ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF VIRTUAL BRAND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

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Abstract

Despite the fact that virtual brand communities (VBC) have existed for over 25 years, little scholarly research has addressed the reasons why people join VBC or choose to remain a patron of one. Also, there is a dearth of study that exploring the effect of VBC participation towards the brand trust and commitment. In view of these shortcomings, this paper is reviewing the previous literature and aims to propose a framework which forms the antecedents and consequences of VBC participation. Two broad motivations (intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation) are proposed as antecedents of participation and two broad outcomes (community consequences and brand consequences) are proposed as consequences of participation. Since this paper is intended to focus on conceptual issues, a possible limitation is that an empirical discussion of this subject matter lies outside the scope of this paper.

Keywords: Virtual brand community, motivation, trust-commitment.

Introduction

The advancement of the Internet provides new opportunities and challenges for marketing brands and products. The Internet is now commonly used as a new media or platform 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 Web 2.0 technology and the social interactions that focusing into a product or a brand in the cyberspace drive the development of virtual brand community (VBC) (Andersen, 2005).

The emerging of VBC not only allows the consumers to share their usage experience on a particular product or brand, it is also serve as testimonials or advises for others as well (Chan and Lee, 2016). Product information provided on company websites are considered bias and that member-generated information are considered more reliable and objective sources. As such, VBC is a fast growing trend among the consumers and of course the companies used as a tool in searching and marketing the products and brands.

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According to Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002), VBC is marked by several characteristics. First, VBC has commonly shared interests. The shared interests may relate to a particular product (Harley Davidson, for instance). Second, most VBCs create and use shared rituals, languages and norms of interaction. 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, VBC 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 towards 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 VBC (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).

Despite the fact that VBC have existed for over 25 years, little scholarly research has addressed the reasons why people join VBC or choose to remain a patron of one. The community users drive the success or failure of a particular VBC (Chan, 2014). If a better understanding of why people hang out in VBC can be achieved, it would be beneficial to organizations that host VBC. As proposed in Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET), a human behaviour is affecting by intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Deci, Koestner and Ryan, 1999). There is also dearth of study that investigating the impact of VBC participation towards the company’s brand. The participation outcome can be used as the key performance indicator of the company’s investment into VBC. According to DeLone and McLean (2003) who proposed the Information Systems Success Model, the use of a particular system should bring positive impacts to the organization.

In view of these shortcomings, this paper is reviewing the previous literature and aims to propose a framework which forms the antecedents and consequences of VBC participation. Two broad motivations (intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation) are proposed as antecedents of participation and two broad outcomes (community consequences and brand consequences) are proposed as consequences of participation.

**Literature Review**

**a) Participation**

One of the most essential elements for the formation and sustainability of VBC 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 behaviour. 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 VBCs 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 VBC 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.
b) Motivation

Intrinsic motivation refers to engagement in behaviour that is inherently satisfying or enjoyable (Legault, 2016). The motivation behind such action is driven by an interest or enjoyment in the task itself, and exists within the individual rather than relying on any external pressure (Benabou and Tirole, 2003). Intrinsic motivation is based on taking pleasure in an activity rather than working towards an external reward. For instance, a child running and jumping outdoor just because it is fun and no other reason. Intrinsic motivation has been studied by since the early 1970s (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

Conversely, extrinsic motivation refers to performance of behaviour that is fundamentally contingent upon the attainment of an outcome that is separable from the action itself (Legault, 2016). It refers to the performance of an activity in order to attain an outcome, which then contradicts intrinsic motivation (Reiss, 2005). For instance, a child might wash dishes at home in order to get or to receive an allowance from parents. It is widely believed that motivation performs two functions. The first is often referred as to the energetic activation component of the motivation construct. The second is directed at a specific behaviour and makes reference to the orientation directional component (Kuvaas et al., 2017).

There are many studies found that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are correlated with human behaviours. Cannizzaro et al.’s (2017) study found that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are significantly influence the HIV and drugs users to get treatment in the hospitals. According to Bear et al. (2017) in a study on 10,344 students in grades 5-12, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are playing a major role for these students to engage in pro-social behaviours. From the continuing professional education context, Tranquillo and Stecker (2016) found that intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are useful tools to engage people into life-long learning.

C) Trust and Commitment

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. Delgrado-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 Delgrado-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

Motivation to participate in the VBC 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).
Many researches ignore the influences of motivation in member participation behavior which
should be investigated. There have been numerous studies of trust and commitment
relationships in the context of consumer-brand relationships (e.g. Chauduri and Holbrook,
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 Conceptual Framework

The Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) suggests that there are two motivation systems (intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation) that affect human behaviour (Deci, Koestner and Ryan, 1999). This helps to explain the relationship between both motivations and VBC participation. Thus, the framework suggests the following relationships:

1. Intrinsic motivation is positively related to VBC participation.
2. Extrinsic motivation is positively related to VBC participation.

Under the Commitment-Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing, two fundamental factors, trust and commitment, must exist for a successful relationship to occur. Relationship marketing investment or relational investment is an important antecedent in building trust and commitment. This helps to explain the relationship between VBC participation and community trust-commitment and also brand trust-commitment. Thus, the framework suggests the following relationships:

3. VBC participation is positively related to community trust.
4. VBC participation is positively related to community commitment.
5. VBC participation is positively related to brand trust.
6. VBC participation is positively related to brand commitment.
7. Community trust is positively related to community commitment.
8. Brand trust is positively related to brand commitment.
9. Community commitment is positively related to brand commitment.

Figure 1 Proposed Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 above shown the proposed conceptual framework for this study. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations were included as the antecedents of VBC participation. There must be reasons for someone to join or to patron a particular VBC. There are also multiple consequences or outcomes of VBC participation were included. These can be related to internal (community trust and commitment) and external (brand trust and commitment) benefits.
Conclusion

Members’ participation and engagement are important components in sustaining an online community. There must be some reasons or motivations that to attract an user to join and engaging themselves into a VBC. If a better understanding of why people hang out in VBC can be achieved, it would be beneficial to organizations that host VBC. Of course, not to be forgotten is the benefits or impacts towards the company’s brand as well.

This paper draws out four key themes that have emerged from a substantial literature review from existing studies in offline and online brand communities. Two broad motivations (intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation) are proposed as antecedents of participation and two broad outcomes (community consequences and brand consequences) are proposed as consequences of participation.

The proposed conceptual framework will make a number of contributions. Firstly, research to date has only examined the impact of participation in a VBC 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 VBC.

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 VBC on community trust, community commitment, brand trust, and brand commitment has been discussed in the model. In addition, the framework added two motivation variables as the antecedent of VBC participation. This makes the model is more comprehensive in measuring the phenomena of VBC participation or usage not only reside in member behaviour perspective. Participation consequences or effects towards the company are also being included.

Therefore, the study potentially contributes to the marketing and consumer behaviour literatures as well as the managerial practices by increasing our understanding of the strategic impact of VBC through a new framework. The proposed conceptual framework is giving an idea of what drives the people to participate a VBC and is important for a community manager to keep the liveliness of the community. Companies’ marketing communication budget might consider shifting their budget from focusing on traditional advertising campaign to paying attention more to what people post on virtual community; or even to developing a VBC on their own websites. Since this paper is intended to focus on conceptual issues, a possible limitation is that an empirical discussion of this subject matter lies outside the scope of this paper.
References


