

MANAGING CONSUMER COMMITMENT THROUGH ONLINE BRAND COMMUNITIES: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM CHINA

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Abstract

The competitive virtual environment generates opportunities for organizations to secure ever-lasting relationship with consumers. This study revealed the relationship of perceived benefits and community commitment enjoyed by the consumers after joining online brand community. A sample of 308 respondents is obtained from China through social networking sites. The analytical outcome highlights the decisive role of hedonic, learning, self-esteem and social benefits for enhancing brand community commitment. Moreover, consumer knowledge before joining a brand page was investigated which concluded that consumer commitment is not moderated by consumer knowledge in an online brand community but it showed positive impact as an antecedent of community commitment. Brand managers could use this accessible tool for satisfying consumer needs and for enhancing brand attachment and loyalty. The future studies might investigate the impact of such consumer commitment on brand loyalty and brand equity by emphasizing on management perspective.

Keywords: Brand commitment, Community commitment, online brand community, Perceived benefits

Introduction:

Radical advancement in information and communication technologies (ICTs) has extended the scope of media for self-participation and information sharing. Such platforms facilitate consumers to get beneficial information from various ICTs devices rather than having an offline interaction, that initiated online brand communities (OBCs). Brand

community is depicted as “*specialized, non-geographically bound community, and based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand*” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). The combination of ICTs and brand management have broadened the understanding about brand equity for brand managers because online brand community (OBC) has presented lots of opportunities for customer relationship management (CRM) as discussed in prior studies such as (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al., 2002; Nambisan & Baron, 2009; Casaló et al., 2007). In virtual environment, brands earn fame when consumer disclose personal experiences, speak about the product and provide personality attributes. Almost, every multinational company has launched OBCs platforms for creating a direct relationship with their consumers which are operated through official website. Moreover, enthusiastic consumers built their personal groups/pages that provide informative discussions, guidelines about pre-purchase or post-purchase services. On the contrary, many companies have failed to retain consumers because they misinterpreted the consumer’s personal and social needs (Fournier & Lee, 2009). The prior studies also neglected the consequence of benefits gained by consumers through engaging in an OBC and its impact on consumer commitment. OBCs are not limited for business activities but usually act as platform for social interactions and information sharing among community members (Hagel and Armstrong 1997). Exclusively, the obligation of commitment among members that influence attitudes and consumer behavior are unique characteristics for an OBC (Williams and Cothrell, 2000). The interest in the subject is based on the growing impact of social media and its implication within an online community because the influence of member’s participation effect individual’s behavioral attributes for a desired brand or product. Thus, purpose of this study is twofold: Firstly to explore the key categorizes of drivers that result in OBC participation. Secondly, investigate the relationship between OBC participation and community commitment through consumer knowledge before joining an online community. By examining these constructs, this study guide marketers with valuable insight on managing OBC for ever-lasting relationship with consumers.

Literature review:

Online brand communities have initiated digital marketing management which integrates consumer commitment, brand advocacy and brand relationship. With the emergence of OBCs, marketers are upturning the focus of brand by maintain communities on virtual environment (McAlexander et al., 2002). So, the benefits enjoyed by OBCs members are consequence of their participation which became an influential factor for consumer behavior analysis (Andersen, 2005). Moreover, marketing

practitioners also need to understand the dynamic drivers of OBC participation for an individual because such participation effects the community member's commitment.

Drivers of OBC participation:

Specifying desired drivers for members in an OBC is pivotal for building consumer-brand relationship and studied as antecedent of consumer participation (Nambisan & Baron, 2009). Prior studies regarding OBCs explored drivers from two aspects which are members' needs and degree of participation. As this study focused on the level of participation, the drivers are categorized in functional, social, psychological and hedonic. The work of Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) examined these drivers as information learning, sense of belonging, level of communication and utilizing leisure time. Furthermore, Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo (2004) suggested five attitudes of OBC members which determine level of participation as: purposive, inter-connectivity, self-discovery, entertainment and social appreciation. However, Yen, Hsu, and Huang (2011) investigated factors for online participation that comprised on rewards perceived members, self appreciation and product support such as technical support or problem solving solutions.

Various scholars have to borrowed uses and gratification theory to study consumer participation in a virtual environment, such as Sicilia and Palazon (2008) applied this approach in Coca Cola themed OBC by extracting social, utility and entertainment values. Moreover, Nambisan and Baron (2009) applied this approach and derived fours variables about member's need which comprised on cognitive, social-integrative, personal integrative and hedonic drivers. Based on these studies, we extracted four groups of factors that are perceived drivers or values for members while participating in an OBC. Firstly, learning drivers comprise on information sharing benefits related to brand/product, product support services, understand technical attributes and sharing facts about product/brand (Yen et al., 2011). The second group comprise on social drivers that boost consumer engagement such as sense of belonging, expanding social network, degree of communication and members appreciations (Dholakia et al., 2004). Third set of drivers includes self-esteem that explain expected status that member seek in an OBC. It includes sharing personal experience, counseling new members and inviting less-committed consumer for active participation. Fourth set of drivers contain hedonic factors which is an integral variable in all the prior literatures. Hedonic drivers comprise on providing favorable circumstances for utilizing leisure time and feel relaxed and connected with their preferred brand/product. Based on literature, we proposed following hypotheses:

- H_{1a}: Learning drivers' positivity influence online brand community participation.*
H_{1b}: Social drivers' positivity influence online brand community participation.
H_{1c}: Self-esteem drivers' positivity influence online brand community participation.
H_{1d}: Hedonic drivers' positivity influence online brand community participation.

Brand community commitment:

Community approach is described in virtual environment as a group of people who communicate for longstanding affection (Rheingold, 1993). For this study, we adopted Jeppesen and Frederiksen (2006) definition of OBCs “*brand community is a group of people who endorse a particular brand, have common interest and participate actively in online and offline environment*”. Customers are involved in different cognitive practices through which they evaluate information related to their favorite brands (Raju et al., 2009). The work of Beatty & Kahle (1988) concluded that product information selection depends on the brand commitment which describes consumer attachment to a particular brand. The brand commitment also influence brand evaluation process that establishes a negative feeling about competitors brands while making a purchase decision. In this situation, consumer behavior changes their attitude when they recognize unfavorable comments about endorsed brand. Moreover, consumers gather only those beliefs that provide positive opinions, maintain relationship and boost brand advocacy (Jain & Maheswaran, 2000). On the contrary, less brand committed consumers are targeted by competing brands because they look for information that satisfies their product need particularly (Raju et al., 2009). Such consumers have higher probability to purchase competitor brands because through information evaluation process both endorsed brand and competitors brand have some attributes (Sanbonmatsu et al., 2005).

Previous studies concluded commitment as an exchange practice through which loyalty is created among members. The attitudinal aspect suggested that commitment is based on strong beliefs that are built on organizational goals. Community commitment guide organizations to promote positive word of mouth and recommendations (Gruen et al. 2000). Brand communities that are comprised on virtual environment are represented by group of commitment consumers that share common goals and intentions (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). These members put forward various discussions which involve product usability, technical understand, modification and personal experiences (Casaló et al., 2007), such interactions enhance brand commitment and loyalty. Thus, aggressive participation in brand community creates expertise, familiarly and comparative attributes in consumers because they are highly commitment with the brand and promote positive word of mouth (WOM) and attract other less-committed consumers (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). To endorse brand perception and association on

OBCs, these consumers share or post effective information that engage new members and other consumers for supporting attitudinal positions (Raju et al., 2009). Such actions increase brand commitment and emotional attachment with brand. The emotional bond between consumer and brand community creates active participation and relationship satisfaction (Casaló et al., 2007). The study of Wang & Fesenmaier (2004) explained that product related reviews, consumer experiences and product-related expertise enhance member's attitude towards brand. In OBCs, community commitment is mentioned as a psychological affection that generates relationship values. Thus, we proposed that positive participation in OBCs influence brand community commitment.

H₂: Online brand community participation positivity influence brand community commitment.

In OBCs, emotional attachment is very less as compared to offline brand communities because, majority of consumer involve in OBCs are passionate about product information or hedonic benefits (Shang et al. 2006). Consumer intention to participate in OBC is based on functional and hedonic benefits because functional benefits include exchange of product information and hedonic benefits provide member with a positive and rich experiences through engagement (Holland and Baker, 2001). Nevertheless, benefits acquired by consumers through OBCs also influence the actual purchasing behavior, brand commitment and opinions about the brand (Hagel and Armstrong, 1997). The activities which were carried out by reference groups are taken over by OBCs and many multinational companies are working on OBCs for their strategic objectives to reach specific target consumers. The inter-relationships between members in an OBC form a brand-centric behavior that advocate various brand building strategies such as brand commitment, co-production, WOM and value creation (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). These brand building strategies guide companies to classify consumer behavior and needs precisely that permit marketing managers to create long-lasting relationship with minimal efforts.

Consumer commitment:

Anderson and Weitz (1992) described commitment as a state of establishing stable relationship with stakeholders by waiving short-term goals in exchange for long-term relationship and attachment. For maintaining long-lasting ties, community commitment is a mandatory condition for an online community (Moorman et al., 1992). The work of Berry and Parasuraman (1991) suggested that relationship among members and with brand are fabricated on the grounds on mutual commitment. In prior literature, commitment is considered as a vital attribute for relationship marketing management for attaining organizational objectives by utilizing

consumer confidence through functional and emotional benefits (Geyskens et al., 1996, Macintosh and Lockshin, 1997). The work of Gundlach et al. (1995) explored that commitment is indeed a critical aspect due to intervene of digital marketing because as consumer commitment increases, it is expected that boost active participation and return of investment. Moreover, commitment is an antecedent for gaining competitive advantage through causal relationships of profitability, premium pricing and positive recommendations (Reichheld, 1996).

In consumer-brand relationship domain, brand community commitment indicate users attitude which includes participation, supporting, assisting and contributing in OBC activities. It underlines attitudinal behavior when a user endorses the value of relationship among member. While, prior studies also considered community commitment as a mediator which positively impact brand performance (Jang et al., 2008). With respect to OBCs, commitment showed more in-depth aspects of attitudinal behavior like Algesheimer et al., (2005) concluded that brand association is precise and positive for online community members because they exhibit active attachment to relationship quality of a brand. Pervious literatures studied brand commitment from three aspects: behavioral, integrative and attitudinal. For this study, we extracted behavioral approach of brand community commitment due to bridging factors of OBCs, emotional attachment and strong bond between consumer-brand relationships (Wiener, 1982). The perception of OBC commitment is to foresee actual behavior of devoted consumer who value continual relationship with brand. On the contrary, leader's passion, entertainment orientation and offline interaction are antecedents of brand commitment (Koh et al., 2003; Hocutt, 1998). The leaders in OBCs are mostly creator of that brand community which decides rules, rewards systems and offline interaction effects engagement due to known personality traits (Koh et al., 2007; Yoo et al., 2002). Moreover, if OBCs are created by companies the purpose are building brand commitment, positive participation and managing member's experiences about products. While, consumer-initiated OBCs require voluntarily participation in different activities such as comparing features with competitive products, open to feedback and opinions, posting valuable information and building trust among members. Thus, consumers favor product information and experiences from peers which enhance their commitment for a brand.

H₃: consumer knowledge has a positive impact on the relationship of OBC participation and brand community commitment

In virtual environment, consumer buying decision is primarily dependent on the information shared by other consumers about that product/brand and alternative brands/products are easily accessible. The commitment community members interact with such consumers to provide

them the best support and suggestions to satisfy new consumers. For an OBC member, commitment is identified by the information shared by that community and effects for generating long-lasting relationship with that member. These benefits are attained through presenting positive attitudes and supporting brand advocacy within that online community.

Theoretical framework:

As this study is associated with relationship marketing in OBCs, thus we applied social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) due to its ties to behavioral aspects which explored the benefits gained by consumer in OBCs and its impact on brand community commitment. A proposed framework shown in (Figure I) interprets OBCs participation drivers and its influence on brand community commitment which is moderated by consumer knowledge about that brand by using ICTs.

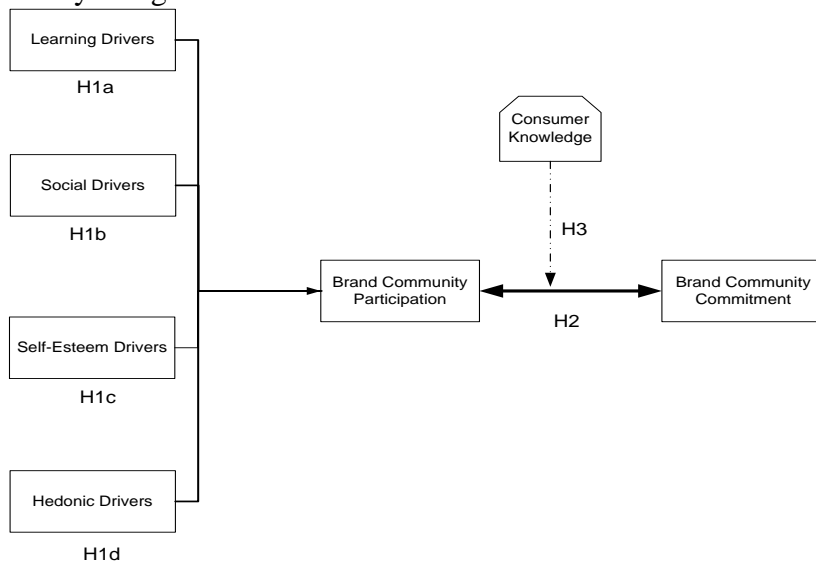


Figure 1: Proposed framework of managing brand community commitment

Research methodology:

The scales and measures of key variables are adopted from prior literature based on the context used in this study. These studies mostly measured constructs on a 5-point likert scale but we expanded likert scale to 7-point “strong disagree to strongly agree” for an in-depth consumer behavior and to make a better fit with proposed relationships. Thus, learning drivers comprised on three items that are adopted from Yen et al. (2011) & Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) by presenting cronbach's alpha of [0.834]. Social drivers consist of three items that are borrowed from Nambisan and Baron (2009) & Dholakia et al. (2004) by depicted cronbach's alpha of [0.831]. The items regarding self-esteem drivers are adopted from Sicilia and

Palazon (2008) by presenting cronbach's alpha of [0.906]. Hedonic drivers comprised on three items borrowed from Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) by showing cronbach's alpha of [0.891]. As, we have discussed that these drivers of OBC leverage brand community participation. Thus, we adopted three items about OBC participation from the study of Woisetschläger et al. (2008) which presented a cronbach's alpha of [0.907]. The construct of brand community commitment comprised on three items with a cronbach's alpha of [0.887] which are borrowed from the work of Garbarino & Johnson (1999).

Sample and demographics:

Based on the subject of this study, we choose netnography methodology for collecting response on our fully-structured questionnaire because research objective clearly defined that virtual environment influences the OBC participation and brand community commitment. Thus, we published our survey on a website that links to different social media networks in China. The responses are collected during the period March, 2014 to October, 2014 and 587 respondents viewed the questionnaire. However, 308 out of 524 respondents submitted information with a response rate of 58.77%.

The statistical examination investigated bivariate, factor analysis, multi-regression and cronbach's alpha of constructs. The demographic characteristics presented that mostly respondents (48.7%) are 21-30 years and (30.5%) are 31-40 years. Female represented (63.3%) and male represented (36.7%) while (45.1%) have completed their under-graduation studies and (44.2%) have earned post-graduation or above. Moreover, (44.5%) respondents spend 4-6 hours on internet everyday while (33.2%) of respondents spend more than 7 hours on internet per day. Table I enlist demographics characteristics of 308 respondents.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents

<i>Variable (N=308)</i>		<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Age in years	Less than 20	23	7.5
	21-30	150	48.7
	31-40	94	30.5
	41 or above	41	13.3
Education attained	High school or below	17	5.5
	Junior College	13	4.2
	Undergraduate	139	45.1
	Postgraduate or above	136	44.2
	Others	3	1.0
Gender	Male	113	36.7
	Female	195	63.3
Family income per month	3,000 RMB or Less	141	45.8
	3,001 - 5,000 RMB	74	24.0
	5,001- 8,000 RMB	44	14.3

	8,001 – 12,000 RMB	16	5.2
	12,001RMB or More	33	10.7
Occupation	Office worker	62	20.1
	Govt. employee	59	19.2
	Professional	15	4.9
	Business owner	36	11.7
	Student	123	39.9
	Housewife	12	3.9
	Others	1	0.3
Internet usage per day	< 1 Hours	6	1.9
	1-3 Hours	69	22.4
	4-6 Hours	131	42.5
	> 7 Hours	102	33.1

Results:

To classify items regarding drivers for OBC participation, we used principal component analysis based on eigen-value >1 and rank them according to variance explained by them. The KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) test provide sample adequacy of 0.906 that is defined as excellent and fit to factor analysis (Hutcheson & Sofroniou, 1999). Rotated factor matrix extracted drivers for OBC participation that are shown in (Table 2). First category presented hedonic drivers as vital benefits for OBC participation that explained a variance of 23.38 by loading four items. Second category comprise on learning drivers with a variance of 21.05 by loading three items. Third category is grouped as self-esteem drivers by loading two items with a variance of 18.56. Lastly, items relevant to social drivers are loaded by presenting a variance of 16.04. Therefore, drivers for OBC participation are organized into four categories with respect to their variance for analyzing further investigation.

Table 2: Principal component analysis of perceived benefits in Online brand Community (OBC)

Motive (Eigen-value)	Loading	Variance explained
Hedonic drivers		23.38
Feel pleased and relaxed	0.846	
Gain joy and happiness	0.818	
Feel inspired	0.711	
Feel sense of satisfaction	0.563	
Learning drivers		21.05
Understanding of components and technical development	0.858	
Solve problem associated to brand	0.798	
Increase knowledge	0.785	
Self-esteem drivers		18.56
Increase credibility and authority	0.827	
Enhance status and reputation	0.799	

Social drivers		16.40
Strengthen connection with other members	0.757	
Expand social network	0.741	
People share common interest	0.514	

The bivariate correlation analysis is presented in (Table 3) with mean and standard deviation of key constructs. The link between brand community traits showed that duration of membership is negatively related to level of posting and degree of visiting an OBC. However, degree of visiting and level of posting are strongly correlation and positive at $p < .001$. These traits outlined that higher the degree of visiting an OBC, higher the level of posting or commenting. The drivers for OBC participation are strongly correlated at $p < .001$ with OBC participation and consumer commitment towards brand community. Thus, we summarize that level of posting and degree of visiting influence OBC participation but drivers for OBC participation are key decisive factors for consumer participation and commitment.

Table 3: Correlation, mean, standard deviation of variables

	Mean	Std. Dev	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Duration of membership	2.44	1.55	1.00								
2 Degree of visiting	3.03	1.69	-.31**	1.00							
3 Level of posting/like	4.61	1.21	-.27**	.44*	1.00						
4 Learning drivers	4.39	1.24	.15**	.24*	.10	1.00					
5 Social drivers	3.94	1.32	.132*	.26*	.27*	.59*	1.00				
6 Self-esteem drivers	3.41	1.38	-.31	.14*	.16*	.32*	.70*	1.00			
7 Hedonic drivers	4.04	1.30	.076	.30*	.26*	.53*	.72*	.68*	1.00		
8 OBC participation	3.79	1.37	.106	.30*	.25*	.51*	.75*	.66*	.72*	1.00	
9 Consumer commitment	3.93	1.37	.099	.29*	.17*	.56*	.61*	.54*	.66*	.69*	1.00

** Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

To examine the impact of drivers on online brand community participation, we generated a liner regression which predicted $R^2 = 65.1\%$ and $Adj.R^2 = 64.7\%$ at $p < 0.05$ as given in Table 4. The predictor showed that social drivers influenced OBC participation followed by hedonic, self-esteem and learning drivers. This illustrates that social and hedonic drivers are very

important predictor of OBC participation such as 1% increase in social drivers will increase OBC participation by 35.7% and 1% increase in hedonic drivers will increase OBC participation by 29.6%. Therefore, we accept all the hypotheses based on this regression which demonstrate that H_{1b} , H_{1c} & H_{1d} are significant at $p < .001$ and H_{1a} is significant at $p < 0.05$. The results summarize that learning, social, self-esteem and hedonic drivers are predictor of OBC participation, so brand managers should target these four drivers as benefits to boost member participation in an OBC.

Table 4: Regression analysis of online brand community participation

Dependent variable	Online brand community participation (OBC_P)		
	β	Sig.	<i>t</i>
α	.035	.851	.188
Hedonic drivers	.296**	.000	5.39
Learning drivers	.087*	.051	1.96
Social drivers	.357**	.000	6.04
Self-esteem drivers	.184**	.001	3.48

R .807

R^2 .651**

Adjusted R^2 .647

** $p < 0.001$, * $p < 0.05$

The relationship between brand community commitment, OBC participation and consumer knowledge about brand is examined through multiple regression analysis by using consumer knowledge as a moderator. After centering OBC participation and consumer knowledge, we generated an interaction term for analyzing H_2 and H_3 (Aiken & West, 1991). Results outlined that OBC participation ($\beta = .640$, $p < .001$) and consumer knowledge ($\beta = .152$, $p < .001$) are associated with brand community commitment (Model#1). The interaction term showed insignificant behavior ($\beta = -.040$, $p > .05$), while OBC participation and consumer knowledge remained significant in (Model#2) as shown in (Table 5). Therefore, we summarized that brand community commitment towards OBC is not moderated by consumer knowledge and F-value change of model#2 is less than model#1 which means that interaction term don't significantly improve the model fit.

Table 5: Regression analysis of Consumer commitment with interaction & without interaction

Model #1		Model #2	
Dependent variable	Brand community Commitment	Dependent variable	Brand community Commitment
R	.707	R	0.709
R^2	.50**	R^2	.50**
Adjusted R^2	.497	Adjusted R^2	0.497
F-value	152.7	F-value	102.1

Predictors	β	Sig.	<i>t</i>	VIF	Predictors	β	Sig.	<i>t</i>	VIF
α	.989**	.000	5.39		α	1.02*	.000	5.38	
OBC_P	.640**	.000	14.8	1.14	OBC_P	.640*	.000	14.67	1.14
CE	.152**	.001	3.51	1.14	CE	.152*	.001	3.51	1.40
					OBC&CE	-.040	.328	-.980	1.00

** $p < 0.001$, * $p < 0.05$

OBC_P = Online brand community participation

CE = Consumer knowledge about brand, before joining OBC

OBC&CE = Interaction term *OBC_P***CE*

Discussion:

As, this study investigated impact of drivers for OBC participation (hedonic, learning, self-esteem, social and self-esteem) on consumer commitment in a virtual environment. The finding proposed that brand community commitment towards a brand emerge when consumers perceived these drivers in an online brand community. Such brand community commitment is an evidence for long-term relationship, belonging and brand attachment which are persistent with prior studies such as (Kang, 2004; Koh & Om, 2006). The results showed that community members who are more committed are expected to generate positive beliefs about that brand/product within the community. This study also found that entertainment, leisure and sharing product knowledge are integral observed drivers for online brand community participation. Particularly, if brand communities are built on consumer interested benefits such as leisure and product information- this increase brand advocacy and commitment in the context of China. Moreover, results proposed that online brand community participation effect brand community commitment but consumer knowledge about the brand before joining the brand community don't moderate this relationship. This is all due to human psychology because when members interact in virtual environment, they leisure, share experiences and inherent different opinion about brand (Arora, 2009). The participations in an online brand community increase social network that promote new consumer without additional cost (Jang et al., 2008; Arora, 2009). Furthermore, this study also revealed that entertainment and social factors provide a platform for industries to develop digital marketing strategies that engage consumers and guide brand manager to promote brand by incurring less cost as compared to traditional marketing techniques.

Conclusion and Managerial implications:

Online brand communities are emerging and gaining strength in brand management because communication devices transformed into sharing

moments and information devices. Thus, many multinational companies have developed virtual communities for their consumer to get closer relationship. This presented brand advocacy, loyalty, emotional attachment and identification of consumer needs. Encounter with other members that share common interest provide motivation to consumer to feel more united. Based on research objectives, online brand communities are accessible tool for satisfying consumer needs and boosting brand commitment. Furthermore, brand managers should offer different activities like support services, organizing events and creating new entertainment platforms for brand community members that drives towards rapid growth, higher market performance and long-term relationship. It portrait an impression that companies care devoted consumer that increase motivation and association between brand community, brand and members.

The commitment is psychological bonds that connect members with brand community because it appears as a belief that resulted in involvement and benefits which cannot be easily available (Bateman et al., 2011). Online brand communities are productive means for enhancing brand attitudes, attachment and loyalty but consumer commitment is very necessary to cultivate these brand values. Future studies should explore in-depth behavior of brand community commitment based on three dimensions which comprise on continuance, affective, and normative. These community commitment aspects could provide valuable insights of consumer commitment on the grounds of the perceived benefits studied in this paper. There are several limitation regarding this study like alternative method may be used for categorizing perceived benefits and this paper faced a regional constraint, may be international or cross-cultural study could provide better fit for brand community commitment. Moreover, future research should collect longitudinal data for analyzing dynamics of OBCs and impact on the relationship behavior.

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