



Promoting continual member participation in firm-hosted online brand communities: An organizational socialization approach



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 January 2016

Received in revised form 10 October 2016

Accepted 22 October 2016

Available online 8 November 2016

Keywords:

Firm-hosted online brand community

Socialization

Member education

Interaction support

Participation feedback

ABSTRACT

In the age of social media, an increasing number of firms have begun to host online brand communities (OBCs) to strengthen their relationship with their consumers. Despite the popularity of firm-hosted OBCs, building a successful online brand community is still a challenge for every firm because of the nature of voluntary participation. This paper introduces an organizational socialization approach to promote sustained member participation, a deciding factor for the success of online communities. Based on theory of organizational socialization, this study identifies three typical socialization tactics employed by sponsors of OBCs (i.e., member education, interaction support, and participation feedback). Further, we present an empirical study to examine their effects on members' membership continuance intention using the data collected from several firm-hosted OBCs. The mediator role of community identification and the moderator role of membership duration are investigated, and theoretical and managerial implications for community management are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In a socially networked marketplace, the conventional role of consumers has been significantly changed (Labrecque, vor dem Esche, Mathwick, Novak, & Hofacker, 2013; Weinberg, de Ruyter, Dellarocas, Buck, & Keeling, 2013). Consumers have become active participants in the value co-creation rather than outsiders of firms and passive receivers of goods and services (Bowen, 1986; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). For instance, customers supply technical assistance to other customers in firm-sponsored forums, create ads for Doritos and other brands, and make new product suggestions for Starbucks (mystarbucksidea.com). In this situation, consumers act as employees of firms, obscuring the firm–customer border (Achrol & Kotler, 1999). Recently, brands have become highly interested in organizing consumers in online brand communities (OBCs) in the current era of social media to harness the potential of consumers in value co-creation (Manchanda, Packard, & Pattabhiramaiah, 2015; Schau, Muñoz, & Arnould, 2009). In fact, previous studies have demonstrated that members in brand communities are ideal collaborators of firms in a variety of areas, such as product knowledge diffusion (Thompson & Sinha, 2008), product innovation (Füller, Matzler, & Hoppe, 2008), and word-of-mouth marketing (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010), among others.

However, organizing and maintaining a firm-hosted OBC is not an easy task (Butler, 2001). In comparison with the nuisance of employees' turnover that traditional organizations experience, OBCs suffer from the turnover of community members at a much higher level. About 68% of newcomers in an online community are reported to leave that community after their first participation because of the nature of voluntary participation in OBCs (Ren et al., 2012). Those who join the online community but leave at once are usually called “tourists” (Kozinets, 2002). An online community will not thrive if these tourists represent a large proportion of community members. Previous studies have also noted that “insiders” of communities, those who identify with brand communities, participate in communities frequently and collaborate with firms in value co-creation, thus guaranteeing the success of OBCs (Füller et al., 2008). Therefore, firms now increasingly make efforts to integrate community members as quasi-employees into their organizations by socializing them as insiders (Kozinets, 2002). These socialization efforts entail a wide range of practices, such as initiating brand events, offering the newest product information, rewarding members, formulating and implementing community policies, and so on (Homburg, Ehm, & Artz, 2015).

Previous research on OBCs has mainly focused on the motivational drivers (Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Pearo, 2004) and outcomes of customer participation in OBCs (Algesheimer, Borle, Dholakia, & Singh, 2010; Goh, Heng, & Lin, 2013; Manchanda et al., 2015). However, less is known about the role of firms' efforts in maintaining OBCs. Given the popularity of firm-hosted OBCs and firms' considerable efforts in managing communities, the lack of research attention is unexpected. In

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this paper, we draw from organizational socialization theory to address this research issue. The basic premise of organizational socialization theory is that socialization tactics adopted by organizations help employees to adapt to the organization. Considerable research has indicated that socialization efforts not only exist in traditional organizations but also in unique form of organizations, often referred to as online communities, extensively (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003). Thus, we introduce organizational socialization theory to the study of OBCs and develop a conceptual framework, in which we analyze how three socialization tactics (i.e., member education, interaction support, and participation feedback) employed by sponsors of OBCs affect the membership continuance intention in an online community. Furthermore, we investigate whether or not these tactics are equally effective for all segment members. In particular, we examine the contingent factor of membership duration.

This paper contributes to the literature in three respects. First, whereas previous research has mainly focused on members' motivational drivers and on the behavioral outcomes of community participation in OBCs, this paper discusses the role of firms' efforts in managing OBCs. In particular, this study introduces organizational socialization into the study of brand community and examines the effectiveness of socialization tactics in OBCs, thus extending the research on OBCs. Second, in contrast to previous research that has unanimously focused on the organizational socialization of employees in the context of conventional organizations, this paper investigates the effectiveness of organizational socialization in the context of an online setting and demonstrates that customers can be considered insiders of firms to be socialized into the organization. Therefore, organizational socialization theory itself is extended. Third, we find that the different socialization tactics are not equally important in retaining members in OBCs. Specifically, the results indicate that interaction support may be an effective way to encourage participation for members with long-term membership, while member education may be suitable in promoting participation among those with short-term membership. These results provide significant implications for online brand community management.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. We begin with a literature review of firm-hosted OBCs and organizational socialization theory. Then, we identify the three important socialization tactics commonly used by firms in OBCs and develop our research hypotheses. In the subsequent section, we describe the study context and data collection methods, and report the results. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the results and their managerial implications.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Firm-hosted OBCs

Brand community is defined as a “specialized, non-geographically bound community, and based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a branded good or service” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412). Many brand communities are built online with the development of social media. These communities are often referred to as OBCs. As OBCs provide a perfect platform for service support, information exchange, and customer education, firms increasingly adopt them as an important marketing tool. To reap the value of OBCs, many firms now make great efforts to maintain OBCs. These efforts usually entail initiating brand events, replying to members' posts, offering the newest product information, rewarding members, and so on (Homburg et al., 2015).

Although firms' efforts in managing OBCs are ubiquitous, previous research on OBCs has been mainly interested in understanding customers within these communities, including the motivational drivers of consumer participation (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; Jeppesen & Frederiksen, 2006; Zhou, Wu, Zhang, & Xu, 2013) and the outcome of this participation (Adjei, Noble, & Noble, 2010). The role of

firms' community management has received much less attention as shown in Table 1.

In the limited studies on the role of sponsors' community management effort, the findings are notably contradictory and far from conclusive. For example, on one hand, offline marketing activities have been found to be effective in promoting community integration, thus suggesting that firms' efforts to encourage interaction among members are valuable (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010). On the other hand, upon examination of how the efforts of online community sponsors could facilitate members' trust in them, sponsors' efforts in encouraging interactions

Table 1
Literature review of research on OBCs.

| Subarea of OBC research | Related studies | Key findings |
|---|--|--|
| Motivational drivers to participate in OBCs | Dholakia et al. (2004) Jeppesen and Frederiksen (2006) | Community participation is driven by value perceptions and social influence. Innovative users contribute innovation work to firm-hosted online communities because they are hobbyists and are motivated by firm recognition. |
| | Nambisan and Baron (2007) | Interaction-based benefits (i.e., learning, social integrative, personal integrative, and hedonic benefits) promote customer participation in virtual customer environments. |
| | Nambisan and Baron (2010) | A sense of responsibility, self-image enhancement, and community identification facilitate members' contribution to communities. |
| | Wiertz and de Ruyter (2007) | Relational social capital, including reciprocity, commitment to community, and commitment to the host firm, is associated with high-level quality and quantity of knowledge contribution. |
| Effects of participation | Adjei et al. (2010) | The quality of C2C communication in online communities increases the number of product purchase and product categories from which purchases are made. |
| | Thompson and Sinha (2008) | A high level of brand community participation will increase the speed of new product adoption. |
| | Goh et al. (2013) | Community participation increases members' purchase expenditures. |
| | Manchanda et al. (2015) | Members with more community participation spend more money on the brand than those with less community participation. |
| | Zhou, Zhang, Su and Zhou (2012) | Brand community identification and commitment is positively associated with brand identification and commitment. |
| Efforts of firms' management | Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann (2005) Porter and Donthu (2008) | Community identification increases future participation and evokes normative pressure. |
| | Stokburger-Sauer (2010) | Efforts in providing quality content and fostering embeddedness increase members' trust in community sponsors, but efforts in encouraging interaction do not. |
| | Homburg et al. (2015) | Compared with online communication activities, offline marketing activities (e.g., organizing an event) hosted by sponsors of brand communities are more effective in strengthening community integration and the consumer-brand relationship. Firms' engagement in online communities initially increases customer sentiment, but it undermines consumer sentiment when it is at a high levels. |

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