



## Customer participation in virtual brand communities: The self-construal perspective



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 24 November 2014

Received in revised form 26 February 2015

Accepted 11 April 2015

Available online 20 April 2015

#### Keywords:

Self-construal

Independence

Interdependence

Community rewards

Public self-consciousness

Participation

Virtual brand communities

### ABSTRACT

By introducing the self-construal theory to the virtual brand community literature, this study examines how self-construal interacts with community rewards and public self-consciousness to influence customer participation. Based on data collected from two communities in China, we found that independent construal had a stronger positive direct effect on the intention to participate than did interdependent construal. The effect of independent construal on intention was attenuated by community reward and public self-consciousness. In comparison, the effect of interdependent construal on intention was enhanced by public self-consciousness, but this strengthening effect did not exist for community rewards. A significant association between intention and actual participation was also found.

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### 1. Introduction

Many firms have added a virtual brand community (VBC) to their marketing activities. A VBC, defined as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” ([42], p. 412), is an Internet platform for firms to disseminate product information, conduct service support, and educate customers [22,45,46]. A study found that 90% of VBC members are passive readers, and most of them are just “one-shot” participants who do not maintain their memberships [51]. Therefore, understanding how to improve VBC participation and enhance community sustainability is a major challenge for firms [3,46].

In response to this challenge, firms have developed various strategies to satisfy their customers in VBCs. For instance, firms build group platforms such as discussion forums to meet customers' needs for interaction and belongingness. Firms also allow members to build individualized personal spaces such as homepages and blogs to maintain customers' independent identities. The implementation of these strategies reflects a

balanced view of the homogeneity and heterogeneity of VBCs. The homogeneity view emphasizes shared norms, shared interests, a collective identity, and collective belonging in a VBC and is supported by a majority of prior VBC literature [22,38,42,43]. The heterogeneity view posits that VBC participants have diverse backgrounds, different commitments, a wide range of expertise, and complex identities [59].

The heterogeneity view has recently emerged in the literature. It suggests that practitioners build VBCs with the commitment to create distinctive values and provide maximum freedom for individuals to express their diverse opinions rather than directing them to maintain shared bonds or respectful interactions [15,18,34,59]. On the other hand, supporters of the homogeneous view note that VBC individuals look for mechanisms to connect with others to satisfy their need for belonging [14,42]. Homogeneity and heterogeneity may exist simultaneously rather than conflict [20]. While heterogeneity may incur conflict that destabilizes a community [18], it may also strengthen community's sustainability if effective practices can be implemented to align customers with shared norms in VBCs [59].

How do members with different interpersonal orientations toward one another affect VBC participation? How can VBC practitioners manage these heterogeneous orientations collectively? Prior literature does not provide clear answers. To fill these gaps and reconcile the homogeneity and heterogeneity views, we

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developed a research model based on three theories: self-construal theory [57], cognitive evaluation theory [19], and impression management theory [32]. We first applied self-construal theory [57] to describe how different orientations toward the self may affect an individual's participation in VBCs. Focusing on the relationship between self and others, self-construal represents the extent to which individuals see themselves as individualized entities (independent construal) or in relation to others (interdependent construal) [57,58]. Self-construal, therefore, represents a spectrum of heterogeneous motivations toward interpersonal relationships where interdependent individuals seek commonality to socialize with others, and independent individuals pursue heterogeneity to distinguish themselves from others [36]. Our first research question is, how does self-construal impact VBC participation?

Based on cognitive evaluation theory [19] and impression management theory [32], we then examine what effective mechanisms can be implemented in VBCs to align participants' heterogeneous motivations with the homogeneous commons of VBCs. Alignment practices are believed to be necessary to reconcile different views and identities so that VBC sustainability can be facilitated [59]. These two theories suggest that we examine two mechanisms (i.e., community rewards and public self-consciousness). Community rewards are mechanisms directing participants to comply with the shared commons of VBCs, which firms can implement as an external incentive. On the other hand, public self-consciousness is the awareness of an individual's unique role from the public's perspective. It is an internal psychological process that governs an individual's behavior to be consistent with the community. An examination of both external and internal practices enables us to evaluate these alignment strategies and provide guidance to VBC practitioners. Our second research question is, how do community rewards and public self-consciousness interact with self-construal to align heterogeneous actors with shared norms?

The structure of the paper is as follows. We first provide a literature review of VBCs and the relevant background theories. We then develop a research model and research hypotheses. Next, we report an empirical study, conclude with a discussion of the findings, and draw some implications for research and practice.

## 2. Literature review

Community sustainability is the longevity of a community over an extended period of time [50]. It can be measured in terms of the number of participants in the community, the number and quality of posted messages, participant loyalty, and trustworthiness [33,51]. Some VBCs demonstrate longevity, while others do not. A better understanding of customer participation can help achieve community sustainability.

### 2.1. Antecedents of customer participation in VBCs

The prior literature has identified various antecedent factors of customer participation in VBCs from different theoretical perspectives, such as the use and gratification theory [21,45,46,62], the utilitarian and hedonic perspective [63], the view of chronic personality (i.e., extroversion and openness) and individual customer difference (i.e., community identification and brand knowledge) [24], and customer interaction or engagement [9,46]. Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo [21] revealed several internal motivations for customers to participate in VBCs, such as self-discovery, maintaining interpersonal interactivity, social enhancement, and entertainment value. Wang and Fesenmaier [62] identified several intrinsic motivations such as psychological, status-gaining and hedonic needs. Wang et al. [63] complemented

the list by adding motivations for social and entertainment needs. Nambisan and Baron [45] investigated social, personal, integrative, and hedonic needs. Nambisan and Baron [44] examined self-image and expertise enhancement.

These motivations can be categorized as motivations for interdependence and motivations for independence. Interdependence-related motivations emphasize building and developing the relationship and affiliation with others. This is consistent with the intrinsic motivation literature, which suggests that individuals seek belongingness to others, such as maintaining interpersonal interactivity, social enhancement, and social and psychological needs. Independence-related motivations are more concerned about internal traits. This is in line with another stream of intrinsic motivations that emphasize independent identity, such as self-discovery, personal integrative needs, self-image, and expertise enhancement.

These two categories of motivations for interpersonal relationships share a similar notion with self-construal theory [36]. The theory identifies independent and interdependent construal as two distinctive interpersonal orientations. Previous research has found that self-construal is able to explain a wide range of self-motives, such as self-regulation and self-enhancement, as well as a VBC customer's interpersonal and social behavior [17]. We posit that self-construal theory may be a useful overarching theory to integrate different theoretical perspectives that explain the motivations to participate in VBCs. Additionally, it may be an underlying mechanism to classify the different types of motivations for individuals to participate in a VBC that have been reported in the prior literature. Self-construal theory may provide a more parsimonious explanation for VBC participation. Therefore, we introduce this theory to the VBC literature.

### 2.2. Self-construal theory

Self-construal is the extent to which an individual interacts with others and views the self as an independent identity or in relation to others [1,57]. The theory of self-construal originates from cross-culture research on individualism and collectivism. Individuals are characterized as individualistic in western culture, while people are considered collectivists in eastern culture [48].

Self-construal is composed of an independent self and an interdependent self. Within a given culture, the non-dominant part of these two selves still exists within an individual [36]. Individuals with predominantly independent self-construal organize their thoughts, feelings, and actions concerning separateness and uniqueness from within rather than in reference to others. Individuals with predominantly interdependent self-construal interpret their thoughts, feelings, and actions meaningfully in association with connectedness and integration with the external social environment [36].

Self-construal theory has been applied in different areas. Escalas and Bettman [23] investigated the relationship between brand connection and self-construal. They posited that consumers purchased brands to build their self-concepts in terms of independence and interdependence, and independence-oriented individuals had stronger self-differentiation goals in their brand purchases. Kim et al. [29] introduced self-construal to the conflict resolution literature. Independence-oriented people were more likely to be dominant in conflict resolution, while interdependence-oriented people adopted avoidance and integration approaches.

It is widely accepted that independence and interdependence are two distinct dimensions of self-construal and co-exist within an individual [23,29]. Singelis [57] found that independence and interdependence were orthogonal. An individual has both independent and interdependent selves simultaneously, and these two

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