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

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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, Muñiz, & 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, expertise 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.
Efforts of firms' management	Zhou, Zhang, Su and Zhou (2012)	Brand community identification and commitment is positively associated with brand identification and commitment.
	Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann (2005) Porter and Donthu (2008)	Community identification increases future participation and evokes normative pressure. Efforts in providing quality content and fostering embeddedness increase members' trust in community sponsors, but efforts in encouraging interaction do not.
	Stokburger-Sauer (2010)	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.
	Homburg et al. (2015)	Firms' engagement in online communities initially increases customer sentiment, but it undermines consumer sentiment when it is at a high levels.

among community members unexpectedly did not lead to more trust in the community sponsors (Porter & Donthu, 2008). Homburg et al. (2015) examined the effect of firms' replies to consumer posts in online communities and found that a certain level of replies would increase customer sentiment, while excess replies would decrease customer sentiment. This finding suggests that moderate efforts on the part of firms may bring positive consequences. On the contrary, some studies, although not explicitly investigating the effect of firms' efforts directly, have suggested that firms' efforts in managing OBCs may be useless because consumers would rather interact with other consumers than with firms (Goh et al., 2013) and participate in consumer-hosted communities than in those hosted by firms (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2011). Clearly, more studies are needed to explore the effects of sponsors' community management activities.

The confusion about the effect of firms' management efforts may result from the lack of a unified framework that helps to explain how firms' efforts in OBCs influence members. We argue that organizational socialization theory provides an ideal framework through which scholars can analyze and explain the effects of community management activities on members' future participation intention. In the following section, we briefly review organizational socialization theory and then apply the theory to identify socialization tactics that firms employ within OBCs.

2.2. Organizational socialization theory

Organizational socialization refers to “the process by which an individual comes to appreciate the values, abilities, expected behaviors, and social knowledge essential for assuming an organizational role and for participating as an organizational member” (Louis, 1980, p. 229–230). People who enter a new organization are usually confronted with a new role and are required to adjust to the organization immediately. As a result, employees must learn the norms, values, goals, and rules, and develop their identity to adapt to the new organization (Jones, 1986). Notably, although many researchers focus on the socialization of newcomers to organizations, others argue that socialization is not only limited to newcomers but also occurs throughout the entire professional career of members (Chao, O'Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, & Gardner, 1994).

Firms use a series of socialization tactics to help employees adjust to organizations. Accordingly, these socialization practices may vary in several dimensions, such as collective versus individual, formal versus informal, sequential versus random, fixed versus variable, serial versus disjunctive, and investiture versus divestiture (Jones, 1986). Typical socialization practices may include offering information and feedback (Bezuijen, Van den Berg, Van Dam & Thierry, 2009), training and education (Chao et al., 1994), and networking and relationship building (Feldman, 1981). Recent research has indicated that socialization efforts do not only exist in traditional organizations but also in virtual organizations such as OBCs (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003). Sponsors of OBCs now make great efforts to socialize members for two key reasons. First, OBCs have their own values, norms, and goals, and thus they require members' socialization for maintenance and growth. Second, as the potential of customers in value co-creation is increasingly being recognized, firms aim to socialize members into the insiders of the organizations to promote value co-creation.

Extant research has demonstrated that socializing employees is not only valuable for employees themselves but also for the organization. For individuals, socialization can help increase their self-efficacy and improve their job satisfaction and performance (Feldman, 1981). For organizations, socialization can help them develop their employees' organizational commitment (Chao et al., 1994), integrate newcomers into organizations, decrease employee turnover, and finally improve business performance (Allen & Shanock, 2013). However, the effect of socialization tactics by sponsors in OBCs remains to be explored.

2.3. Socialization tactics in OBCs

Socializing new employees to make them adjust to organizations is one of the challenges of human resource management. Similar to the effect of socialization of employees in conventional organizations, members' adaption into an online community, which is a unique type of organization, requires a process of socialization as well. In recent years, a number of studies have found that the socialization process is prevalent in virtual communities (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003; Choi, Alexander, Kraut, & Levine, 2010; Ducheneaut, 2005; Farzan, Kraut, Pal, & Konstan, 2012; Yi & Jin, 2006). For instance, members have been observed to normally seek information through electronic communication to adapt to virtual groups (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003). In the context of Wiki projects, several socialization tactics are helpful in developing members' commitment to the project by encouraging members to take their roles in Wiki (Choi et al., 2010). In fact, Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), who first developed the concept of brand community, already noted that marketers of brand communities always aim to socialize members by a variety of ways to build a cohesive community.

However, socialization tactics in online communities may differ from those used in conventional organizations. Unlike the relationship between employees and their affiliated organizations, no formal contracts exist between members and communities. Online users commonly join and leave an online community freely without any barriers. In other words, the relationship between online users and online communities is informal and rather loose. Thus, institutionalized socialization tactics in organizations, such as formal mentoring programs or group training, are usually inapplicable to online communities (Choi et al., 2010). Socialization tactics in online communities should be unique to some extent. Thus far, no studies are available that summarize socialization tactics in the context of firm-hosted OBCs. In this paper, drawing on organizational socialization theory and studies on socialization in the context of online communities, we identify three important socialization tactics in OBCs, namely, member education, interaction support, and participation feedback (Table 2), and consider the nature of OBCs.

2.3.1. Member education

Member education is defined as the extent to which community sponsors provide members with the skills and abilities to use their product (Bell & Eisingerich, 2007). One of the most common motivations for customer participation in OBCs is to search for helpful information about the product, especially when customers are confronted with problems in using the product (Nambisan & Watt, 2011). In response to these needs, sponsors of OBCs always update news and knowledge about their products in online communities, and this action is part of member education activities.

Furthermore, member education is an important socialization tactic for firms. Previous studies have indicated that firms act as an important agent for consumer socialization by advertising their products in mass media (Moschis & Churchill, 1978). In online communities, the way that firms may socialize with consumer to some extent is similar to socialization through advertising. In firm-hosted OBCs, firms generally provide members with consumption tips and brand knowledge, and promote their products by emphasizing the merits of products in communities. By doing so, firms can enhance members' skills, abilities, and knowledge about their products and develop members' favorable attitude toward the brands.

We predict that member education in OBCs increases members' intention to remain in the community. First, member education helps members acquire skills for using products, and these skills enable them to see OBCs as a valuable place for brand knowledge and make them likely to remain in the OBCs (Bell & Eisingerich, 2007; Kelley, Skinner, & Donnelly, 1992). Second, as previous studies have demonstrated that satisfied customers are willing to maintain a long-term relationship with a company (Haumann, Quaiser, Wieseke, & Rese, 2014), member education efforts initiated by sponsors may enhance

Table 2
Summary of the three socialization tactics in OBCs.

Socialization tactic	Socialization agent	Socialization content	Related studies
Member education	Firm	To enhance members' skills, abilities, and knowledge of brands	Moschis and Churchill (1978); Bell and Eisingerich (2007)
Interaction support	Peers	To develop consumers' favorable attitude toward the group of peer consumers and also enhance consumption-related skills	Wang, Yu, and Wei (2012); Allen, McManus, and Russell (1999)
Participation feedback	Community institution	To make members appreciate the norms and values of communities	Ahuja and Galvin (2003); Choi et al. (2010); Farzan et al. (2012)

members' satisfaction with brands and, in turn, make them more willing to maintain a good relationship with brands in OBCs (Kelley et al., 1992). Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1. Community sponsors' efforts in member education have a direct and positive effect on members' membership continuance intention in OBCs.

2.3.2. Interaction support

Interaction support refers to the extent to which a sponsor of an OBC provides its online community members with the means, capability, and opportunity to communicate and interact with one another (Kim, Choi, Qualls, & Han, 2008). The thriving of an OBC depends greatly on the interaction among its community members. Without substantial interaction, an OBC will eventually collapse. Therefore, to build a community, sponsors usually spend a great deal of effort in initiating a number of activities, such as encouraging members to talk about the reasons why they like the product, and even organize offline activities or fan get-togethers.

These efforts in interaction support provide a good opportunity for peer communication (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). By encouraging peer communication, sponsors of OBCs may speed up the socialization of members. Peers have long been considered as an important socialization agent for individuals (Moschis & Churchill, 1978). Nearly every day, we talk about products with our friends, seek their opinions, and receive recommendations from them. Knowledge, norms, attitudes, and behaviors transmitted among community members through peer communication foster a shared culture and identity. In online communities, the role of peer influence may be even more important than in other communities because consumers tend to share their brand experiences with other brand admirers, and most interactions occur among peers rather than between members and representatives of firms. Several researchers have demonstrated the importance of peer communication in consumer socialization in the context of social media. For instance, peer communication can help socialize consumers and form consumers' favorable attitude toward products (Wang et al., 2012). Thus, firms' interaction support activities may be an important socialization tactic.

We infer that the efforts in interaction support of community sponsors positively affect members' membership continuance intention. Indeed, socialization depends largely on communicative processes (Ludwig et al., 2014). With more firm-initiated peer interaction and communication, members are likely to listen to the opinion of others and observe the behavior of others, so that they not only learn the values and norms of the community but also the skills and abilities to adjust to communities (McAlexander et al., 2002). Furthermore, by encouraging interaction among members, OBCs enable members to get to know one another and develop close social relationships with other members, and a sense of community may develop (Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008). A high level of social embeddedness and belonging can make members feel that leaving the community will be difficult. Accordingly, on the basis of these arguments, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2. Community sponsors' efforts in interaction support have a direct and positive effect on members' membership continuance intention in OBCs.

2.3.3. Participation feedback

Participation feedback is defined as the community sponsors' efforts to respond to member participation activities to ensure that members take part in the community properly (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Providing feedback is a critical socialization tactic both in conventional organizations (Bezuijen, Van Dam, Van den Berg & Thierry, 2010) and online communities (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003; Choi et al., 2010; Farzan et al., 2012). Participation feedback is important for communities because it helps community sponsors guide members on appropriate conduct. Feedback in the virtual environment can be categorized into three types: normative feedback, which concerns norms in communities in non-task actions; performance feedback, which is feedback on one's task performance in communities; and technical feedback, which involves technical information when members perform tasks in communities (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003).

In the context of OBCs, marketers usually build a reward and punishment system by which they provide feedback on the value of posts and other participation activities of community members (Lampe & Johnston, 2005). Member participation in OBCs can be assessed with these feedback systems. Members are rewarded once they contribute to OBCs. These rewards may include virtual medals, social status in OBCs, and even the priority to buy preannounced products of brands. Conversely, the community punishes members who display harmful behaviors in communities, such as insulting others or advertising in communities. Punishment may include degrading their community status and even canceling their right to post for a time. Sponsors also always explicitly inform members about the rules, policy, and tips for efficient and appropriate member participation in the community.

In accordance with the research on socialization in organizations, providing feedback encourages employees' learning activities and accelerates employees' role clarity and integration into the organizations (Bezuijen et al., 2010). Similarly, participation feedback from online communities provides members with clear behavior guidelines and fosters members' understanding of their roles in communities to help them participate in communities effectively. Furthermore, by providing feedback, the sponsor can motivate members to seek a higher social status or other benefits in the community, which entails further and deepened participation in the community. Thus, we suggest the following hypothesis:

H3. Community sponsors' efforts in participation feedback have a direct and positive effect on members' membership continuance intention in OBCs.

2.4. Mediating role of community identification

Community identification refers to an individual's sentiment as a member of an OBC (Algesheimer et al., 2005). Contrary to the

relationship between employees and their affiliated organizations, consumers participate in OBCs voluntarily without barriers to leave the OBCs and switch to others. In other words, no explicit contract or law limits members' entrance or exit. Thus, members' identification with the community is generally the main reason for their staying and continuing to participate in an OBC (Ludwig et al., 2014). When members identify with the OBC, they recognize that they share important attributes and realize that they are truly a member of the OBC. This cognition produces a sense of “we-intentions” and makes members more willing to participate in and contribute to the OBC.

Socialization tactics of community sponsors facilitate members' identification with OBCs. The study on organizational socialization shows that socialization tactics positively affect employees' identification with the organization. For instance, in a longitudinal field study, socialization tactics were discovered to be positively related to organizational identification (Ashforth & Saks, 1996). Moreover, socialization involves learning the abilities, beliefs, values, norms, and orientations that provide a clear referent for identification (Ashforth & Saks, 1996). In other words, socialization helps individuals develop their identities in organizations (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013). We assume that a similar mechanism can work in the context of OBCs and that community identification mediates the effect of socialization tactics on members' membership continuance intention. First, member education increases members' identification with OBCs because it improves self-efficacy by enhancing customers' skills and abilities and by improving customers' satisfaction with the community (Homburg et al., 2015). Second, as interaction support can help establish relationships among members in OBCs and develop a strong sense of belonging or kinship, then interaction support activities can enhance members' identification with OBCs. Finally, the participation feedback of OBCs acts as appraisal information that guides members' behavior and encourages members to follow the communities' norms and values; therefore, it improves members' awareness of membership, which is one of the components of social identity (Tsai & Bagozzi, 2014). When individuals identify with a community, they will intend to stay in that community as a member. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

H4. a: Community identification mediates the effect of member education on members' membership continuance intention. b: Community identification mediates the effect of interaction support on members' membership continuance intention. c: Community identification mediates the effect of participation feedback on members' membership continuance intention.

2.5. Moderating role of membership duration

Recent study has highlighted the different reactions of various member segments to firms' community engagement (Homburg et al., 2015). In this paper, we aim to investigate the interaction effects between socialization tactics and membership duration. These effects can provide sponsors of OBCs with practical implications for managing members in its communities. Membership duration, which represents how long an individual has been a member of an OBC, may be an important moderator. Studies on organizational socialization have demonstrated that socialization is not limited to newcomers but occurs instead throughout their whole life in organizations and communities (Chao et al., 1994). Studies on brand communities have indicated that members with different membership durations differ in terms of behaviors and motivations to participate in OBCs (Thompson & Sinha, 2008) (Fig. 1).

Generally, newcomer participation in OBCs is driven by functional needs rather than social needs in the early part of their membership. At this stage, seeking advice and helpful information may be their priorities (Tsai & Bagozzi, 2014). Members usually listen to the discussions among other members without directly interacting with other members, and whether or not their informational needs are being satisfied is important to them (Raies, Mühlbacher, & Gavard-Perret, 2015). However, with their increasing level of participation in the online community, members become skilled in product use and thus no longer derive much value from firms' initial member education activities. Instead, they enjoy high status in the community and then pay attention to building close relationships and seeking reputation in the community (Thompson & Sinha, 2008). Furthermore, with their increasing level of engagement, members may be more familiar with the unique values embedded within an established community and understand their roles in the community (Tsai & Bagozzi, 2014), thus enabling them to become more adapted to firms' socialization tactic of interaction support. Members with a long-term membership may have learned the norms, values, and orientation of the OBC. Therefore, they do not rely much on the feedback of the community to regulate their behaviors. By contrast, those with a short-term membership may be not familiar with the new environment; participation feedback may be required to promote their learning and stimulate their participation (Raies et al., 2015). Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

H5. a: Membership duration negatively moderates the mediating effect of community identification between member education and members' membership continuance intention. b: Membership duration positively moderates the mediating effect of community identification between interaction support and members' membership continuance intention.

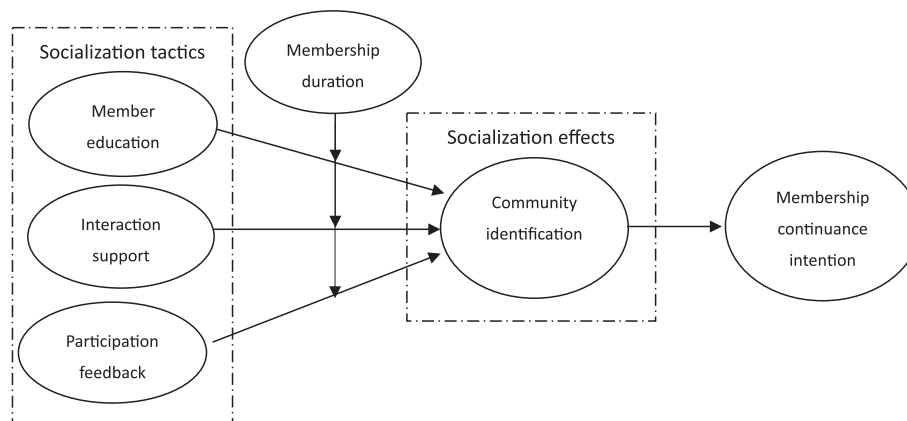


Fig. 1. Research model.

c: Membership duration negatively moderates the mediating effect of community identification between participation feedback and members' membership continuance intention.

3. Method and results

3.1. Sample

The data for this study were collected from seven firm-hosted OBCs (for the list of OBCs, see Table 3). The criteria used to select communities were as follows: (a) the firm must host an online brand community, and (b) the firm must manage this community to promote members' activities. We chose OBCs from the mobile phone industry because this industry matches our research purpose well. First, as demonstrated by previous studies, establishing OBCs is ubiquitous for firms in the mobile phone industry. Second, Chinese mobile phone brands are now making great efforts in marketing based on OBCs. Xiaomi, a Chinese mobile phone brand launched in 2011 that captured the largest market share of mobile phones in China in a span of three years, is well known for its marketing based on its OBC. Unlike traditional giants in the mobile phone industry such as Huawei and Lenovo, which mainly attract customers through advertising in commercial media, Xiaomi, as a newcomer to the industry, mainly markets products through its online community. It makes great efforts in managing the community by providing consumers with the latest information about its brands and rewards for their participation and contribution, and by sponsoring activities in the community, such as fan festivals, parties for same-city consumers, and so on. The great success of Xiaomi has motivated many Chinese mobile phone brands to pay attention to their online consumers and encouraged them to establish and manage their own online communities. Notably, these OBCs are usually linked to the brand's website.

The questionnaire for this study was developed through the following steps. First, the measurement items were translated into Chinese with double translation checks. Before we collected data for the study, we conducted pretesting of the measurement on 20 members from these communities. The pretest respondents were asked to evaluate the relevance of the questionnaire items for each variable of the study. The questionnaire was modified in accordance with the pretest feedback. Further, we contacted the representatives of these communities and obtained the lists with the email addresses of their members to survey the community members. Using these email lists, 1500 questionnaires were randomly distributed to brand community members. A total of 589 people submitted their responses, but 75 did not meet the time baseline (i.e., they viewed the online questionnaire in <2 min) or did not answer the questionnaire seriously (i.e., with obvious errors in logic). Therefore, we discarded these questionnaires and obtained 514 questionnaires for the final empirical test. Table 4 presents the demographic characteristics of our sample.

3.2. Measures

The constructs in the conceptual model were measured in accordance with the previous study with some modifications. A set of

seven-point Likert scales was used to measure these constructs. Briefly, the scale of member education came from Eisingerich and Bell (2008), and the scale of "interaction support" was adapted from Kim et al. (2008). For the measurement of "participation feedback," we adapted the measures from Bezuijen et al. (2009). Finally, we obtained the scales of community identification and membership continuance intention from Algesheimer et al. (2005). For the measurement of membership duration, we coded <1 year, 1–2 years, 2–3 years, and longer than 3 years as 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively.

3.3. Measurement model

Our assessment of the internal consistency and reliability of the data relied on the confirmatory factor analysis and Cronbach's α level (see Table 5). The results indicate that all 19 items had significant, standardized factor loadings. Exploratory factor analysis extracted five factors as expected. Cronbach's α factors were all above 0.815, thus indicating high internal consistency. The composite reliabilities of the five constructs all exceeded 0.874, thus suggesting that the measured items have adequate reliability. In addition, confirmatory factor analysis was used to test the convergent validity. Overall model fit indices ($\chi^2(142) = 306.523$, $\chi^2 / df = 2.159$, $p < 0.01$, RMSEA = 0.064, CFI = 0.934, NFI = 0.906, IFI = 0.934, GFI = 0.919) were satisfactory. Discriminant validity relies on the average variance extracted (AVE). Table 5 shows that all AVEs are above 0.639. The square root of each construct's AVE exceeded the coefficients between the measure and other constructs. Overall, these results show that the measurement items have adequate reliability and validity (Table 6).

3.4. Common method variance

As our study used same-source data, we recognize the potential for common method variance (CMV) bias. Thus, we adopted several design procedures to reduce this possibility as suggested by Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff (2003). First, we segregated the items for the independent and dependent variables in different survey sections. Second, we adopted heterogeneous scale formats to disrupt respondent consistency biases. In addition to these ex-ante efforts, we conducted two ex-post analyses. First, principal components factor analysis was performed according to Harman's one-factor test (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). The results showed that the largest explained variance before rotation was 33.07%, thus indicating that no significant CMV could be found. Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted with only one factor. The results showed that the one-factor model had a worse fit than the multi-factor models, thus supporting the absence of CMV. Second, using a method suggested by Malhotra, Kim, and Patil (2006), we added the CMV-adjusted correlation matrix as input to a path analysis. We found that the CMV-adjusted correlation matrix remained consistent with the uncorrected matrix. All of the significant correlations in the uncorrected correlation matrix remained significant in the CMV-adjusted matrix, and no significant differences were found in the path coefficients. Overall, these tests indicate that CMV does not adversely affect our results.

3.5. Hypothesis testing

We used structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the main and mediating effects. First, we tested the main effects by running a direct model using the method suggested by Mathieu and Taylor (2006). The results of the SEM analysis revealed a good fit ($\chi^2[84] = 245.262$, $p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.061, CFI = 0.954, GFI = 0.942). The results show the following: (1) the effect of member education on membership continuance intention is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.194$, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting H1. (2) The effect of interaction support on membership continuance intention is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.323$, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting H2. (3) The effect of participation feedback

Table 3
Firm-hosted online brand communities in this study.

Brand	OBC of the brand
Xiaomi	http://bbs.xiaomi.cn/
Meizu	http://bbs.meizu.cn/
Vivo	http://bbs.vivo.com.cn/
Huawei	http://club.huawei.com/
Oppo	http://www.oppo.cn/
Oneplus	http://www.oneplusbbs.com/
Smartisan	http://bbs.smartisan.com/forum.php

Table 4
Demographic characteristics.

Gender	Age		Income (RMB)		Education		Membership duration		
Male	76.4%	<20	13.4%	<3000	63.2%	High school or below	12.6%	<1 year	29.6%
Female	23.6%	21–30	51.9%	3001–5000	23.7%	Junior college	29.3%	1–2 years	31.1%
		31–40	26.5%	>5000	13.1%	Undergraduate	43.8%	2–3 years	24.5%
		>40	8.2%			Graduate	14.3%	>3 years	14.8%

on membership continuance intention is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.105$, $p < 0.05$), thus supporting H3.

Second, we ran the no direct effects model that estimated the paths from each socialization tactic to community identification, and from community identification to membership continuance intention, but found no direct effects from socialization tactics to membership continuance intention. The results revealed a good fit ($\chi^2[145] = 406.595$, $p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.059, CFI = 0.943, GFI = 0.925). In this model, all three socialization tactics related significantly to community identification (member education, $\beta = 0.191$, $p < 0.001$; interaction support, $\beta = 0.203$, $p < 0.001$; and participation feedback, $\beta = 0.343$, $p < 0.001$); community identification exhibited a significant relationship

Table 5
Constructs and items.

Construct	Items	SFL
Member education (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.826$)	The community sponsor provides me with a lot of useful information for my product usage.	0.789
	When I encounter product problems, the representatives of the firm offer me solutions.	0.810
	The community sponsor regularly updates information about product usage.	0.867
	The community sponsor makes efforts to enhance members' skills in product use.	0.783
Interaction support (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.861$)	The community sponsor has designed an effective bulletin board on which participants communicate.	0.844
	The community sponsor provides various means to support member communication, such as chat room, email service, member search service, game.	0.877
	The community sponsor supports various events that members can experience together.	0.851
	The firm initiates many offline activities for members to get together.	0.791
Participation feedback (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.815$)	The community sponsor will upgrade my status if I participate continually in the community.	0.802
	I will receive rewards (i.e., coupons) from the community sponsor if I contribute to the community.	0.773
	The community itself will alert me to my behaviors that violate the rules of the community.	0.858
	The community sponsor will inform me of the proper way to participate in the community.	0.773
Community identification (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.853$)	I am very attached to the community.	0.834
	Other brand community members and I share the same objectives.	0.812
Membership continuance intention (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.836$)	The friendship I have with other brand community members means a lot to me. I see myself as part of the brand community.	0.850
	Leaving this brand community would be very difficult for me.	0.837
	I intend to stay on as a member of the brand community.	0.847
	I will continue to be a member of this brand community in the future.	0.882
		0.777

Note: SFL means standardized factor loadings.

with membership continuance intention ($\beta = 0.541$, $p < 0.001$). Again, using the no direct effects model as a base, we fit three models by adding a path from "member education," "interaction support," and "participation feedback" to the dependent variable of membership continuance intention each time. The first model exhibits excellent fit indices ($\chi^2[144] = 388.633$, $p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.058, CFI = 0.947, GFI = 0.928). Unlike in the no direct effects model, a significant improvement was found ($\chi^2[1] = 17.962$, $p < 0.001$), and the direct effect of member education on membership continuance intention was significant as proved by the results ($\beta = 0.224$, $p < 0.001$). Overall, these results indicate that community identification partially mediated the effect of member education on membership continuance intention, thus supporting H4a. The second model exhibited excellent fit indices ($\chi^2[144] = 370.622$, $p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.055, CFI = 0.951, GFI = 0.932). Unlike in the no direct effects model, a significant improvement was found ($\Delta\chi^2[1] = 35.973$, $p < 0.001$), and the direct effect of interaction support on membership continuance intention was significant as proved by the results ($\beta = 0.307$, $p < 0.001$). Overall, these results indicate that community identification partially mediated the effect of interaction support on membership continuance intention, thus supporting H4b. The third model exhibited excellent fit indices ($\chi^2[144] = 399.455$, $p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.059, CFI = 0.945, GFI = 0.926). Unlike in the no direct effects model, a significant improvement was found ($\Delta\chi^2[1] = 7.140$, $p < 0.05$), and the direct effect of participation feedback on membership continuance intention was significant as proved by the results ($\beta = 0.157$, $p < 0.01$). Overall, these results indicate that community identification partially mediated the effect of participation feedback on membership continuance intention, thus supporting H4c.

The moderate variable of membership duration is a variable with four values. Thus, if we use the SEM method to test the moderated mediation effect, the four groups must be compared with each other in pairs for all three moderating models. This comparison leads to a high level of complication. To avoid such a complication, we used the method suggested by Zhao, Lynch and Chen (2010) and followed the procedure recommended by Hayes (2013) to test the proposed moderated mediation effect. In performing the bootstrap test, we assigned 5000 as the sample value and 95% as the confidence level for the confidence intervals. First, we analyzed the moderation effect of membership duration on the mediation role of community identification between member education and membership continuance intention through the mediate variable of community identification. The results show that the indirect pathway through community identification is negative and significant

Table 6
Correlation matrix.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Member education	1				
2. Interaction support	0.403**	1			
3. Participation feedback	0.422**	0.427**	1		
4. Community identification	0.412**	0.389**	0.477**	1	
5. Membership continuance intention	0.354**	0.401**	0.338**	0.463**	1
Mean	4.839	4.870	4.762	4.442	4.710
Standard deviation	0.947	0.933	0.925	1.051	1.083
Composite reliability	0.886	0.906	0.878	0.900	0.874
AVE	0.660	0.707	0.643	0.694	0.699

Note: ** $p < 0.01$.

($B = -0.184$, $SE = 0.062$) and that the 95% confidence interval (CI) excludes zero (95% CI: -0.024 , -0.047). Therefore, H5a is supported. The findings indicate that the effect of member education on membership continuance intention is stronger for users with short-term membership than for users with long-term membership. Second, we analyzed the moderation effect of membership duration on the mediation role of community identification between interaction support and membership continuance intention through the mediate variable of community identification. The results show that the indirect pathway through community identification is positive and significant ($B = 0.236$, $SE = 0.071$) and that the 95% CI excludes zero (95% CI: 0.104 , 0.344). Therefore, H5b is supported. These results indicate that the effect of interaction support on membership continuance intention is stronger for users with long-term membership than for users with short-term membership. Third, we analyzed the moderation effect of membership duration on the mediation role of community identification between participation feedback and membership continuance intention through the mediate variable of community identification. The results show that the indirect pathway through community identification is not significant ($B = 0.064$, $SE = 0.052$) and that the 95% CI does not exclude zero (95% CI: -0.019 , 0.083). Thus, H5c is not supported. These results indicate that no significant difference is found between short-term members and long-term members regarding the effect of participation feedback on their future behavior intention.

4. Conclusions and discussion

Firm-hosted OBCs are one of the most important social media tools through which consumers collaborate with firms in value co-creation. Previous studies on OBCs predominantly focused on the motivational drivers and outcomes of consumer participation in OBCs while largely neglecting the role of management of OBCs by firms (Homburg et al., 2015). In this paper, we introduced organizational socialization theory to the literature on OBCs and explored the effects of firms' efforts to socialize members in communities. To do so, we first identified three typical socialization tactics employed by firms in OBCs. We found three typical socialization tactics: member education, interaction support, and participation feedback. Then, we conducted an empirical study by collecting data from several firm-hosted OBCs to investigate the effect of firms' socialization tactics on membership continuance intention. The results suggest that all three socialization tactics could promote membership continuance intention with community identification as a mediator. We also investigated whether the effects of socialization tactics vary or not with the different levels of membership duration. The results show that member education may be more effective in influencing membership continuance intention for members with short-term membership than for those with long-term membership. Conversely, the results show that interaction support exerts a stronger positive effect on membership continuance intention for members with long-term membership than for those with short-term membership.

4.1. Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the marketing literature in several ways. First, it extends previous research by investigating how firms' efforts (particularly their socialization tactics) affect members' participation intention in OBCs. Previous literature on brand communities focused on members' intrinsic motivations for participation and contribution. Although these studies add to our knowledge of brand communities and provide firms with significant implications for motivating member participation, they do not explicitly explore the effect of firms' management efforts on the behavior intention of community members. Thus, the role of firms has been ignored. As an increasing number of firms are building and maintaining OBCs, the effect of firms' engagement in OBCs is a research topic with theoretical and managerial significance. This study

draws on organizational socialization theory and finds that socialization tactics positively affect members' future participation intention. Our study suggests that research on OBCs should be extended from the perspective of consumers to the perspective of firms, and that the effect of firms' community management efforts should be explored further.

Second, this study illustrates how theories from the field of organization research can be applied to understand OBCs and members within communities. The view that online communities represent a type of organization is not new, yet few studies have attempted to apply theories from the field of organizations to explore how managers manage firm-hosted OBCs. This study uses organizational socialization theory to explore the effects of socialization tactics employed by firms in the context of OBCs. By doing so, it contributes to the literature by validating organizational socialization theory in a unique context and deepening our understanding of OBC management. Furthermore, this study also extends the literature on organizational socialization to some extent. Previous studies on organization socialization considered employees as individuals to be socialized, while our study demonstrates that customers are becoming the individuals who can be socialized by firms as the firm–customer border is becoming permeable. Thus, this study suggests that the assumption of organizational socialization theory can be generalized to understand the shifting role of customers in the era of social media. In sum, this study invites further examination of the nature of OBCs from the perspective of organization and with emphasis on the shifting role of consumers.

Finally, we find that socialization tactics are not equally effective in retaining members with differing levels of membership duration. Many studies on OBCs consider members as homogenous, but our results indicate otherwise. Therefore, conducting an analysis on subgroups will be valuable. When studying members of online communities, researchers should consider the characteristics of such members.

4.2. Managerial implications

With the development of social media, consumers are significantly becoming empowered and important participants in value co-creation of firms. In some cases, consumers can even act as employees. As the potential of consumers in value co-creation becomes increasingly evident, firms are becoming highly interested in organizing OBCs to collaborate with consumers. To build a successful online community, companies must confront the crucial challenge of retaining members and promoting sustained participation. By introducing organizational socialization theory into the literature of OBCs, this paper provides a novel approach for OBC management. Our study indicates that OBCs can be considered as a unique type of organization and that its members can be regarded as firm insiders. Thus, firms can use socialization efforts to maintain and grow the communities. This study provides significant implications for firms that host OBCs by identifying and investigating the effect of socialization tactics on membership continuance intention.

First, we found that member education has a direct effect on members' participation intention. This result suggests that customers value the content provided by firms, and they like consulting OBCs for helpful information. Traditionally, firms socialize consumers mainly through mass media, such as TV. With the rapid development of social media, many consumers have been turning away from traditional media and moving toward online communities. Thus, our results demonstrate that, to capitalize on the opportunity to socialize consumers, firms can allocate more resources to online communities to educate their customers. By doing so, the consumer–brand relationship will be strengthened.

Second, our results indicate that efforts in interaction support contribute to a high level of membership continuance intention. Peers are important socialization agents for consumers, and peer social influence has been growing with the development of social media. Therefore, firms can socialize consumers by facilitating peer communication in

communities. Our results suggest that firms, as OBC sponsors, can initiate brand events (both online and offline) to provide an opportunity for members to share their brand experience with one other and then create a stronger and more cohesive community with shared brand stories, rituals, and traditions (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Third, firms should focus more on community institution and policy design as participation feedback increases members' participation intention. An effective feedback system provides members with clear guidelines on behavior and facilitates members' learning of the norms, values, and attitudes of the community. Thus, firms should monitor member behavior in communities and feedback to members to direct them toward appropriate behavior.

Finally, our results show that members with various levels of membership duration respond to firms' socialization tactics differently. This finding is consistent with that of Homburg et al. (2015), who suggested that various consumer segments may have differing reactions to firms' social media initiatives in communities. This finding implies that firms should be wary of allocating untargeted resources to all types of members. Subgroup analyses can be helpful when managing members in communities.

4.3. Limitations and future research

This study has limitations that provide opportunities for further research. First, this research identifies and examines the effects of only three critical socialization tactics. These tactics may only represent socialization tactics in part, and additional socialization tactics can also be employed. Thus, future studies can analyze the activities of OBCs more comprehensively to reveal the effects of a sufficient breadth of socialization tactics on OBCs. Such an investigation extends our knowledge of OBC management and provides practical implications for firms. Second, we showed that members with various levels of membership duration respond to firm engagement in OBCs in different ways. Thus, future research should investigate other characteristics of members, such as social status in communities, to check whether or not such socialization tactics affect the behavior of members in the same way. Third, we used only perceptual data in this study, thus limiting the generality of our findings. Further studies can collect secondary data (e.g., more involvement with communities to collect participation data) and use an experimental design (e.g., scenarios to evaluate different levels or types of firm socialization tactics) to validate and extend our findings. Finally, we conducted the research in the context of the Chinese mobile phone industry. Therefore, studies across different industries and countries are required to explore the extent of the generalizability of our findings.

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