



How community interactions contribute to harmonious community relationships and customers' identification in online brand community



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 November 2015

Received in revised form 20 April 2016

Accepted 25 April 2016

Available online 6 May 2016

Keywords:

Community interactions
Harmonious community relationships
Community identification
Online brand community

ABSTRACT

As a proxy for the vitality of online brand community, effective interaction has always been viewed as a prerequisite for the formation of harmonious organization atmosphere and high degree of organizational identity. To investigate the process, this study proposes a model delineates the relationship among community interactions, harmonious community relationships, and customers' community identification. The findings, based on 665 valid samples, reveal that different community interactions (product-information, human-computer, and interpersonal) have different effects on harmonious community relationships (customer-brand and customer-other customers' relationships), which in turn influences customers' identification with community. Furthermore, these community interactions have an interactive effect on harmonious community relationships. Based on the analytical results, this study concludes with some managerial and research implications.

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1. Introduction

The infusion of information technology and the increase of customer sovereignty consciousness have redefined the roles of customers play in all aspects of business. They are no longer the passive receivers of value provided by the enterprises, but co-creators of value along with product innovation and competitive strategy (; Luo, Zhang, & Liu, 2015; Payne, Storbacka, Frow, & Knox, 2009; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). For obtaining more empowerment and effectively controlling over the service process, customers, especially younger generations, are more inclined to interactions in virtual environment compared to face-to-face communication (Köhler, Rohm, Ruyter, & Wetzels, 2011; Clarkson, 2010).

Engaging customers in the service experience by building online platform has become an important issue for researchers and marketers (Kuo & Feng, 2013; Köhler et al., 2011). These so-called online customer platforms, defined here as company-hosted online brand communities, are increasingly becoming an integral element for stimulating customer interactions (Wu, Huang, Zhao, & Hua, 2015; Wu, Ku, & Liao, 2015b; Wang, Yeh, & Yen, 2015). Due to the char-

acteristics of high and continuous multi-party communications without time and geographical bound, members of online brand communities can easily share product information and interact with each other, and consequently develop harmonious community relationships as well as community identification (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013; Heinonen, 2011). Online brand community is not only a physical place, but, in reality, is a set of social relationships linking a brand with its customers, customers with other customers, which constitute a basic framework of community relationships (Luo et al., 2015; McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Muniz & O'guinn, 2001). For customers, relationship establishment and identity formation are easily shaped in the process of interactive activities. Therefore, it is imperative for firms to carry forward a success for stronger relationships with customers and customer identification with community.

Relational marketing or building customer relationships has attracted much interest from researchers and practitioners by enhancing customer loyalty (Berry, 1995; Zinkan, 2012; Kuo & Feng, 2013). Currently, most research predominantly focuses on customer-brand relationships, neglecting the effects of customer-other customers' relationships (Wu, Huang, Zhao, & Hua, 2015; Wu, Ku, & Liao, 2015b; Kim, Jeon, & Hyun, 2011). However, as an important part of community triangle relationships, customer-to-customer relationships play a significant impact on community performance and efficiency, so the further study of this is very

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promising (Andersen, 2005; McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'guinn, 2001).

Members' strong identification with online community has been considered as an important force of community effectiveness (Qu and Lee, 2011; Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008; Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). Once customers become identified with brand community, it is highly likely for them to actively engage in the community activities and show various types of positive member behaviors. However, how to effectively activate members' community identification has not been fully revealed yet. In an attempt to enrich the existing literature on relational marketing in online communities, based on uncertainty reduction theory and social identity theory, we develop and empirically test an integrated research model to identify how online community interactions contribute to harmonious community relationships and customers' community identification. Moreover, in order to understand the effect mechanism of community interactions more clearly, we make an interactive effect and mediating effect analysis on them respectively.

2. Literature review

2.1. Uncertainty reduction theory

As one of the classical theories about the perception formation and relationship development in interpersonal communication, uncertainty reduction theory indicates that people/organization will face a high uncertainty of the cognitive state in the initial contact phase (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). In order to reduce the uncertainty, they tend to exchange, search and collect information through various behavior manners (Daft & Macintosh, 1981; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). According to Berger and Calabrese (1975), low amounts of uncertainty correspond with greater development of relationships.

Due to the lack of face-to-face communication, members in virtual environment have higher perceived risk (Kunz & Seshadri, 2015). To reduce uncertainty and equivocation, customers tend to obtain information in interaction activities of online brand community. Some members may ask frequently asked questions by the means of using computer-mediated interactive platform; some may obtain information by browsing the user-generated content; others may get help or support through directly communicating with members. In community interaction process, customers will increase their understanding and decrease the uncertainty about brand and other customers, resulting in narrowing the distance of customer-to-brand and customer-to-other customers (McAlexander et al., 2002; Muniz & O'guinn, 2001). Thus, it can be said that community interactions play an important role in developing intimate relationships between customer and brand, and customer and other customers from the perspective of uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Based on the above analysis, according to the uncertainty reduction theory, this study constructs a conceptual model to explore how community interactions contribute to the harmonious community relationships.

2.2. Community identification

Social identity is defined as an individual's recognition of own membership of a social organization, involving value and emotional connotation (Tajfel, 1981). In other words, the member's cognition that he/she belongs to a brand community spurs him/her to classify them into the community category. Thus, social identity becomes an important criterion to examine connections between individuals and social group (Palmer, Koenig-Lewis, & Jones, 2013).

Community identity originates from group identity, which is a special type of social identity, where individuals prescribe themselves by their membership. As the core characteristic, community identification refers to group sense of belonging individuals perceive from community (Algesheimer et al., 2005), essentially describes the psychological bonds between members and social group they belong to, meaning they identify with the norms, traditions, customs and goals of community (Tajfel, 1981). When members find the community shares a unique feature with them, they are more likely to take community as a desirable goal of social realization and identification (Heere et al., 2011). Some research has pointed out that community identification is an important decision variable of community members' behavior and attitude (Muniz & O'guinn, 2001; Algesheimer et al., 2005), so it is necessary to explore the formation mechanism of community identification.

2.3. Online brand community interactions

Community originated from sociology, in reality, is a socially networked group, so social interaction inevitably becomes an important content of community interactions (Nambisan & Baron, 2009; Nambisan, 2002). Social interaction mainly manifests interpersonal interaction in the community settings (Wang, Chan, & Yang, 2013). Interpersonal interaction is defined as person-to-person communication among peer customers, and essential for establishing and developing social relationships (Nmbisan and Baron, 2009). Scientific interpersonal interaction mechanism is an important guarantee of community socialization (Nmbisan and Baron, 2009; McAlexander et al., 2002). With the deepening of customer and organizational socialization, interpersonal interaction has attracted wide attention from the researchers and businesses (Moschis and Churchill, 1978).

Access to information on firms' product/service usage, technology and marketing is the primary purpose of customers who join brand community. And they are very willing to communicate product consumption experience with other members in brand community (McAlexander et al., 2002). Therefore, product-related content become the indispensable aspect of brand community interactions (Kuo & Feng, 2013; Nambisan & Baron, 2009). As an interaction rooted in the context of product, stimulating product-information interaction among community members has been an important channel for the implementation of firms' marketing strategy.

Firms have long invested in technology for reducing the cost of customer support and improving the quality of the customer experience. Computer-mediated interaction in community is attained through variety strategies such as information and graphics presentation, page navigation and design, search functionality, link use and predictive systems (Andrews, Preece, & Turoff, 2002). The interaction characteristic is mentioned as human-computer interaction, which reflects the responsiveness of community or "the potential for immediate feedback from the receiver" (Te'eni, 2001).

Based on the above-mentioned research streams, in this study, the focus is on three dimensions of online community interactions: product-information interaction, human-computer interaction and interpersonal interaction. The three dimensions are viewed as reflecting customers' actual interaction experience in online brand community and, as such, as potentially establishing and developing community relationships (Zaglia 2013; Zhou, Zhang, Su, & Zhou, 2012). Next, the research model that captures these relationships is presented.

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