



Consumption community commitment: Newbies' and longstanding members' brand engagement and loyalty[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The relationships among members of virtual brand-related communities may change depending on the length of their participation in the community. Consumers' commitment to the community is likely to influence the relationship between consumer engagement in the community and brand loyalty. Commitment can be affective, calculative, and normative. Knowledge concerning the impact of these dimensions on behavioral loyalty to a brand over membership time is lacking. This study examines the changing relationship between consumers' engagement in a consumption community, their kind of commitment to the community and their behavioral loyalty to a brand over membership time. Members of a French virtual community sharing photography interests participated in the sample. Configural analysis shows that strong engagement in community activities alone is neither sufficient nor necessary for brand loyal intentions. Combinations of engagement with various levels of affective, calculative and normative commitment to the community can cause high behavioral brand loyalty of community members. These combinations change with the length of membership in the community. Brand managers can use the results to fine-tune their communication to groups of community members with different combinations of engagement and commitment as drivers of brand loyalty.

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1. Introduction

The objective of the research here is to increase understanding of the causal impacts of various patterns of engagement and prevailing dimensions of community commitment on the intended behavioral brand loyalty of members in virtual consumption communities and to examine the effect of participants' length of membership in a community of consumption on these patterns. Virtual consumption communities are gatherings of people in social media for the purpose of exchanging experiences with products or services, finding new solutions to problems of usage or consumption, and mutual learning about best practices (Paxton, 1999). Since the early days of virtual community research (Kozinets, 1999), findings indicate that social relationships among community participants build-up over time through increasing interaction.

Community members engage progressively (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013), participating more often and more intensely in community activities. Consumer engagement in communities, defined as the frequency and duration of participation in the community as well as the level of activities performed by the members in the community, creates and reinforces relationships likely to enhance the emotional bonds that consumers have with objects, with the community, or with a brand (Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012).

Brand community research reports a weak direct relationship between consumer engagement in the community and loyalty to the community's focal brand in terms of repurchase intention and recommendation inclination (Casalo, Flavian, & Guinaliu, 2007; Jang, Olfman, Ko, & Kim, 2008; Shang, Chen, & Liao, 2006; Shih, Hu, & Farn, 2010). Raïes and Gavard-Perret (2011) attribute the weakness of the relationship to interdependent mediation effects of community commitment and brand commitment on the relationship between engagement in the community and behavioral brand loyalty. Commitment is the desire of individuals to pursue their relationship with a partner (Anderson & Weitz, 1992; Gundlach, Achrol, & Mentzer, 1995; Moorman, Deshpande, & Zaltman, 1993; Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpande, 1992). This partner may be a person, an organization, a brand and also a consumption community. The emotional bond that captures the desire of community members to pursue their relationship with the community is called "community commitment".

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Following Allen and Meyer (1990) the commitment to a community can build from affective, calculative, and normative grounds. Affective community commitment denotes an emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the community. Calculative community commitment reflects the perceived costs associated with leaving the community. Normative community commitment represents the perceived (social) obligation to remain in the community and to support other members (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002). Jang et al. (2008) report that the commitment of brand community members to their community has a significant impact on the consumers' loyalty to the brand. Raies and Gavard-Perret (2011) underline that the detected effects change with consumers' length of membership in the community. Newcomers and longstanding participants may have different patterns of commitment dimensions that impact their re-buy intentions and inclination to positive word-of-mouth concerning a brand.

To the best of the authors' knowledge no published research studied the impact of different patterns of affective, calculative and normative community commitment on brand loyalty so far. The objective of the research presented in the following is, therefore, to better understand the causal impact of various patterns of engagement and prevailing dimensions of community commitment on community members' behavioral brand loyalty and to examine the effect of participants' length of membership in a community of consumption on these patterns.

The analysis is based on a survey of 714 newcomers (subscription since less than one year) and 331 longstanding members (subscription since more than one year) of a French consumer-initiated community concerned with photography-related activities and in particular the Nikon brand. Fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA; Ragin, 2008a) provides a differentiated picture of causes for strong intended brand loyalty over membership time. Strong behavioral engagement in the community as single predictor is neither necessary nor sufficient for strong intentions of behavioral brand loyalty. Over membership length, changing combinations of presence and absence of dimensions of community commitment together with strong engagement in community activities are more effective in explaining loyalty of newcomers and longstanding members than each dimension by its own. If community commitment is very strong on all three dimensions, the level of engagement in the community loses its importance.

This research contributes to our theoretical knowledge by shedding more differentiated light on patterns of engagement and dimensions of commitment to a consumption community, which are related to highly brand loyal intentions. The research enriches our knowledge concerning differing commitment-related causes for re-buy intention and positive word-of-mouth of newcomers versus longstanding participants in virtual communities of consumption. It helps brand managers to better understand differences in motivation of consumption community members and to raise the precision of their communicative actions.

Following this introduction, Section 2 reviews the literature offering empirical evidence based on a symmetric testing of the relationship between behavioral engagement in a community, community commitment and behavioral brand loyalty at different levels of membership length. Also, Section 2 develops and presents the tenets to be tested in the research. Section 3 describes the data collection process, measurement scales and analytical methods. The section explains the reasons why the researchers preferred fsQCA over commonly used structural equation modeling. Section 4 describes the assessment of measure reliabilities, convergent and discriminant validity. The section presents patterns of community commitment dimensions related to strong behavioral brand loyalty as well as the influence of membership length on the patterns of predictors. Also, this section includes tests and findings for predictive validity. Section 5 discusses the findings and their contributions to extend knowledge in the field. Section 6 concludes with a summary, limitations, and recommendations for brand managers.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Community commitment and brand loyalty

Actions lead to further actions (Julienne, 2013; Kiesler, 1971; Moles & Rohmer, 1977; Ouellette & Wood, 1998; Sutton, 1994), but actions also create and deepen emotional bonds with action targets. Alon, Brunel, and Siegal (2002) show that ongoing engagement of community members leads to the formation of personal relationships, which, in turn, increase the social interaction with other community members and result in the individual being socially embedded within the community (Alon, Brunel, & Schneier Siegal, 2004). Chan and Li (2010), Gummerus, Liljander, Weman, and Pihlström (2012), and Gupta and Kim (2007), find increasing engagement in brand communities leading to increasing commitment to the community (Fig. 1). Following organization research, committed individuals are bonded to and may identify with an organization (Bevan, Barber, & Robinson, 1997; Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982; Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974). Bonded individuals tend to be loyal to that organization due to affection, a fear of loss or moral obligation. Allen and Meyer (1990) term these bonds affective, calculative and normative commitment. Consumers who are committed to a virtual consumption community have rather strong emotional bonds with their community, which may be dominated by affection (Kang, Lee, Lee, & Choi, 2007), the fear of loss (Casalo, Flavian, & Guinalli, 2008) or the feeling of social obligation (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann (2005), Casalo et al. (2007), Casalo et al. (2008) and Jang et al. (2008) find a generally positive impact of community commitment on behavioral brand loyalty, defined as positive word-of-mouth and repeat purchase intention (Lee, Lee, & Feick, 2001; Parasuraman & Grewal, 2000). Some research measure the mediating effect of trust (Casalo et al., 2007), satisfaction (Langerak, Verhoef, Verlegh, & De Valck, 2004), community integration (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010) or sense of community (Kim, Lee, & Hiemstra, 2004). Raies and Gavard-Perret (2011) find an interdependent mediation of community commitment and brand commitment on the link between community engagement and behavioral brand loyalty. The impact of community commitment is stronger for longstanding community members than for newcomers, whereas for newcomers the impact of brand commitment is greater than that for longstanding members. None of these studies examine the specific effects of the affective, calculative and normative dimensions of community commitment on brand loyalty, or the potential impact of the length of membership in the community on the levels and combinations of these dimensions.

2.2. Effects of membership length

"Membership length" refers to the length of the relationship that a member has with a community (Bolton, Lemon, & Verhoef, 2004). Based on research work presented by Walther (1995), Kozinets (1999), and Langerak et al. (2004), consider that new members have fewer social links and are less embedded in the community compared to long-time members, because they are not familiar with the community and its rules and because they are mainly motivated by information search.

The number of previous interactions may reinforce the effect of membership length on participation, and the benefit of each interaction. Alon and Brunel (2007) and Langerak et al. (2004) find that with the length of membership of consumers in a community comes a change in consumers' interests, the benefits that consumers search for, and their actions concerning other community participants as well as brands. Over time, the interest of community members seems to change from a dominating personal interest in gathering useful information (Ridings & Gefen, 2004; Wasko & Faraj, 2000) to a feeling of obligation toward the community (Mathwick, Wiertz, & de Ruyter, 2008). Community members develop more social relationships. Hennig-Thurau,

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