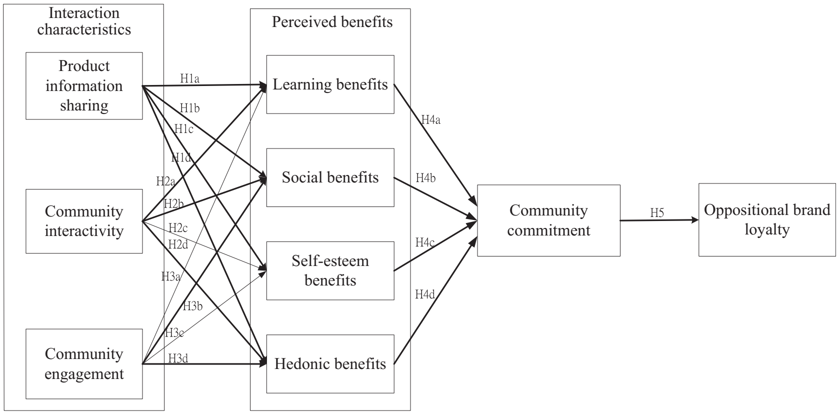

Fig. 1. Research model. $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$.

loyalty can easily be observed among brand communities such as in automobile, computer (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), and open source software (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006b) brand communities. For example, many drivers of the Saab brand community share an opposition to Volvo (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). For businesses, oppositional brand loyalty generated voluntarily by consumers can not only strengthen consumer brand preferences but also weaken rival brands. However, previous studies of brand communities have paid little attention to oppositional brand loyalty. Most such studies have only observed or discussed the phenomena of oppositional brand loyalty in a single community without empirical investigation. Consequently, more in-depth investigation of oppositional brand loyalty in brand communities is necessary.

Nowadays, more and more businesses are committed to building brand communities to achieve marketing goals. Many businesses have failed mainly because they do not understand or are unable to satisfy member individual and social needs (Fournier & Lee, 2009). Members are crucial to any brand community. Member recognition of and loyalty to a community depends largely on whether that community can satisfy their needs or not (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; Farquhar & Rowley, 2006). Previous studies on brand communities mainly focused on the benefits of brand communities from the business perspective, interactions between community members, or the relationship between shared consciousness and community commitment (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Thompson & Sinha, 2008). The previous literatures have neglected issues such as "What benefits can members gain from interactions with each other in a brand community to make community commitment?". Besides, previous studies have empirically demonstrated that community commitment affects member behavioral intentions and even brand loyalty. But to the best of our knowledge, no empirical study has specifically addressed how member community commitment to affect their oppositional brand loyalty. This study thus investigates, from the viewpoint of brand community members, the effects of interaction characteristics of online brand communities on the perceived benefits of those communities, the effects of perceived benefits on member community commitment, and the effects of community commitment on oppositional brand loyalty. By exploring the relationship among these constructs, this study provides businesses with practical suggestions on building and managing online brand communities.

The reminder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews relevant literature on brand community, community interaction characteristics, perceived benefits, community commitment, and oppositional brand community, and then develops research hypotheses. Next, Section 3 describes the research methodology. Additionally, Section 4 summarizes the analytical results based on empirical study using data collected from Taiwan online automobile communities. Discussion and conclusions are finally drawn in Sections 5 and 6.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

In this study, we apply social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961) to existing knowledge on relational marketing to exam the formation process of oppositional brand loyalty in online brand communities. The proposed conceptual framework (Fig. 1) depicts the effects of interaction characteristics of online brand communities on the perceived benefits of those communities, the effects of perceived benefits on member community commitment, and the effects of community commitment on oppositional brand loyalty. This section offers brief review of literature pertaining to brand community, as well as the theoretical rationale for the causal relationships in the proposed model.

2.1. Brand community

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 412) defined a brand community as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand." A brand community has three main components, including consciousness of kind, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Consciousness of kind refers here to the intrinsic connections among members. Members with such consciousness have a shared knowing of belonging and feel different from or even reject those who are not part of the community. Shared rituals and traditions refer to brand culture, history and consciousness. Sharing and duplicating brand stories allows members to reshape the community culture, strengthen its value, and increase member shared consciousness. Finally, moral responsibility refers to the obligation of members to the community as a whole, as well as to other individual members. This shared sense of moral responsibility drives members to react consistently to problems encountered by other members or in daily activities through discussing problems, sharing experiences, offering advice, and providing mutual assistance.

Numerous studies have pointed out that interaction can help bring members of a brand community closer together. When close relationships exist among brand community members, members do not choose products based merely on product functions or personal perceptions of the brand. The influence of the brand community increases member affective connection to the brand and becomes crucial in their brand choice. Brand communities thus are highly important in marketing (Carlson et al., 2008; Jang, Olfman,

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