



How do motivations for commitment in online brand communities evolve? The distinction between knowledge- and entertainment-seeking motivations



Ting-hsiang Tseng^a, Hazel H. Huang^{b,*}, Adilina Setiawan^b

^a Department of International Business, Feng Chia University, Taiwan

^b Durham University Business School, University of Durham, DH1 3LB, UK

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ABSTRACT

The current study used the concept of motivational hierarchy to investigate how commitment is developed in online brand communities. By examining the online brand communities of two functional (*Canon* and *Nikon*) and two symbolic brands (*Coca-Cola* and *Starbucks*), the study focused on two pragmatic motives, knowledge- and entertainment-seeking motives, that served as the members' initial drives to participate in online brand communities. The findings suggested that different initial motives followed different hierarchical routes to form commitment. Specifically, members with knowledge-seeking motives to participate in online brand communities became committed via two routes: with or without symbolic motives. On the other hand, entertainment-seeking members became committed only via the route through symbolic motives. Pragmatic and symbolic motives were connected by satisfaction, which could be seen as a proxy whether or not the pragmatic and symbolic motives were fulfilled.

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1. Introduction

Online brand communities are brand communities that members can interact with other members or the brands through the Internet without temporal and spatial barriers. They are usually operated through two channels: (1) private channel, a custom-built community owned and managed by the brand companies (e.g., Apple's Apple Support Communities) and (2) public channel, which operates open communities on external existing platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter. Through these channels, companies are able to directly communicate with their consumers and therefore may establish a long-term relationship with them at a low cost (Hur, Ahn, & Kim, 2011). At the core of the relationship established via online brand communities is commitment (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013).

Commitment in online brand communities is critical to the success of online brand communities, as it can be translated into commitment to brands (Brodie et al., 2013) and brand loyalty

(Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013). According to relationship marketing, commitment, or engagement, to brands happens when consumers believe that maintaining an ongoing relationship with the brands provides greater functional and emotional benefits than ending it (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Borrowing the idea from relationship marketing, Madupu and Cooley (2010) extended the ongoing relationship with the brands to include with other members in the communities.

In order to understand how brand community members become committed in community activities, motivation, as the key driver to human behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2000), has been extensively discussed in this context (Brodie et al., 2013; Dholakia & Bagozzi, 2004; Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2006; Luarn, Yang, & Chiu, 2015; Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schröder, 2008; Tsai, Huang, & Chiu, 2012; to name a few). But most studies seem to have simplified the motivational process. More specifically, they have treated motivation as either a unidimensional concept, such as "motivation to engage in C2C exchanges" as in Gruen et al. (2006) study, or an unranked concept, putting different types of motivations at the same level, as in Luarn et al. (2015) research on personal, social, perceptual, and consumption-based motivations. These treatments of motivations were conceptualized, despite the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: tsength@mail.fcu.edu.tw (T.-h. Tseng), hazel.huang@durham.ac.uk (H.H. Huang), dily.setiawan@gmail.com (A. Setiawan).

fact that a hierarchical structure of the motivational process has been the dominant structure in the psychology literature (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). As there is scant discussion in its application in the online brand community context, this paper is to examine commitment in online brand communities by using the motivation hierarchy.

The reasons for using the motivational hierarchy in studying commitment in online brand communities are twofold. First, using a hierarchical process to examine motivations enables us to properly see how community members' motivations evolve as their motivations are mutable in different stages according to their micro-level dynamics (David & Shapiro, 2008). Members are motivated to join or participate in brand communities for various reasons, including information, entertainment, remuneration, personal identity, integration, social interaction, and empowerment (Muntinga, Moorman, & Smit, 2011). These motivations can be broadly categorized into pragmatic (functional-related) and symbolic (social-related) motives (Dholakia & Bagozzi, 2004; Luarn et al., 2015; Stragier, Abeele, Mechant, & Marez, 2016). The pragmatic motives are related to solving immediate issues (either search for knowledge or for fun), and the symbolic motives are related to self-identity and social related drivers. However, these motives have been seen as at the same level (Brodie et al., 2013; Luarn et al., 2015; Tsai et al., 2012), despite that some earlier studies have suggested that community members tend to move from asocial to social activities (Kozinets, 1999; Walther, 1995). In addition, there has been some disagreement as to how different motives, satisfaction, and commitment in a community are related: while some studies argue that the relationship between motives and commitment can be both direct and indirect (Kim & Drumwright, 2016; Stragier et al., 2016), others believe that the relationship is only an indirect one via satisfaction (Jin, Lee, & Cheung, 2010; Wang & Fesenmainer, 2004). Therefore, there is a need to synthesize and clarify the relationship between different motives, satisfaction, and commitment in online brand communities.

Second, using a hierarchical process enables us to unravel the possible evolutionary routes to commitment by distinct motivations. In particular, we examine two different, but popular, pragmatic motives, namely knowledge-seeking and entertainment-seeking motives. Many members' initial participation involves only browsing information. This kind of browsing is also termed as "lurking," suggesting a passive participation via unobtrusive reading without writing. However, browsing information can result from our need for knowledge (e.g., how do I use a certain tool?) or from our need for entertainment (e.g., to search for fun, fantasy, and relaxing). Knowledge-seeking motive has a functional connotation that answers immediate questions or solves immediate problems, whereas entertainment-seeking motive has an emotional connotation that helps one to pass the time relaxing and enjoyably. Different connotations suggest the motives are fulfilled in a different way. Therefore, we expect that different pragmatic motives develop different routes to forming their commitment to the online brand communities.

In sum, we propose that community members start from passive participation and then move on to active participation in a progressive manner because of the evolutionary nature in the pragmatic motives and symbolic motives, but that different pragmatic motives (knowledge- or entertainment-seeking) trigger different hierarchies leading to commitment. The current study is to examine the evolutionary process of motivations that develop commitment in an online brand community and unravel the intertwined relationships between motivations, satisfaction, and commitment.

2. The hierarchical view of motivations

The dominant structure in motivational research is hierarchical (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). However, when the motivations are brought into an online brand community context, the hierarchical structure disappears. Various studies have examined consumers' motivations in participating in brand communities, but their discussion is limited to the type of motivation without considering the hierarchy possibility (Dholakia & Bagozzi, 2004; Luarn et al., 2015; Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schröder, 2008; Tsai et al., 2012). This disappearance is understandable because unlike other consumption activities (e.g., weight control) or life projects (e.g., self-achievement), there is only a vague, if any, superordinary goal to motivate consumers to join online brand communities. Superordinary goal is a concept from the top-down process of motivation (Austin & Vancouver, 1996), which is usually applied in the psychology literature (Cropanzano, James, & Citera, 1992) and refers to an individual's ultimate goal, such as self-esteem or self-confidence (Leary, 2007). For example, in order to boost self-confidence, our focal goal can be to lose weight. In order to achieve the focal goal, specific subordinate goals, including dieting and exercising, are determined and executed through a range of consumption activities. Once the focal goal (losing weight) is achieved, we are closer to our superordinate goals. In such cases as these, they follow the top-down structure, which requires that a superordinary goal be identified first and other focal or subordinate goals be determined in order to achieve the superordinary goal.

However, online brand communities lack the clear setting of a superordinary goal. This is because the initial reasons for people to join an online brand community are usually pragmatic (e.g., seeking information or entertainment) and seldom relevant to self-identity. As a result, the bottom-up motivational process is more suitable to understand motivations in this context. A bottom-up process suggests that the goals exist in an accumulated sense and no superordinary goal is clearly identified (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). Identifying superordinary goals is also unnecessary because prospect participants in online brand communities are usually occupied with the immediate situation that calls for their joining the communities. In other words, the motivations appear progressively as their experience with the community evolves (David & Shapiro, 2008), and the next level motivation will not take effect until the current level of motivation is fulfilled.

The initial motivation is driven by self-interest (Dholakia & Bagozzi, 2004; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). The self-interest motivation manifests in its pragmatic goals (such as information seeking) or results from a situational happenstance (such as entering a chat room to pass the time and have some fun). In these cases, people do not engage themselves further unless they perceive some value through their observation or participation. This value, in turn, drives their motivation to move up the hierarchy from pragmatic motives to symbolic ones and together with their satisfaction with the community, leads to commitment.

Our proposal of the two hierarchical motives, pragmatic and symbolic, leading to commitment is in line with the two components identified in commitment, namely, rational and emotional (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999). For example, marriage couples are committed to their marriage not only because of the emotions, such as love, they have for each other, but also because of the moral reasons, such as staying together for the children. Satisfaction is therefore mainly drawn from the members' functional evaluation (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993; Bolton & Lemon, 1999), suggesting its rational role in commitment. On the other hand, symbolic motivations are socially and emotionally bound (Dholakia & Bagozzi, 2004). Together, they lead to commitment with the communities. With increased commitment, the likelihood of their participation

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