How Do Different Types of Community Commitment Influence Brand Commitment? The Mediation of Brand Attachment

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Abstract

Although previous research indicates that participation in a brand community may foster consumer loyalty to the brand in question, research has seldom examined the mediating effect of community commitment on brand commitment. Drawing from the typologies of organizational commitment, we divide community commitment into three components: continuance community commitment (continuance CC), affective community commitment (affective CC), and normative community commitment (normative CC). We then assess the mediating role of brand attachment in the relationship between these three components and brand commitment. We test the hypotheses using a sample of online mobile phone brand communities in China. The empirical results reveal that brand attachment exerts an indirect (but not mediated) effect on the relationship between continuance CC and brand commitment and on the relationship between normative CC and brand commitment. We also find that it exerts a partial mediating effect on the relationship between affective CC and brand commitment. The findings contribute to the branding literature and have important implications for brand community management.

Introduction

THE INTERNET CAN BE CHARACTERIZED as fast, convenient, and distance free.[1–3] Increasingly, both young and old consumers use the Internet as a vehicle for pre-purchase information gathering and problem solving.[4,5] Consumers also use the Internet to share product information and experiences.[6] Marketers have come to recognize the importance of online brand communities in building and maintaining consumer–brand relationships.[7] Research about brand communities has found that participation in a brand community may increase the likelihood of adopting a new product by the preferred brand,[8] may positively influence members' commitment to the brand,[9] and may foster consumer loyalty to the focused brand.[10,11]

Brand commitment is an emotional or affective form of attachment to a brand.[12] How does brand community commitment generate brand commitment? One study of brand communities proposed that brand attachment plays a mediating role in the relationship between brand community commitment and brand commitment.[13] However, according to typologies of organizational commitment, community commitment is a multidimensional construct that contains three components—continuance community commitment

(continuance CC), affective community commitment (affective CC), and normative community commitment (normative CC)—each of which has a different theoretical rationale.[14,15] If this is the case, how does each form of community commitment generate brand commitment? Are their influences the same? Scholars and practitioners should understand how consumers' relationships with a brand community translate into relationships with the brand and foster consumer commitment to the brand. This study intends to uncover these intermediate mechanisms and thereby enrich our understanding of brand community.

Theoretical Background

Community commitment is the psychological bond between community members and their community. As previously mentioned, community commitment is a multidimensional construct that consists of continuance, affective, and normative CC.[16] According to the typologies of organizational commitment, community members may have psychological bonds with a particular community based on (a) need, (b) affect, and/or (c) obligation.[15] Continuance CC is the bond between a community member and a particular community that arises from the member's belief that his or

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her involvement in the community provides him or her with net benefits that are not easily available elsewhere.[15] This construct captures the "colder" or more rational, economics-based dependence of individuals on community benefits.[17] Affective CC is the bond between a community member and a particular community that is derived from the individual's strong emotional attachment to that community.[15] This construct is a "hotter" or more emotional factor, and is the degree to which the community member is personally involved in a community, as well as his or her resulting degree of trust in and commitment to the community.[18] Normative CC reflects the bond between a community member and a particular community that arises from the individual's sense of obligation to that community.[15] This construct may result from the individual's internalizing a sense of loyalty[19] and obligation[20] or from his or her experiencing a sense of indebtedness.[15] Although each form of commitment has a different theoretical rationale, they are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, members or customers may simultaneously possess different levels of each type.[14]

Hypotheses

The direct relationship between brand community commitment and brand commitment

Several studies have noted that member behavior in communities is driven by members' desire to receive a range of informational and social benefits.[15] Members with high continuance CC may believe that the social and economic costs of leaving a community are high, particularly if they have invested considerable effort in the community, seeking to establish an identity there and to learn the specific mores of the community. This investment, in turn, enhances the community members' commitment or loyalty to the related brand.

H1a: Continuance CC positively influences brand commitment.

Some brand community members may develop feelings of attachment to and identification with a community,[21] and thus may feel a sense of belonging.[22] Members with high affective CC desire to continue their relationship with the community in the future, and their participation and their interactions with other members help to strengthen their brand experience and value, leading to enhanced brand commitment or loyalty.

H2a: Affective CC positively influences brand commitment.

When individuals are committed to a community, they become vested in its successes and failures[23] and develop positive attitudes and behavior toward the products and brands favored by that community.[24] For members with high normative CC, "the right thing to do" is to purchase consistently the products of the brand around which the community is centered.[11] Consequently, purchasing products made by a competing brand likely leads to cognitive dissonance and undermines the individual's relationships with other community members.[25]

H3a: Normative CC positively influences brand commitment.

The mediating effects of brand attachment

Brand attachment is the strength of the bond that connects a specific brand with the identity of the consumer.[26] This bond includes a rich and accessible memory network of thoughts and feelings about the brand and the brand's relationship to the self. Brand attachment is affected by two critical factors: the brand–self connection and brand prominence. The brand–self connection is a core component of attachment as the bond that connects a person with a brand. Brand prominence, in turn, is the "strength" of the bond that connects the brand with the consumer.[26,27] Thomson et al.[28] found that consumers' emotional attachments to a brand predict their commitment to the brand (e.g., brand loyalty).

H4: Brand attachment positively influences brand commitment.

Some research has found that the relationships between brand communities and brands may be bidirectional.[11] However, given our research purpose and the meaning of the term "brand community," we study only the influence of brand communities on brands.

Members with high continuance CC commit to a brand community because of sunk or switching costs or because there are no attractive alternatives to the established relationship.[17] In a long-term relationship with a brand community, consumers continuously interact with other members and draw value and utility from consuming the same brand.[13] Over time, this sharing generates more brand value, resulting in closer consumer relationships within the community, which in turn help members form bonds with the brand (i.e., to experience brand attachment).

H5: Continuance CC positively influences brand attachment.

Some community members may develop affective bonds with the community,[15] which allows them to develop feelings of attachment to and identification with the community.[21] Because of their sense of attachment and belonging, individuals with strong affective CC are more apt to invest their time and effort in helping others within the community. Consequently, their identification with and emotional ties to the brand around which the community is centered may increase.[11]

H6: Affective CC positively influences brand attachment.

Because the community is a platform that consumers can use to share their brand experiences and the value that they draw from the brand, "the right thing" for community members to do is not only to sustain and even strengthen the community[29] but also to purchase the brand's products consistently.[11] Self-verification theory suggests that community members seek experiences that affirm their sense of self and avoid experiences that threaten their sense of self.[30] Therefore, members with high normative CC are likely to possess a sense of obligation to the community and the brand. Thus, they engage in behaviors that protect and enhance the community and form attachments to brands.

H7: Normative CC positively influences brand attachment.

H5, H6, and H7, together with H4, suggest that brand attachment plays a positive mediating role in the relationships between continuance CC and brand commitment, between affective CC and brand commitment, and between normative

CC and brand commitment, respectively. Based on this reasoning, this study formulates the following hypotheses:

H1b: Brand attachment mediates the positive influence of continuance CC on brand commitment.

H2b: Brand attachment mediates the positive influence of affective CC on brand commitment.

H3b: Brand attachment mediates the positive influence of normative CC positive on brand commitment.

Methods

Sample

This research tested the model using data collected from Sojump (www.sojump.com), a popular online survey platform in China. A filtering question was used to identify all available respondents who were members of online mobile phone brand communities. A total of 404 questionnaires were selected for the final empirical test. Table 1 provides the demographic characteristics of the usable sample.

Measures

Scales from prior research were adapted or combined to measure all the constructs included in the conceptual model (see Table 2). Because Chinese participants have a tendency to select the neutral point on a 5- or 7-point Likert scale, all of the measurement scales were 6-point Likert scales (1 = "strongly disagree," 6 = "strongly agree"). Items from English were translated into Chinese and given to 12 marketing professors who were proficient in both languages. We then carefully considered all controversial translations.

TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	222	55.0%
Female	182	45.0%
Age		
≤20	30	7.4%
21–30	293	72.6%
31–40	76	18.9%
>40	5	0.11%
Income (RMB)		
≤2,000	150	37.1%
2,001–4,000	118	29.2%
4,001–6,000	71	17.6%
6,001–8,000	36	8.9%
>8,000	29	7.2%
Education		
High school or below	11	2.7%
Junior college	59	14.6%
Undergraduate	289	71.5%
Postgraduate or above	45	11.1%
Tenure		
≤1 year	101	25.0%
1–2 years	124	30.7%
2–3 years	99	24.5%
3–4 years	46	11.4%
>4 years	34	8.4%

Continuance, affective, and normative CC indicate members' desire to maintain their relationships with a brand community because of switching costs, emotional attachment, and obligation, respectively. The items that were used to measure these factors were adopted from prior research.[15] Brand attachment is the bond that connects the brand with the self. This study uses a 4-item scale that we adapted from previous research to measure this construct, including the two first-order dimensions of brand–self connection and brand prominence.[26] Brand commitment is consumers' desire to maintain their relationships with the brand in question. Three items were adapted from the literature to measure this construct.[31,32]

Method of data analysis

Partial least squares (PLS) is a useful multivariate causal modeling tool that can be used to analyze the relationships between several dependent and independent latent constructs.[33] That is, PLS considers the relationships among all variables at the same time but does not require multivariate normality.[33] We thus used SmartPLS 2.0 to test the hypotheses.[34]

Results

Measurement model

The internal consistency of the data was tested using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and Cronbach's alpha (see Table 2). The results indicate that all 19 items have relatively significant standardized factor loadings (SFL > 0.759). The test extracted five factors, as expected, and the Cronbach's alpha values of these factors are all above 0.810 ($\alpha > 0.70$), which indicates the high internal consistency of the items.[35] The composite reliabilities (CR) of all of the constructs exceed 0.845 (CR > 0.70), suggesting that the measurement items have adequate reliability.

CFA and average variance extracted (AVE) were used to test convergent and discriminate validity. As shown in Table 2, the overall model fit indices are fairly satisfactory. All of the SFLs (>0.759) and AVEs (>0.729) are greater than 0.50, and the square root of each construct's AVE exceeds the coefficients of the relationships between the measure and other constructs.[36] Therefore, the items possess adequate convergent and discriminate validity.

Tests of hypotheses

In an effort to test the mediation effects, this study uses two models.[37] Model 1, which includes four variables (continuance CC, affective CC, normative CC, and brand commitment), tests the total effects. Brand attachment is also added to model 2 to test for mediation effects. Figure 1 provides the empirical results for model 2.

Before we proceed further, we should clarify the relationship between indirect effects and mediated effects. The conclusion that a mediation effect is present implies that the total effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable is initially present.[38] However, the assessment of indirect effects makes no such assumption.[37,38] Therefore, model 2 tests the indirect or mediation effects.

Total effects

Model 1 describes the total effects. According to the results, the positive effect of continuance CC on brand commitment is

TABLE 2. MEASUREMENT ITEMS AND VALIDATION ASSESSMENT

	SFL	α	CR	AVE
Continuance CC		0.814	0.890	0.729
If I stopped coming to this site, it would take me a long time to find a site that could replace it	0.823			
Thre are very few other places where I could find the type of useful content and services that I obtain from this site	0.884			
The content of this site is too valuable for me to stop visiting	0.856			
Affective CC		0.941	0.955	0.810
I feel like a part of the group at this site	0.759			
I have a real emotional attachment to this site	0.850			
This site has a great deal of personal meaning for me	0.810			
I feel a strong sense of belonging to this site	0.821			
I feel a strong connection to this site	0.811			
Normative CC		0.914	0.940	0.796
I feel an obligation to continue visiting this site	0.880			
I would feel guilty if I stopped visiting the site now	0.887			
I keep coming to visit this site because I have a sense of obligation to it	0.932			
I visit this site partly out of a sense of duty	0.869			
Brand attachment				
Brand–self connection			0.845	0.832
To what extent is [brand name] part of you and who you are?	0.925	0.832		
To what extent do you feel that you are personally connected with [brand name]?	0.925			
Brand prominence				
To what extent are your thoughts and feelings toward [brand name] often automatic, coming to mind seemingly on their own?	0.938	0.864		
To what extent do your thoughts and feelings toward [brand name] come you naturally and instantly?	0.938			
Brand commitment		0.893	0.933	0.824
If [brand name] was not available, it would make little difference to me if I had to choose another brand (R)	0.913			
I can see myself as being loyal to [brand name]	0.904			
I will more likely purchase a brand that is on sale than purchase [brand name] (R)	0.907			

Note. Overall model fit: χ^2 (109)=267.57, χ^2/df=2.455, $p<0.01$; CFI=0.97; NNFI=0.96; IFI=0.97; RMSEA=0.060. For the loadings of reverse questions, the response data are subtracted by 7.

R, reverse question; SFL, standardized factor loadings; CR, composite reliabilities; AVE, average variance extracted.
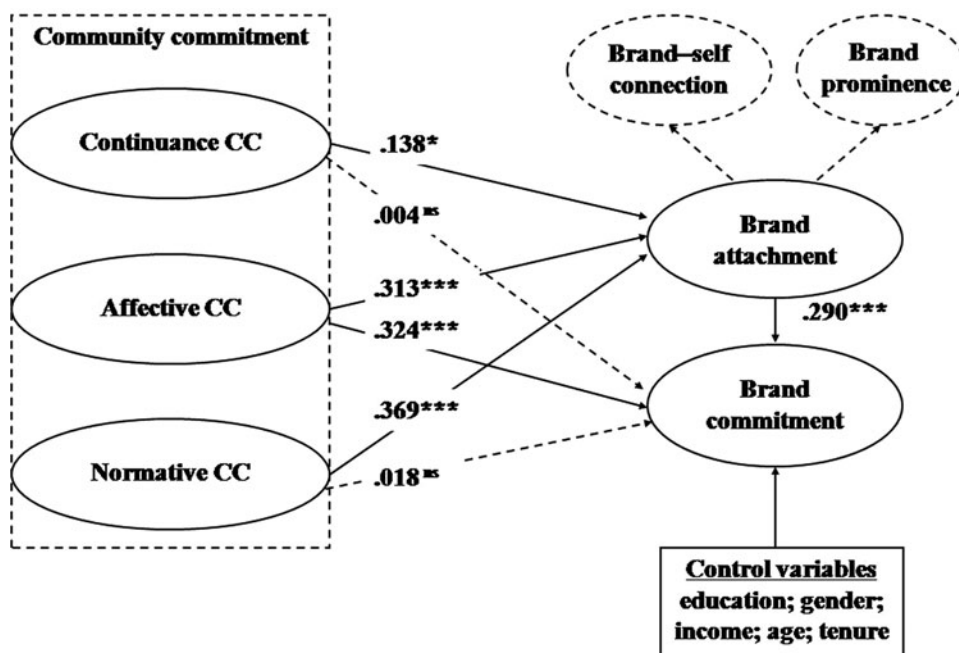

FIG. 1. Partial least squares analysis of the conceptual model.

** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed test); ns not significant.

not significant ($\beta=0.048$, $t=1.133$, $p>0.05$), which invalidates H1a. Therefore, in model 2, there is no mediation effect on the relationship between continuance CC and brand commitment, so we must reject H1b. The influence of affective CC on brand commitment is positive ($\beta=0.409$, $t=4.316$, $p<0.001$), which supports H2a. There may be a mediation effect that influences the relationship between affective CC and brand commitment in model 2. Finally, no positive relationship exists between normative CC and brand commitment ($\beta=0.115$, $t=1.558$, $p>0.05$), and thus, we must reject H3a. Therefore, there is no mediation effect that influences the relationship between normative CC and brand commitment in model 2, and we must reject H3b.

Indirect effects and mediated effects

When we include brand attachment in model 2, the relationship between continuance CC (the independent variable) and brand attachment (the mediator) becomes significant ($\beta=0.138$, $t=2.132$, $p<0.05$), which supports H5. The mediating effect of brand attachment effect on brand commitment (the dependent variable) is also significant ($\beta=0.290$, $t=3.948$, $p<0.01$), which supports H4. Therefore, continuance CC affects brand commitment indirectly though brand attachment. Similarly, the relationship between normative CC (the independent variable) and brand attachment (the mediator) becomes significant ($\beta=0.369$, $t=4.366$, $p<0.05$), which supports H7. Therefore, normative CC affects brand commitment indirectly though brand attachment.

In addition, once brand attachment is included in model 2, the relationship between affective CC (independent variable) and brand attachment (mediator) becomes significant ($\beta=0.313$, $t=3.370$, $p<0.05$), which supports H6. However, the effect of affective CC′ (independent variable) on brand commitment (dependent variable) decreases substantially (model 1: $\beta=0.409$, $t=4.316$, $p<0.001$; model 2: $\beta=0.324$, $t=3.367$, $p<0.05$). Therefore, brand attachment plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between affective CC and brand commitment, which supports H2b.

Discussion

Does brand attachment play a mediating role in the relationship between brand community commitment and brand commitment? The empirical results reveal that brand attachment exerts indirect (but not mediated) effects on the relationships between continuance CC and brand commitment and between normative CC and brand commitment, and that it exerts a partial mediation effect on the relationship between affective CC and brand commitment. Continuance CC and normative CC are more rational and cause individuals to commit to a community because of switching costs[17] or a sense of obligation[20] to that community. Such members will not commit to the brand without brand attachment. Conversely, affective CC is a more emotional construct.[18] Therefore, members with high affective CC may directly transfer an emotion such as empathy from the community to the brand.[39]

Theoretical implications

Building and maintaining online brand communities is an effective means of improving customers' brand attitudes, loyalty, and brand attachment. This study explores the in-termediate mechanism in the relationship between brand community commitment and brand commitment. First, consumers' commitment to a brand community may be based on different psychological bonds, such as need, affect, and/or obligation, and the intermediate mechanisms at work may vary across these bonds. Second, when consumers are committed to a brand community based on need or obligation, this commitment to the community does not automatically translate into brand commitment. If a brand community does not cultivate consumer emotion or encourage brand attachment, community members may not necessarily become committed or loyal to the brand. Third, affective CC, which arises from strong emotional attachment to the community, affects brand commitment both directly and indirectly. One explanation for these findings may be that the effect of community commitment on brand commitment rests on the development of consumer emotion or attachment to the brand community or the brand.

Managerial implications

Given the increasing prevalence of online brand communities, it is important to know how brand communities influence brands. The results of this study have several managerial implications. First, to manage the relationship between brand community and brands effectively, companies must cultivate brand community commitment. The study results suggest that brand community commitment, which includes continuance, affective, and normative CC, leads to brand attachment and brand commitment. Companies may nurture brand community commitment by encouraging different psychological bonds; for example by providing valued information, making a specialized logo, or fostering member identification by promoting activities. Second, companies should pay special attention to cultivating consumer affect in promoting the brand community and the brand. Members want to share their brand experiences and establish intimate relationships with others online. In doing so, they may develop feelings of attachment to and identification with the community, and they may develop a sense of belonging. Therefore, companies should not only provide material assistance but also deliver value and utility through the brand community.

Limitations and further research

Several study limitations suggest directions for further research. First, the quantitative data for the study were collected using self-reporting, which may generate common method bias. Alternative techniques may be used to decrease the bias. Second, although the sample was highly representative, it does not mirror the variation across different industries. Therefore, product categories could be integrated into the model to determine the importance of direct or indirect determinants of purchase intention. Third, according to Algesheimer et al.,[11] the relationships between brand communities and brands may be bidirectional. Further researchers should use longitudinal studies to capture the dynamics of brand communities and their relationship to brands.

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