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Article information:

To cite this document: Won-Moo Hur, Kwang-Ho Ahn, Minsung Kim, (2011), "Building brand loyalty through managing brand community commitment", Management Decision, Vol. 49 Iss: 7 pp. 1194 - 1213

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Building brand loyalty through managing brand community commitment

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to: analyze the effect of trust and affect toward a brand community on the commitment of brand communities; and investigate the mechanism through which the commitment of a brand community is able to increase various loyalty behaviors (e.g. repurchase intentions, positive word-of-mouth, and constructive complaints).

Design/methodology/approach – In order to test the hypotheses, a total of 200 Chinese female online brand community users were sampled, specifically users who had been active in the online brand community for over a year, and Partial Least Squares (PLS) analysis was performed.

Findings – The results identified the significant positive paths: brand community trust → brand community commitment; brand community affect → brand community commitment; and brand community commitment → brand loyalty behaviors. In addition brand community commitment was found to play a mediating role in the relationships between brand community trust/affect and brand loyalty. Finally, brand community commitment was seen to have a stronger effect on word-of-mouth than on constructive complaints.

Research limitations/implications – This study demonstrates the need to elaborate the brand community commitment construct. Specifically, attention to the underlying dimensions of commitment should identify more dynamic relationships among trust/affect, brand community commitment, and brand loyalty behaviors.

Practical implications – Marketing executives and brand managers who are considering customer loyalty improvement strategies must understand the value of managing an online brand community effectively. The findings of this study suggest significant ways to increase brand loyalty behaviors, particularly for brands seeking to broaden their appeal in the female Chinese market.

Originality/value – In contrast with the existing studies dealing with community commitment as an attitudinal antecedent of brand loyalty, this study empirically tested the mediating role of community commitment based on Baron and Kenny's logic. Moreover, the mediation was found to have a differential effect, namely a partial mediation for the relationships community trust-repurchase intention/WOM but a full mediation for the relationship brand community affect-constructive complaint.

Keywords Brand loyalty, Brand management

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

Many industries already in the mature stage of their lifecycle hardly expect profit increases by securing new customers. Nonetheless, the quest for new sources of profit receives a great deal of attention. Consequently, the leading companies in those industries do their best to induce additional purchases from their loyal customers, whereas late starters are fighting to reduce the brand switching rate and block customers out of the leaders. All of their efforts are directed toward enhancing customer loyalty, since increased customer loyalty results in favorable behaviors, such as customers' repurchasing, positive word-of-mouth to nudge the competitors' customer base, and cross-selling (Verhoef *et al.*, 2002; Hur *et al.*, 2010; Stokburger-Sauer, 2010).

A wide variety of programs have been developed and implemented to increase customer loyalty. The majority of these programs target customers' functional and economic benefits (e.g. price-discounts, coupons, mileage programs, etc.). However, these types of loyalty programs are necessary but not a sufficient condition to simultaneously increase multifaceted customer loyalty (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2005). That is, increasing customer loyalty in a holistic sense requires a series of customized marketing strategies adapted to various loyalty types.

The recent combination of customers' brand commitment and the growth of their internet use has broadened marketers' understanding of loyalty enhancement programs. Advances in information and communication technologies, in particular internet and mobile related ones, have presented both threats and opportunities in customer relationship management, in which brand communities are receiving major attention (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996; McAlexander *et al.*, 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Sheth and Parvatiyar, 1995).

Research interest in brand communities was initiated by the fact that brand communities help companies to attract individual customers and to strengthen relationships with those customers, thereby establishing long-term relationships (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010). These enduring relationships with customers make companies more competitive and as a result greatly improve their marketing productivity (Berry, 1995; Webster, 1992). Studies on brand communities, however, have not been able to deal with the whole circle, from initiating relationships with customers to the improvement of marketing productivity. Instead, the research focus has been on diverse areas, such as the effect of attitudes toward brand communities on brand loyalty (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005; Jang *et al.*, 2008), attitudes based on the level of congruity between a brand community and the self-concept, and relationships between brand community activities and brand community loyalty (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006). The reason for this type of diverse research focus is that a brand community is often defined in terms of the relationships in which the customers situated, including relationships between the customer and the brand, between the customer and the company, between the customer and the product in use, and among fellow customers (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002).

Considering that existing studies have identified the significant role of brand commitment on building brand loyalty, and that brand community studies have limited themselves in dealing with "commitment" as a crucial player in enhancing loyalty behaviors, this study seeks to investigate the role of brand community commitment on the brand community loyalty behaviors, as well as examine the antecedents of brand community commitment.

The major objective of this study, therefore, is to empirically test the structural model including antecedents of brand community commitment, brand community commitment, and brand community outcomes (loyalty behaviors). The specific aims of this study include the following. First, this study adopts trust and affect toward the brand community as antecedents of brand community commitment and analyzes the effect of trust and affect toward a brand community. The significant relationships between trust and commitment and between affect and commitment have been identified in previous brand management studies (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Harris and Goode, 2004; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). However, this framework has not been empirically tested in a brand community management setting. Since the focus of this study is to understand brand community in the context of the customer-brand relationship, one of the relationships addressed in McAlexander *et al.* (2002), it is expected that testing the effect of trust and affect toward the brand community on brand community commitment will corroborate the significant role of trust and affect in building commitment and committed behaviors (i.e. loyalty behaviors). Second, this study investigates the mechanism through which brand community commitment is able to increase varied loyalty behaviors (e.g. repurchase intentions, positive word-of-mouth, and constructive complaints). The mediating effect of brand community commitment is tested using Baron and Kenny's (1986) logic, the results being analyzed to identify the role of brand community commitment as a mediator.

With these specific research purposes, this study first defines brand community in general and conceptualizes commitment in the brand community context. It then discusses the antecedents and consequences of brand community commitment through an extensive literature review. Next, the methodology section provides details of the sampling process, measures, analysis methods, and results. Finally, the discussion section explores the theoretical and managerial implications of this study and suggests directions for future research.

Theoretical background and research hypotheses

Brand community and brand community commitment

With the importance of brand community having been emphasized recently, marketers are increasingly focusing on building, managing, and maintaining brand communities (e.g. McAlexander *et al.*, 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). The concept of community has been defined in various ways. Rheingold (1993) defines it as a group of people who have longtime interactions with rich individual affection, which is mediated by computers online. On the other hand, Jones (2000) conceptualizes community as a group of people who interact in computer-mediated space with computer-mediated communication (CMC) support. For the purpose of this study, brand community is defined as a group of people who possess a particular brand or who have a strong interest in a brand, and who are active both online and offline (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Jeppesen and Frederiksen, 2006).

The major goals of brand community participation are functional and hedonic. Functional goals refer to information exchange among community members, whereas hedonic goals lead people to have a rich and positive experience through the interactions among them (Holland and Baker, 2001). Regardless of which goal is set before the participation, the impact of brand communities on private lives has been increasing, such as through actual product purchasing and consumption, or the

formation of opinions toward brands or products (Hagel and Armstrong, 1997), since they have been replacing the role performed by existing reference groups (Constant *et al.*, 1996). As such, companies have begun to use brand communities for the strategic purpose of getting closer to a particular target market segment. Members of a brand community determine the agenda and specific community activities by the inter-relationships among members who possess the same brand, and as they exchange information and/or meanings about the brand (Muniz and Schau, 2005), they form a brand-centered sub-culture (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), which could be used for companies' brand-building strategies. Therefore, the interaction between companies and brand communities is helpful for companies to identify customers' characteristics and needs more accurately, so that companies are able to manage long-term customer relationships at a lower cost.

Commitment refers to the state of developing stable relationships with partners, accepting short-term sacrifices in order to maintain relationships and assuring the stability of the relationships (Anderson and Weitz, 1992). It is also defined as customers' confidence that the functional and affective benefits from maintaining these relationships are greater than the benefits from ending them (Geyskens *et al.*, 1996). Commitment is mentioned as a core feature of relationship marketing management (Doney and Cannon, 1997; Macintosh and Lockshin, 1997), and as a requirement for achieving a company's goals (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). For example, Gundlach *et al.*, (1995, p. 78) insist that commitment ought to be considered as critical in marketing because the focus of marketing is moving from "deals" to "relationships." When a customer is committed to a brand or a company, it is highly likely that the customer will cooperate actively and will not easily be attracted to competitors, which in turn will increase profits. In addition, commitment is regarded as the source of a company's sustainable competitiveness because it has causal relations with a company's cost reduction and profit increase, the word-of-mouth effect through recommendations, and a premium pricing effect (Reichheld, 1996).

In the context of consumer-brand relationship, community commitment refers to each member's attitude toward the community. In this regard, the concept of commitment is used as a predictor of members' actual behaviors in an online community, such as participating in community activities, offering help to the community, and solving problems for others. Considering the role of commitment in the relationship with actual behaviors in the community, commitment should be treated as an attitudinal factor that is emphasized when members acknowledge the value of continuing relationships between their community and themselves. On the other hand, studies focusing on the mediating role of community commitment have identified that this construct positively affects brand performance, such as brand loyalty (Jang *et al.*, 2008; Füller *et al.*, 2007). Other studies report that community members who commit more to their online communities perceive brand identification more positively and clearly, showing stronger attachment to brand relationship quality (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005).

Antecedents of brand community commitment

Trust is highlighted in relationship marketing as a precursor of commitment (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). The discussion on trust mainly began in B2B areas, which are typically characterized by asymmetric information exchange and uncertainty. Reciprocal trust is

especially important for long-term, stable transactions, and moreover, for committed relationships (McDonald, 1981). Anderson and Narus (1990) define trust as a generalized expectancy concerning partners' future behavior. Trust is also thought of as involving a "calculative process" (Doney and Cannon, 1997), determining whether to stay in a relationship based on a cost-benefit evaluation. In this regard, Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) present the notion of brand trust, resulting in a well thought out and carefully considered process. Brand trust can be seen as the tendency of the customer to believe that a brand keeps its promise regarding performance (Füller *et al.*, 2008).

Since the formation of trust is based on the observations and experiences of interactions with partners, continued satisfaction often leads to trust (Ganesan, 1994). According to Williams and Hazer (1986), it is possible to form satisfaction in a relatively short time through previous interactions, which positively affects trust. It takes longer to build trust than satisfaction, and customers depend more on their trust than on satisfaction in their decision-making in terms of whether they commit or not (Achrol, 1991). A logical extension along these lines is that trust toward a brand community positively influences brand community commitment, while noting that currently there is a lack of studies dealing directly with the relationship between trust and commitment in the brand community context.

Whereas trust reduces uncertainty and reinforces relationships with customers at a cognitive level, affect is often related to a positive emotional response, one that is more spontaneous, more immediate, and less deliberately reasoned in nature (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001, p. 82). Studies dealing with long-term relationships between customers and brands emphasize affective attachment as an important customer response and one of the determinants of committed behavior (Dick and Basu, 1994; Fournier, 1998; Gundlach *et al.*, 1995). The positive affect generated by brand community activities will enhance committed responses, such as consciousness of a kind (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) and integration in the brand community (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002).

Consequences of brand community commitment

Wiener (1982) considers commitment as a process of bridging a certain set of leading variables and the resulting behavioral outcomes, and concludes that commitment is a motivational factor (Wiener, 1982). Staw (1980) classifies commitment as either attitudinal or behavioral. The former involves emotional attachment to a community and often leads to strong community membership; the latter results in actual behaviors beyond mere emotional attachment. Customer loyalty is an actual and profound behavior that consistently supports and repurchases preferred products or services, despite competitors' marketing efforts to change their behavior (Oliver, 1997). On the other hand, Dick and Basu (1994) define customer loyalty as the relationship between relative attitude and repeat patronage. They suggest three research streams: behavioral, attitudinal, and integrative viewpoints (Jacoby and Chestnut, 1978).

The recent integrative approach has opened a more detailed research perspective on loyalty, which is divided further by the degree, level, or strength of the loyalty. Dick and Basu (1994) categorize four kinds of loyalty: true, latent, spurious, and low loyalty. Ganesh *et al.* (2000) classify loyalty behaviors into two categories, so that active loyalty includes positive word-of-mouth and additional sales, whereas passive loyalty includes service maintenance. In addition, brand community offers a space for committed users to express their brand improvement ideas and/or complaints about bad experiences with

the brand. Such expressions appear more from highly committed users (Schappe, 1998; Van Dyne and Ang, 1998), which represent the positive relationship between brand community commitment and constructive complaints from brand community users.

Following previous studies of varied loyalty behaviors based on the strength of loyalty between the company and customers (Dick and Basu, 1994; Ganesh *et al.*, 2000; Hirschman, 1970), this study includes repurchase intentions, positive word-of-mouth, and constructive complaints as consequences of brand community commitment.

Hypotheses

This study consists of two parts. The first part analyzes the effects of trust and affect toward brand communities on brand community commitment. The second part investigates the differential effect of brand community commitment on loyalty behaviors divided according to their strength, namely repurchase intentions, positive word-of-mouth, and constructive complaints. The specific research hypotheses are as follows (see Figure 1).

The effects of trust and affect toward a brand community on brand community commitment. Customers as rational beings pursue the maximum value in every transaction, so they try to engage in transactions with the company which offers the best value. In this regard, trust is considered to be one of the most important mediators leading to commitment in buyer-seller relationships (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Moorman *et al.* (1993) identify that trust leads to commitment in labor relations, and Schemwell *et al.* (1994) suggest that trust provides higher value in relationships, which in turn improves the quality of the relationship. Based on this discussion, brand community commitment seems to be influenced by brand community trust, suggesting the following hypothesis for brand community users:

- H1. Brand community users' trust toward a brand community will have a positive effect on their brand community commitment.

Customers express themselves through the brands they like, and they are favorable and attached to brands having higher congruity with their self-image. As a result, they

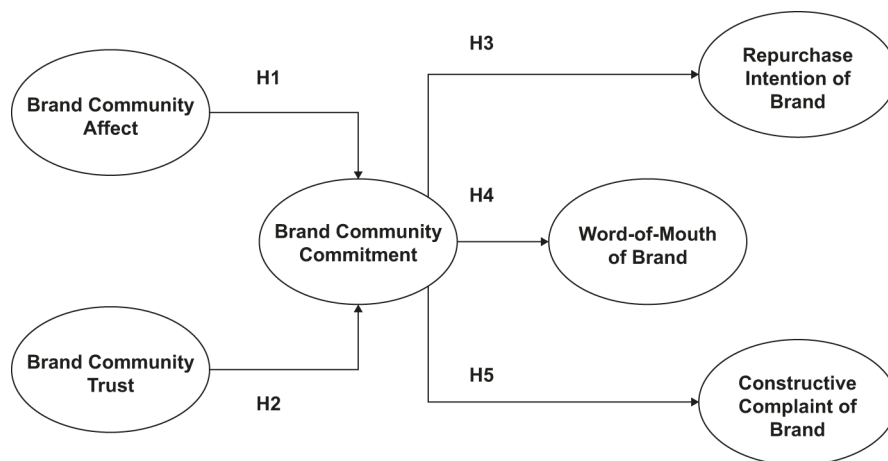


Figure 1.
Research model

are highly likely repurchase such brands consistently (Jamal and Goode, 2001). Graeff (1967) reveals that a positive attitude toward a brand is formed when consumers' self-image and brand image are congruous. Similarly, Grubb and Grathwohl (1967) insist that customers boost their self-concept by consuming the psychological aspects of products. This relationship between consumers' psychological fit, in other words, affective attachment to brand communities and their favorable attitudes, such as commitment toward a brand community, leads to the following hypothesis about brand community users:

H2. Brand community users' affect toward a brand community will have a positive effect on their brand community commitment.

The effect of brand community commitment on brand loyalty types. Repurchase intention has been broadly defined and widely examined in social psychology and marketing. In social exchange theory (Kelly and Thibaut, 1978) and the investment model (Rusbult, 1983) within social psychology, repurchase intention is explained as relationship maintenance. On the other hand, studies in marketing channel management or in organizational behavior conceptualize repurchase intention in terms of relational commitment, as an intention to keep the relationship (Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

Economic benefit, known as an antecedent of the behavioral part of loyalty, is also reported to be an antecedent of calculative commitment (Dick and Basu, 1994; Klemperer, 1995). Calculative commitment affects the tendency to maintain the relationship (Lee *et al.*, 2004; Verhoef *et al.*, 2002), and it has the critical role of preserving long-term relationships (Fournier, 1998). It is also widely held that affective commitment, including psychological attachment and a sense of unity, induces customers to remain in the existing service and keeps them from trying competitors' services. Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995) found that consumers who show affective commitment are less attracted to competitors' promotions. The foregoing discussion prompts the following hypothesis about brand community users:

H3. Brand community users' commitment toward a brand community will have a positive effect on repurchase intentions toward a brand.

Commitment as a psychological attachment leads to customers' proactive behavior (Bettencourt, 1997), such as positive word-of-mouth (Dick and Basu, 1994). Specifically, when customers are affectively committed to a service company, they identify themselves with the company's vision and value, and in turn they are interested in the growth of the company. As a result, they demonstrate proactive behaviors such as positive word-of-mouth (Chonko, 1986). In short, customers' sense of unity with a brand community leads to their active word-of-mouth.

Several studies on organizational commitment have also identified the significant effect of commitment on positive word-of-mouth. Gummesson (2002) points out that committed employees act as "part-time marketers" in attracting potential customers. Paulin *et al.* (2006) divide hospital employees into Ambassador', "Advocate", and Passive Supporter' groups based on their willingness to recommend their hospital to prospective employees, and find that the Ambassador and Advocate groups show significantly higher levels of commitment. This leads to the following hypothesis on

the positive effect of brand community commitment on community users' word-of-mouth:

- H4.* Brand community users' commitment toward a brand community will have a positive effect on positive word-of-mouth toward a brand.

When customers are dissatisfied with products or services, they tend to end their relationship with the company supplying the products or services, or they express their dissatisfaction to that company (Gabrielsson and Kirpalani, 2004; Hirschman, 1970). Thus, customers who express their dissatisfaction in a constructive way are very important for a company to recover a failed service. Customers who are not committed in their relationship with a company find it especially easy to end the relationship after service failure. However, committed customers acknowledge that the service failure is directed toward the performance of the company, not the company itself, and they therefore tend to express their bad experience to the company (Schappe, 1998; Van Dyne, and Ang, 1998). This leads to the following hypothesis about brand community users:

- H5.* Brand community users' commitment toward a brand community will have a positive effect on their constructive complaints toward a brand.

Methodology

Sample

The data used to test the hypotheses was collected from Chinese female brand community users. Considering the growth of the Chinese economy (Qian, 2000), as well as the growth in the purchasing power of Chinese females (Tai, 2005), Chinese females should be a meaningful target segment for global marketers. Specifically, we sampled Chinese female mobile phone consumers who had joined a brand community (i.e. become members of the community) and who had been active in it. This particular mobile phone brand is globally renowned and operates online brand communities in over fifty countries. Community members are able to be involved in diverse activities, such as downloading content, sharing information through message boards, getting technical support information, and participating in events. A sample of 200 brand community members was obtained based on the following qualifications. First, respondents should reside in one of the two biggest cities, Beijing or Shanghai. Second, respondents should have been registered and active in the brand community for over one year. The sample size of 200 was targeted in the early stages of the research design and achieved without missing values, following the suggestion by Chin and Newsted (1999) that a sample size of 150-200 is needed to attain reliable coefficient values which using Partial Least Squares (PLS) analysis. One-on-one personal interviews were administered by interview specialists from a marketing research firm in order to reduce non-sampling bias throughout the survey process. In the preliminary analysis, 67 (33.5 percent) people belonged to the 20-29 year-old category, 67 (33.5 percent) belonged to the 30-39 year-old category, and 66 (33.0 percent) belonged to the 40-49 year-old category. In addition, 110 (55.5 percent) of the participants were college or university graduates, whereas 80 (40.0 percent) were high school graduates, and ten (10.0 percent) were middle school graduates or below. In terms of marital status, 50 percent of the total sample was married.

Measures

The survey questionnaire consisted of seven parts:

- (1) brand community trust;
- (2) brand community affect;
- (3) brand community commitment;
- (4) repurchase intentions toward the brand;
- (5) positive word-of-mouth toward the brand;
- (6) constructive complaints toward the brand; and
- (7) demographics.

Brand community trust and affect were measured by using multiple item scales adapted from previous research (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001). Brand community commitment was measured by three items adapted from Jang *et al.* (2008) and Algesheimer *et al.* (2005). To measure repurchase intentions, we used the three-item scale proposed by Verhoef *et al.* (2002), and to measure positive word-of-mouth, we used the three-item scale proposed by Hur *et al.* (2010), Verhoef *et al.* (2002) and Reichheld (2006). Finally, constructive complaints were measured using three items adapted from Gabrielsson and Kirpalani (2004) and Bove and Robertson (2005). All scale items for assessing the construct were obtained through a seven-point Likert scale for respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the items (see Table I).

Validation of measures

Cronbach's alpha and the Composite Reliability test revealed that all constructs showed a value above the threshold (0.6 for both Cronbach's alpha and CR, adopted by Bagozzi and Yi, 1988) (see Table I). To test for convergent validity, CR, factor loading, and AVE (Average Variance Extracted) were examined. It is acceptable if an individual item factor loading is greater than 0.7, CR exceeds 0.7, and AVE exceeds 0.5 (Gefen *et al.*, 2000) (see Table II). All loadings for the reflective constructs exceeded 0.7 and were shown to be significant at Bootstrap t-statistics ($\alpha = 0.01$), while satisfying CR and AVE criteria.

In order to examine the discriminant validity for the constructs, this study first used a cross-loading table, which showed that the measurement items loaded highly on other factors (Gefen and Ridings, 2003). The cross-loadings of individual items were compared across all latent variables (see Table II). Each item was assigned to its reflective construct. This study examined the table of the correlations of constructs and the latent roots of AVE (see Table III). The results in both tables reveal that all constructs in this study fulfilled discriminant validity.

Data analysis

The data was analyzed using Partial Least Squares (PLS) and SPSS 17.0. The PLS algorithm allows each indicator to vary with how much it contributes to the composite score of the latent variable, instead of assuming equal weight for all indicators of a scale (Chin *et al.*, 2003). This study used PLS rather than other SEM methods (i.e. LISREL, AMOS, etc.), because the PLS approach places minimal restrictions on sample size and residual distribution (Phang *et al.*, 2006).

Construct	Measurement items	Loading	α	CR	AVE
Brand community affect	This brand community makes me happy	0.90	0.90	0.94	0.83
	This brand community gives me pleasure	0.93			
	I feel good when I participate in this brand community	0.90			
Brand community trust	I trust this brand community	0.90	0.69	0.83	0.62
	I rely on this brand community	0.81			
	This is an honest brand community	0.73			
Brand community commitment	I feel a sense of belonging in this brand community	0.88	0.88	0.92	0.74
	I will visit this brand community continuously	0.90			
	I will exchange information and opinions with the members of this brand community	0.88			
	I will collect information through this brand community	0.79			
Repurchase intentions	I will repurchase this brand in the year to come	0.90	0.75	0.89	0.80
	I would love to use this brand continuously	0.89			
	Even though this brand is sold out, I won't purchase other brands (d)**				
Word-of-mouth	I often tell others about xxx brand	0.90	0.72	0.88	0.78
	I recommend xxx brand to others	0.87			
	I will leave positive comments about xxx brand on community sites (d)**				
Constructive complaints	I let the company know my opinions about the improvement of xxx brand	0.95	0.94	0.96	0.89
	I post any problems regarding xxx brand on the company's internet bulletin board	0.93			
	If the flaws of xxx brand could be improved, I would actively inform the company of my complaints	0.94			

Notes: *Seven-point scale 1 = Strongly disagree; 7 = Strongly agree; ** (d): items ignored in the process of the reliability and validity tests

Table I.
Constructs and their measurement items*

Results

Table IV shows that our proposed model could explain 74.6 percent of the variance in brand community commitment, 36.9 percent of the variance in repurchase intentions toward the brand, 50.5 percent of the variance in positive word-of-mouth toward the brand, and 12.6 percent of the variance in constructive complaints toward the brand.

In total, five paths were examined in the structural model (see Table IV). Path estimates from brand trust (*H1*) and brand affect (*H2*) toward brand community play a meaningful role in the commitment of a brand community. Brand trust ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.01$) and affect ($\beta = 0.59$, $p < 0.01$) of a brand community each exerted a significant, positive impact on the commitment of a brand community. The model predicts direct paths from brand community commitment to repurchase intentions (*H3*), to positive word-of-mouth (*H4*) and to constructive complaints toward the brand

MD 49,7							
	Affect	Trust	Commitment	Repurchase intentions	WOM	Constructive complaints	
1204	af1	0.90	0.72	0.78	0.60	0.63	0.37
	af2	0.93	0.72	0.79	0.52	0.61	0.34
	af3	0.90	0.66	0.73	0.51	0.53	0.29
	tr1	0.74	0.90	0.78	0.59	0.61	0.37
	tr2	0.57	0.81	0.57	0.38	0.37	0.25
	tr3	0.47	0.63	0.41	0.49	0.47	0.41
	cm1	0.69	0.63	0.88	0.54	0.64	0.34
	cm2	0.77	0.67	0.90	0.50	0.64	0.32
	cm3	0.73	0.73	0.88	0.53	0.62	0.28
	cm4	0.70	0.64	0.79	0.53	0.54	0.28
	ri1	0.57	0.53	0.55	0.90	0.65	0.38
	ri2	0.49	0.58	0.54	0.89	0.66	0.59
	wm1	0.62	0.63	0.66	0.71	0.90	0.56
	wm2	0.52	0.46	0.59	0.57	0.87	0.39
	cc1	0.38	0.42	0.36	0.56	0.54	0.95
	cc2	0.36	0.38	0.32	0.50	0.51	0.93
cc3	0.31	0.38	0.32	0.47	0.47	0.94	

Table II.
Cross-loading table for the constructs

	Affect	Trust	Commitment	Repurchase intentions	WOM	Constructive complaints
Affect	1.00					
Trust	0.84	1.00				
Commitment	0.77	0.78	1.00			
Repurchase intentions	0.59	0.61	0.62	1.00		
Word-of-mouth	0.65	0.71	0.62	0.73	1.00	
Constructive complaints	0.37	0.35	0.42	0.54	0.54	1.00

Table III.
Correlations of the constructs and AVE

Path	Path coefficient	t-value	R ²
Brand community affect → Brand community commitment	0.59	8.55*	0.75
Brand community trust → Brand community commitment	0.32	4.79*	
Brand community commitment → Repurchase intentions of brand	0.61	11.39*	0.37
Brand community commitment → Word-of-mouth of brand	0.71	16.19*	0.51
Brand community commitment → Constructive complaints of brand	0.35	4.76*	0.13

Table IV.
Results of testing

Notes: * $p < 0.01$; Italicized items belong to the corresponding construct

(H5). As expected, the effect of brand community commitment on repurchase intentions ($\beta = 0.61, p < 0.01$), on positive word-of-mouth ($\beta = 0.71, p < 0.01$), and on constructive complaint ($\beta = 0.36, p < 0.01$) toward the brand were all significant. Thus, H3, H4, and H5 were supported.

The mediating effects of brand community commitment were tested using Baron and Kenny's (1986) logic, which states that a variable functions as a mediator when it meets the following three conditions:

- (1) the independent variable significantly influences the mediating variable;
- (2) the mediating variable significantly influences the dependent variable; and
- (3) when paths 1 and 2 are controlled, a previously significant relationship between the independent and dependent variables is no longer significant.

As seen in Figure 2, the direct paths of trust toward brand community on three brand loyalty types are significant at $p < 0.01$. After introducing brand community commitment as a mediator of the path between brand community trust and the three brand loyalty types, the strength of the relationship between brand community trust and repurchase intentions ($\beta = 0.63$ to $\beta = 0.40$) and word-of-mouth ($\beta = 0.65$ to $\beta = 0.22$) indicates a partial mediating effect on brand community trust-repurchase intentions and brand community trust-word-of-mouth (Figure 3).

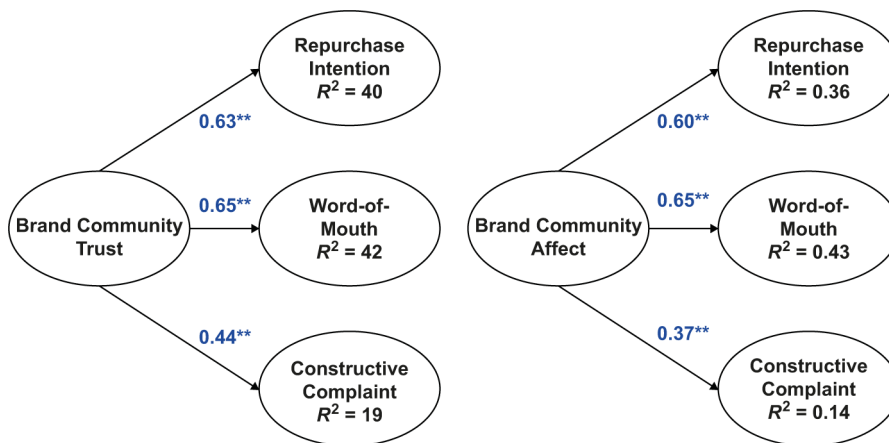


Figure 2. The direct effect of brand community trust and affect

Note: ** $p < 0.01$

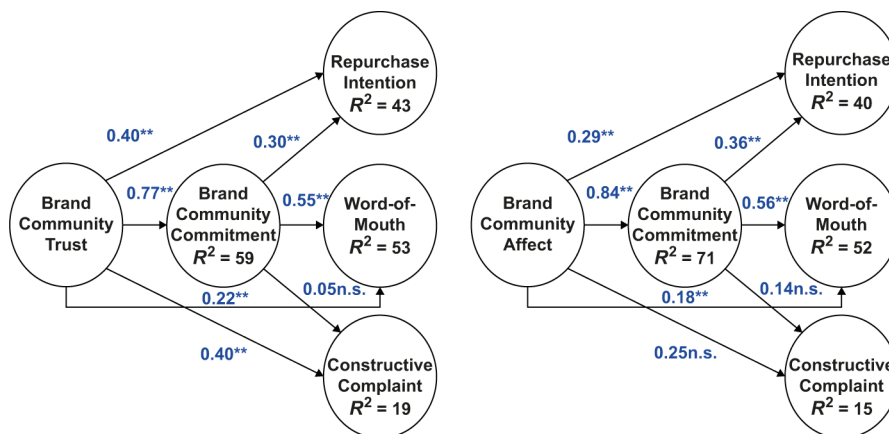


Figure 3. The mediating effect of brand community commitment

Note: ** $p < 0.01$

The same procedure was repeated to test the mediating effect of brand community commitment in the relationship between affect toward the brand community and the three brand loyalty types. The results were similar: brand community commitment partially mediates affect-repurchase intentions ($\beta = 0.60$ to $\beta = 0.29$) and affect-word-of-mouth ($\beta = 0.65$ to $\beta = 0.18$) and fully mediates the relationship affect-constructive complaint relationship ($\beta = 0.37$ to $\beta = 0.25$; n.s.) (see Figures 2 and 3).

In addition, any difference in the effect of brand community trust and brand community affect on brand community commitment was statistically examined by adopting Chin's (1998) analysis on path coefficient difference. As a result, two paths directed toward community commitment from brand community trust and affect were not significantly different ($t = 1.43, p > 0.05$). The differences in three paths were also tested, from brand community commitment to repurchase intentions, to word-of-mouth, and to constructive complaints. Three pairs of paths (i.e. repurchase intentions v. word-of-mouth, repurchase intentions v. constructive complaints, and word-of-mouth v. constructive complaints) were compared, and the results indicated that brand community commitment has a stronger effect on word-of-mouth than on constructive complaints ($\beta = 0.71$ v. $\beta = 0.36$; $t = 2.07, p < 0.05$). The rest of the pairs did not show any statistical difference (repurchase intentions v. word-of-mouth: $t = 0.75, p > 0.05$, repurchase intentions v. constructive complaints: $t = 1.39, p > 0.05$).

Discussion

This study aimed to empirically test the relationship between trust/affect toward a brand community and brand loyalty, which is mediated by brand community commitment. Specifically, it first tested the effect of trust and affect toward the brand community on brand community commitment. Next, the differential effect of brand community commitment on loyalty behaviors (i.e. repurchase intentions, positive word-of-mouth, and constructive complaints) was analyzed. The study then explored the relative effect size of trust and affect on community commitment. The theoretical and managerial aspects of the foregoing findings are discussed as follows.

Theoretical implications

First, the previous studies on the role of brand community have highlighted the effect of community commitment on attitudinal loyalty and repurchase intentions only (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005; Jang *et al.*, 2008). If we consider a brand community as a space for sharing brand related information among brand customers and potential customers, other loyalty behaviors, including word-of-mouth and offering opinions, should also be comprehensively accounted for in relationships with brand community commitment. In this regard, it is meaningful to identify the significant positive effect of brand community commitment on repurchase intentions and word-of-mouth. That is, well-managed brand community communication leading commitment toward a brand community will most likely enhance various types of brand loyalty.

Second, the identified role of brand community commitment in enhancing various types of customer loyalty offer specific ways to manage brand communities and relationship marketing strategies for each loyalty behavior. A company's profit originates from strong relationships with its customers, and it also results from interactions among customers, for instance word-of-mouth (Reichheld, 2003; 2006). Reichheld (2006) presents a strong positive effect for word-of-mouth and

recommendation (i.e. Net Promoter Score: NPS) on the profit of a company. In this study, brand community commitment was identified as having the greatest effect on positive word-of-mouth among other loyalty types, which implies the significant role that brand communities have on brand profitability enhancement. At the same time, brand community managers need to motivate community users to maintain their relationship with the brand and the brand community in a voluntary manner. Algesheimer *et al.* (2005) suggested that normative brand community pressure has a negative effect but engagement or commitment has a positive effect on brand loyalty. Accordingly, thorough investigations including both external (e.g. frequency of using the brand community) and internal (e.g. motives for using the brand community) aspects should be included in brand community commitment – brand loyalty research.

Third, this study identified that brand community commitment plays a mediating role between attitudes toward a brand community (i.e. affect, trust) and brand loyalty. The role of community commitment as an antecedent of brand loyalty has been widely addressed (Jang *et al.*, 2008). However, this study focused on the mediating role of community commitment and found that the mediation effect of community commitment is differentiated, depending on the type of loyalty behavior and the attitude toward the brand community to which it relates. Specifically, brand community commitment is found to partially mediate the relationship between community trust and repurchase intentions/positive word-of-mouth and the relationship between community affect and repurchase intentions/positive word-of-mouth, whereas brand community commitment fully mediates the relationship between brand community trust and constructive complaints. It is interesting to note that community trust directly affects constructive complaints without the mediation of community commitment, but community affect requires the mediation of commitment in order to affect constructive complaints. This finding could be interpreted with the concepts of ability and integrity, which are underlying dimensions of trust (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Alemán, 2005; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Brand communities in general provide brand ability-related information and integrity-level experiences. This in turn motivates customers themselves to improve the brand with which they associate, since they strongly believe that their opinions will be reflected in the brand management. Consequently, customers who have strong trust toward a brand community are less likely to need community commitment to complain in a constructive way. On the other hand, affect toward a brand community is an overall positive feeling; therefore, active loyalty behaviors (i.e. constructive complaints) are hardly expected. This finding suggests that positive feelings should be linked to commitment first to induce active loyalty behaviors. It is expected that further studies will theorize the elaborate process from attitude toward the brand community to brand community loyalty, as suggested by the investigation in this study.

Managerial implications

The findings in this study have practical implications for marketing practices. First of all, it is clear that a company's brand community marketing activities have the power to influence the strength of the relationships among community participants, the brand, and the company. Accordingly, companies recognizing the important role of brand community should make every effort to actively manage a brand community.

Second, the provision of a space in which customers can directly participate would be very effective in enhancing customers' loyalty toward a brand. Brand communities are useful spaces where consumers get involved, exchange relevant information among members, and broaden their understanding about brands. Since customers' participation often leads to brand loyalty activities, brand communities should be considered as a tool to improve marketing effectiveness. Considering that the internet is often misused to spread inaccurate information or negative word-of-mouth about a brand, brand communities should be used in defense of such threats.

Third, the noted importance of brand communities offers new insights for customer relationship management and related marketing activities. Following the trend of companies making the most of customers' positive word-of-mouth in their marketing strategies (e.g. P&G organized communities, such as vocalpoint.com and tremor.com, and using them in the new product launching process), suggestions on ways to increase community commitment should make valuable contributions to companies' customer relationship marketing.

Fourth, this study suggests trust and affect are vital factors in enhancing customers' brand community commitment, raising the question as to how a company might increase trust and affect in the minds of its brand community users. Brand community managers should help users to develop an emotional bond with the brand community and the brand. Sustained efforts to make users feel pleasure and enjoyment will enhance the affective atmosphere of the brand community. In addition, brand community managers should engage in careful knowledge management to ensure that all the available information is trustworthy. Considering that trust is more influential than affect on brand community commitment and loyalty behaviors, as identified in this study, brand community managers should take precautions to enhance the level of trust toward the brand community. Likewise, the brand community website and community user activity should be designed to facilitate the enhancement of trust and affect toward the brand community.

Finally, considering that Chinese customers show high levels of conspicuous consumption and peer pressure (Chung and Fischer, 2001; Zhou and Hui, 2003), it is likely that word-of-mouth marketing mediated by brand communities would be very effective. Particularly in the case of China, with its vast territory and ethnic diversity, BTL (below-the-line) promotions using word-of-mouth should be more appropriate than ATL (above-the-line) centered marketing activities.

Limitations and future research directions

The following limitations of this study should be addressed if future research is to achieve a higher level of validity. First of all, this study adopted trust and affect toward the brand community as antecedents of brand community commitment. Even though trust and affect have been long standing antecedents of commitment in previous studies (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001; Harris and Goode, 2004; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006), other relational variables, such as self-congruity, should also be considered and examined in the relationships among antecedents and their effects on commitment. Second, this study treated brand community commitment as a unidimensional construct. However, further research involving other commitment dimensions, such as affective and calculative commitment (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2005), continuous – behavioral – affective commitment (Kim and Frazier, 1997), and continuous – normative – affective commitment (Gruen

et al., 2000), would show detailed relationships between commitment dimensions and loyalty behaviors. Third, brand community commitment in this study was operationalized and measured by customers' attitudes. However, there is room for actual quantifiable data (e.g. frequency and strength of community participation) used to measure brand community commitment. That is, further study should be able to incorporate both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of community commitment, providing richer conclusions about the role of community commitment. Fourth, the measurement for WOM used in this study was too simple to capture consumers' referral behaviors as a whole. Therefore, considering other measurement scales in communication and loyalty study areas should be helpful to generate more valid measurement items for WOM. Fifthly, this study only used a sample of Chinese females to test the relationships centered by brand community commitment. Including a male sample, a service brand community, and/or customers from other cultures would help to improve the external validity of this study. Finally, brand equity, often considered the ultimate criterion variable in brand research, could be brought into the framework, making it possible to investigate extended paths, such as attitudes toward brand community – brand loyalty – brand equity.

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