

[Original Article]

## Impacts of Community Commitment on Brand Equity Creation in Company-Initiated Online Brand Communities

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### Abstract

With the emergence of online communities, the role of online communities in establishing brand equity has been greatly emphasized. In order to enhance our understanding of commitment in online brand communities, the present study attempts to investigate how three dimensions of community commitment (continuance, affective, and normative commitment) influence each component of brand equity (brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and brand loyalty) in the context of company-initiated online brand community. An online survey was conducted with a sample of online brand community members. The results found differential impacts of three types of community commitment on brand equity components, emphasizing the role of continuance and affective commitment. Continuance community commitment positively influenced brand awareness and brand association. Affective community commitment positively affected perceived quality, while among the three, only continuance and affective community commitment influenced the enhancement of brand loyalty. The results suggest that brand marketers need to focus on continuance and affective commitment factors in their online communities to effectively enhance brand equity possessed by consumers. Theoretical and managerial implications are provided.

*Keywords: Online brand community, Continuance commitment, Affective commitment, Normative commitment Brand equity*

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### I. Introduction

With the spread of internet and electronic media, an online community has emerged as a space of generating and exchanging new information with others (Kim, Choi, Qualls, & Han, 2008). Advances in mobile technology and smart phones have improved the accessibility to online communities and accelerated their usability and dissemination. An online community refers to “an aggregation

of people who share a common interest and communicate through electronic mailing lists, chat rooms, Internet user groups or any other computer-mediated mechanism” (Kim *et al.*, 2008, p. 410). Brand marketers are competitively utilizing online communities to differentiate their brand and achieve sustainable competitive advantages (Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006). An online brand community is a brand community based on internet-mediated technology; a brand community is defined as “a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412), providing emotional and affective bonds between consumers and brands (Thompson & Sinha, 2008). Accordingly, in the present study, an online brand community refers to a specialized virtual community with no geographical limitations based on internet-mediated technology, where social relationships among users of a brand are embedded in. Online brand communities are increasingly utilized by firms to interact and develop social relationships with their consumers, thus increase brand loyalty of consumers.

Previous research addressed commitment as important in online environments. Committed members or customers in online communities tend to actively interact and share information with others and do not easily switch to other alternatives. This results in enhancing subsequent outcomes such as brand loyalty, purchase intention, word of mouth, and participation (Jang, Olfman, Ko, & Kim, 2008; Kim *et al.*, 2008). As such, commitment in online communities has been studied as an influential factor to improve and establish brand commitment and brand loyalty (Jang *et al.*, 2008; Kim *et al.*, 2008; Ko & Kwon, 2006). Thus, to effectively utilize online communities and develop a successful marketing strategy, firms need a deeper understanding of commitment in online brand communities and brand loyalty. Especially, for fashion brands, online brand communities are frequently used as effective means of improving brand commitment of consumers and thus increasing brand loyalty. However, literature is limited in examining the dimensionality of commitment in online brand communities, particularly in fashion brand community context, initiated by firms and how various types of the commitment influence brand equity.

Accordingly, the present study aims to investigate three types of community commitment (continuance, affective, and normative commitment) suggested by Zhang, Zhou, Su, and Zhou (2013) in company-initiated fashion brand online community context and their impacts on each component of brand equity (brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and brand loyalty).

## II. Literature Review

Meyer and Herscovitch (2001, p. 301) define commitment as “a force that binds an individual to a course of action of relevance to one or more targets.” Commitment in online community context refers to an attitudinal factor which appears when community members regard the psychological bond and the continuing relationships between their community and themselves as valuable (Jang *et al.*, 2008; Zhang *et al.*, 2013). Community commitment is a multi-dimensional construct. Zhang *et al.* (2013) divided commitment into three types; continuance, affective, and normative community commitment, depending on the psychological bond types of community members with a community based on need, affect, and/or obligation (Bateman, Gray, & Butler, 2011). Continuance community commitment is “the bond between a community member and a particular community that arises from the member’s belief that his or her involvement in the community provides him or her with net benefits that are not easily available elsewhere” (Zhang *et al.*, 2013, p. 836). Affective community commitment is “the bond between a community

member and a particular community that is derived from the individual's strong emotional attachment to that community" (Zhang *et al.*, 2013, p. 837). Normative community commitment refers to "the bond between a community member and a particular community that arises from the individual's sense of obligation to that community" (Zhang *et al.*, 2013, p. 837). These three types of community commitment are not mutually exclusive, rather can be simultaneously possessed by community members (Zhang *et al.*, 2013). Commitment in brand community, often regarded as an attitudinal concept (Bloemer & Kasper, 1994), results in enhanced consumer responses towards a brand such as brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and brand loyalty.

Brand equity refers to "the difference in consumer choice between the focal branded product and an unbranded product given the same level of product features (Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000, p. 196). Aaker (1991) proposed that brand equity is a multi-dimensional construct that creates value for the firm and the customer. Brand equity is composed of four components, including brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and brand loyalty (Aaker, 1991, 1996), which affect enhanced profits and the long-term success of the firm (Ambler, 1997; Srivastava & Shocker, 1991). Brand awareness refers to "the ability for a buyer to recognize or recall that a brand is a member of a certain product category", and consists of brand recognition and recall (Keller, 1993). Brand association is "anything linked in memory to a brand", which builds brand image (Aaker, 1991, p. 61) and results in a favorable response to the brand (Yoo *et al.*, 2000). As an individual is exposed to brand experiences or communications, brand association becomes stronger (Aaker, 1991; Aaker & Keller, 1990). Perceived quality is defined as "the consumer's judgment about a product's overall excellence or superiority" (Zeithaml, 1988, p. 3), implying that product quality is perceived by consumers' subjective evaluations (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Brand loyalty refers to "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior" (Oliver, 1997, p. 392). Brand loyalty is the tendency to prefer a certain brand, in turn, resulting in the intention to buy the brand as a primary choice (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Loyal customers consistently purchase a product or service from their preferred brand and thus increase brand equity of the brand (Yoo *et al.*, 2000). For this reason, firms try their best to improve the brand loyalty of their customer and ultimately pursue this for long-term success.

Previous research found that community commitment in online brand communities positively influenced brand loyalty (Jang *et al.*, 2008). Attitudinal and behavioral commitments in fashion online communities were also found as influential in improving the brand loyalty of community members (Ko & Kwon, 2006). Rhee and Choi (2007) studied online communities to investigate the brand equity formation process with the mediating role of community commitment by conducting a quantitative survey. Their results found that attitudinal and behavioral commitment improved brand equity possessed by consumers, which is measured by brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. Zhang *et al.* (2013), using a sample of online mobile phone brand communities in China, divided community commitment into three types; continuance, affective, and normative community commitment. Their research found that among the three types, only affective community commitment had a significant, positive impact on brand commitment, which was also found as enhancing consumers' favorable responses (Kim *et al.*, 2008). Literature agreed on the positive influence of community commitment on brand awareness, brand association, and brand loyalty, which form brand equity in the online brand community context (Choi & Han, 2012).

Members in communities may be driven to behave in a certain way to receive informational and social benefits (Bateman *et al.*, 2011). Members with high continuance community commitment may believe that their involvement

in the community provides them with benefits that are not easily available elsewhere and make an investment to establish the continuing relationships with the community for the benefits (Chen, Lu, Wang, Zhao, & Li, 2013; Zhang *et al.*, 2013). This investment will result in enhanced brand commitment or brand loyalty to the related to brand (Zhang *et al.*, 2013). Through the participation in the community, members develop feelings of belongings and attachment to the brand (Markus, Manville, & Agres, 2000). Members with high affective community commitment may continue their relationship with the community because of their experience and interactions with the community and other members and their strong emotional attachment to the community, resulting in enhanced brand commitment or loyalty (Zhang *et al.*, 2013). In the community, members feel an obligation to pursue a certain behavior favored by that community (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001). Members with high normative community commitment may continue their relationship with the community because they believe that is the right thing to do (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; Zhang *et al.*, 2013). Accordingly, normative commitment perceived by members may lead to enhanced loyalty. Based on the previous discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

*H1*: Continuance, affective, and normative community commitment will positively affect brand awareness.

*H2*: Continuance, affective, and normative community commitment will positively affect brand association.

*H3*: Continuance, affective, and normative community commitment will positively affect perceived quality.

*H4*: Continuance, affective, and normative community commitment will positively affect brand loyalty.

### III. Methods

The present study employed a quantitative online survey method. Focus Company, a renowned marketing research firm, was in charge of distributing survey questionnaire and collecting data from randomly selected sample out of its consumer panel. Company-initiated online brand communities that the respondents were enrolled in included two official online communities of famous fashion brands with the numbers of enrolled members over 40,000. Those are relatively large in size compared to other online brand communities. Those two communities were selected because there were in the upper ranks of fashion online community categories in Korean major portal sites of naver and daum. The sample was composed of members over 18-years old enrolled in two company-initiated online brand communities. Respondents enrolled in the selected brand communities were included in the sample frame. After deleting missing data, the final sample size was 305. About half of the respondents were female (54.8%). About fifty percent of the respondents were in their thirties and 26.6% were in their twenties. Half of the respondents had office jobs and 64.3% were college graduates. Results of t-test showed no difference in the levels of community commitment and brand equity variables between two different online brand communities, allowing to integrate data from two online communities.

The present study employed multiple-item measurement scales, validated and found to be reliable in previous research. A survey questionnaire was developed and modified from the original measurement items to be appropriate for the present study. The questionnaire consisted of three types of community commitment (continuance, affective, and normative commitment) and four components of brand equity (brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and brand loyalty). Online brand community commitment measures were adopted from Zhang *et al.* (2013); 3 items for continuance commitment, 5 items for affective commitment, and 4 items for normative commitment. Brand

equity was measured by four components; 3 items for brand awareness (Yoo & Donthu, 2001; Yoo *et al.*, 2000), brand association (Yoo & Donthu, 2001), 4 items for perceived quality (Buil, Chernatony, & Martinez, 2008), and 3 items for brand loyalty (Buil *et al.*, 2008; Yoo *et al.*, 2000). The items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale with anchors of “strongly disagree” as 1 and “strongly agree” as 7. Finally, demographic information (gender, age, occupation, education) was collected.

## IV. Results

Using SPSS 20, principal component analysis with varimax rotation was performed to check the dimensionality of the variables. An eigenvalue of 1.00 or greater was used to determine the number of factors extracted in the factor analysis. Items were to be excluded if they yielded low factor loadings (<.40), high cross-loadings (>.40), or low communalities (<.30). The items loaded above .50 and less than .30 for the other factors were retained (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003). As a result of principal component analysis, all the items loaded over .60 and all the factors showed a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient above .70, an acceptable level of reliability with the recommended minimum proposed by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). Table 1 presents the correlations among the independent and dependent variables.

Table 1. Correlations

	Continuance Commitment	Affective Commitment	Normative Commitment	Brand Awareness	Brand Association	Perceived Quality
Continuance Commitment	1					
Affective Commitment	.372**	1				
Normative Commitment	.371**	.342**	1			
Brand Awareness	.187**	.087	.111	1		
Brand Association	.163**	.157**	.062	.352**	1	
Perceived Quality	.194**	.280**	.157**	.351**	.284**	1
Brand Loyalty	.242**	.289**	.220**	.288**	.273**	.326**

\*\* $p < .01$

Multiple regression analysis was performed to test the proposed hypotheses using SPSS 18.0. For the constructs measured with multiple items, mean scores of the individual items measuring each construct were used for the analysis. It was hypothesized that continuance, affective, and normative community commitment will positively affect brand awareness (H1), brand association (H2), perceived quality (H3), and brand loyalty (H4). The results are presented in Table 2. H1 was partially supported, finding differential influences of three community commitment types on brand awareness. In H1, only continuance community commitment positively affected brand awareness ( $\beta=.167$ ,  $t=2.632$ ,  $p<.01$ ), while affective and normative community commitment did not. In line with H1, H2 was partially supported, revealing the positive relationship of continuance community commitment with brand association ( $\beta=.129$ ,  $t=2.029$ ,  $p<.01$ ). In H3, only affective community commitment had a positive effect on perceived quality ( $\beta=.231$ ,  $t=3.786$ ,  $p<.01$ ). The result of H4 also showed differential impacts of three commitment types; only continuance and affective community commitment positively influenced brand loyalty ( $\beta=.127$ ,  $t=2.086$ ,  $p<.05$ ;  $\beta=.207$ ,  $t=3.431$ ,  $p<.01$ , respectively).

Table 2. Multiple regression results

Variables	Brand Awareness		Brand Association		Perceived Quality		Brand Loyalty	
	std. $\beta$	$t$	std. $\beta$	$t$	std. $\beta$	$t$	std. $\beta$	$t$
Independent Variables								
<b>Continuance Commitment</b>	.167**	2.632	.129*	2.029	.092	1.494	.127*	2.086
<b>Affective Commitment</b>	.009	.146	.119	1.896	.231**	3.786	.207**	3.431
<b>Normative Commitment</b>	.046	.728	-.027	-.430	.044	.716	.102	1.690
$R^2$	.037		.038		.089		.113	
Adjusted- $R^2$	.028		.028		.080		.104	
$F$	3.872**		3.966**		9.853**		12.738**	

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$

## V. Discussion

The present study investigated how three dimensions of commitment in company-initiated online fashion brand communities (continuance, affective, and normative commitment) influence each component of brand equity (brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and brand loyalty). While literature agreed on the positive influence of community commitment on brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and brand loyalty, composing of brand equity (Choi & Han, 2012; Rhee & Choi, 2007), the results of the present study showed differential impacts of three types of community commitment in online fashion brand communities on brand equity components, emphasizing the role of continuance and affective community commitment in online fashion brand communities to enhance brand equity for fashion brands. Consistent with the previous literature, continuance community commitment was found to positively influence brand awareness, brand association, and brand loyalty. The findings imply that members who have strong and positive feelings toward the brand community and continue the relationships with the members and the community for achieving benefits (McWilliam, 2000; Zhang *et al.*, 2013) are more likely to have the enhanced awareness, association, and loyalty toward the related brand. Therefore, by having elements which increase continuance community commitment, for example, offering incentives for frequent visits and posting in the community, the fashion brand could increase the brand awareness, association, and loyalty of their community members or customers. However, continuance community commitment did not influence perceived quality of the brand. Members' belief that participation in the community provides benefits may not be strong enough to improve consumers' judgment about the excellence of the brand.

Affective community commitment positively affected perceived quality, implying that the extent of the emotional bond between community members and the brand actually influences consumers' subjective evaluation about the product quality of the brand which hosts the community. However, there was no impact of affective commitment on brand awareness and association. Members having the bond with the brand community and other members derived from strong emotional attachment to the community may have already had a good knowledge of the brand and sufficient levels of brand awareness and associations, thus not leading to significant enhancement of brand awareness and associations. Among the three, only continuance and affective community commitment influenced the enhancement of brand loyalty, which explains consumers' purchase behavior. This finding suggests that to improve consumer behavioral responses toward the brand, fashion brand marketers should have elements which increase

consumers' continuance and affective commitment by providing informational or practical benefits and emotional attachment through interactions in their online brand communities.

Interestingly, normative community commitment did not have any impact on the components of brand equity. This result may be explained by consumer sample in the present study having little obligation to participate and support the community, thus not sufficiently influencing any brand equity component. Also, the online brand communities are built on internet-mediated technology and open to anyone who wants to participate in, and do not require attendance on a regular basis, which influence less strong normative commitment perceived by members. This may also explain no relationship between normative commitment and brand equity component. Previous research also found similar results; no direct relationship of normative commitment with an attitudinal factor, brand commitment (Chen *et al.*, 2013), and a behavioral factor, content creation behavior on SNSs in the online community context (Jang *et al.*, 2008). The results suggest that fashion brand marketers do not need to consider the normative commitment factor as much as continuance and affective commitment, and they should rather focus on these two commitment types.

The study has a theoretical contribution to brand community literature by examining the multi-dimensionality of brand community commitment and brand equity and finding the differential influence of each commitment type on each brand equity component in the fashion brand community context. The study also extends the literature by revealing the importance of continuance and affective community commitment in building brand equity in online brand communities initiated by companies. The study also provides meaningful insights to fashion brand marketers and companies. Based on the findings, firms need to offer various elements fostering the continuance and affective commitment of consumers in establishing their online brand communities in order to increase brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and brand loyalty, thus establishing strong brand equity, particularly for fashion brands.

While the study generates insightful implications, it has several limitations. This research only employs a sample of online fashion brand communities initiated by companies. Future study could utilize a sample from both consumer-initiated and company-initiated communities and compare differential impacts of commitment on brand equity in each type. Also, the study did not simultaneously investigate the consequences of brand equity with commitment. Future study could examine the antecedents of commitment and the consequences of brand equity and establish a comprehensive theoretical model to explain the role of community commitment in establishing strong brand equity.

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