



Research on Virtual Brand Community from the Perspective of Relationship

Take Magic Awakening mobile game as an example

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ABSTRACT. With the development of the Internet, more and more brand merchants use the online virtual brand community model for marketing. Consumers have transformed from a single passive object to an aggregated community group, releasing huge energy. There are many mediating factors in the transition from community relationship to economic behavior. This paper focuses on the relationship drive in brand community and studies the transition process from relationship development to brand consumption. Taking Magic Awakening super topic as a case, this paper regards Magic Awakening mobile game as a game brand and super topic as a virtual product community. On this basis, we interview the development of social relations and consumption status of six members of the community. This paper finds that a large number of weak ties and a few strong ties established by members in a virtual brand community have different effects on brand consumption, and ultimately promote members' consumption behavior. Although there are still some deficiencies in the case studies, this paper will still provide some enlightenment and reference for the study of virtual brand community.

Keywords: Virtual brand community; Social relationship; Brand consumption.

1 Introduction

It is undeniable that online communities are developing rapidly in the context of the Internet age. Users who are interested in the same brand can use online platforms to establish a community, which enables users to form connections between users, or between users and brands. The brand community is not only a new method for merchants to profit from marketing, but also a platform for users to communicate and build emotions. Although the growth of mobile Internet traffic has stagnated, the virtual brand community based on relationships still has great growth potential. In the context of virtual brand community, the role of consumers is transformed from a single passive

object to an aggregated community group, releasing huge potential and value, and becoming an important node in brand production and communication, thus promoting brand marketing communication enter a new era of social marketing.

The concept of brand community was initially proposed by Immunize and O'Guinn, who focused on the relationship between customers who used the same brand or who were interested in the brand [1]. At present, the new types of communities are creating a new social structure and economic model. With the help of social media such as WeChat and Weibo, it has become a new driving force for the transformation and development of enterprises, and has become an important force for urban development and urban innovation [2]. The virtual network community is conducive to the group environment in which weak ties are formed and expanded. Its anonymity allows people to form weak ties with strangers, facilitates the formation of equal interaction patterns in virtual communities, makes communication without barriers, and helps extend hundreds of weak ties, some of which will develop into strong bonds [3]. Due to the different relationship attributes of weak ties and strong ties, community members may have different influences on their consumption behavior. At the same time, the dissemination mode of community information formed by each subject of the virtual brand community in the interaction process, the discourse system of the symbolic community roles, and the relationship between different roles constitute the discourse relationship of the virtual brand community. In the virtual brand community, through the operation of mature discourse relationships, emotional identity and trust relationships can be promoted, and eventually realize commercial realization on the basis of value selection [4].

Previous studies on virtual brand communities conclude that the driving force from community to brand consumption mainly includes several aspects such as interest-driven, relationship-driven and cultural-driven [5-9]. This paper examines the influence of relationship-driven and community interaction of members within a brand community on members' consumption and daily engagement behavior. In the Internet brand community, strong or weak social relationships are established between members. Whether the strength of the relationship established affects the brand's dependence and economic consumption, and in what way affects the consumption behavior is the research problem of this paper.

This article focuses on the Harry Potter Magic Awakening super topic and answers the research questions through interviews with community members in the Weibo super topic community. Harry Potter Magic Awakening is a multiplayer online game. The vast majority of community members on Weibo constructed around the mobile game are mobile game users, that is, consumers of mobile game brands. There are official Weibo accounts of mobile games in the Weibo super topic community. In the super topic community, members can participate in discussions and interact through likes, comments, blogs, and attention to strengthen social relationships. It can be said that Weibo super topic is a typical online brand community.

2 Methods

Previous studies have largely focused on the construction of a virtual brand community's sense of identity and loyalty to community members, and most of them have used quantitative analysis to conduct empirical research. This paper focuses on the development of member relationships and social positions in the brand community and aims to explain its internal logic from relationship to consumption through case analysis. This article selects 6 members of the Harry Potter Magic Awakening super talk community as interviewees. The respondents are all college students with similar ages, educational backgrounds, and monthly incomes. The times they generated accounts and follow the super topic community are the same, but the degree of social relationship development is somewhat different.

This paper selects the Weibo super topic community as the research object and takes super topic as the community carrier in the virtual brand community. Super topic Community is a virtual community formed on the microblogging platform relying on Internet technology. In the community, users can conduct two-way interactive exchanges and at the same time, they can continue to pay attention to the people and things they are interested in. Super topic is a small circle formed on a large open platform such as Weibo, and only those who are interested or in need will pay attention to this topic. The super topic community has the characteristics of relative privacy, high interaction, high user stickiness, and internal democratic management [10]. Users can post and discuss certain content in the super topic community, and other users can respond, like, and forward the post, forming a one-to-many, many-to-many efficient interactive structure mode between users [11]. Super topic initiated and constructed for a certain brand often becomes a gathering place for brand consumers, that is, an online brand community.

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Super Topic in the Form of Virtual Brand Community

In some social platforms such as Tiktok and Bilibili, users mostly use dynamic video to convey information. The discussions launched around the mobile game brand "magic awakened" are dominated by popular science and strategies. Therefore, the communication mode is also more one-to-many single information dissemination, and there are not many community and group discussion. Compared with these social media platforms, the Weibo super topic built around the theme of "Magic Awakened" is a good example of the characteristics of a brand community. Super topic has relative closeness and aggregation, and its members are user groups interested in the brand. At the same time, compared with dynamic video, text-based posting and commenting make it easier for users to communicate and interact with each other, changing the topic of discussion from popularizing tips to making friends and teams, and changing the communication method from one-to-many single communication to many-to-many interactive communication. Besides, the mechanism of mutual shutdown and private messaging also make it easier to establish stable social relationships in the community, and to transform weak

relationships into strong ones. Therefore, relatively speaking, Weibo super topic has the characteristics of virtual brand community, and social relations in the community are easier to establish.

"I know more about games on Tiktok, and there is more science popularization on it. Weibo is a kind of posting, most of which are still text, but some dynamic videos on Tiktok will be more detailed. I observe the strategies on Tiktok. The role of Weibo is to find people to team up to play the game, to see if there are people like to team up. There are also associations lack of people, housemates empty beds, is considered a social platform within the game, outside the game to assist in the game social. " (Interviewee A)

It can be seen that although members of the community have different motivations to enter the super topic community, some are for capturing relevant information, with purpose and need, and some are for temporary interest and chance coincidence, they often use the characteristics of the community to make friends or find team friends and develop social relations after entering the super topic.

"Initially, I entered the Super Topic community to be the first to learn about the game's event releases and tips, but subsequently, I used the Super Topic more for fellowship and to find teammates." (Interviewee C)

"I know that there is a super talk community that can exchange game experiences, and solid friends. So I added it to see how others play and exchange experiences with others." (Interviewee B)

At the same time, Weibo super topic members have some common characteristics, such as paying attention to experience and product experience, paying attention to the manufacturer's operating attitude, and being sensitive to changes in the payment system.

"Before playing this game, we have played many games of the same type, krypton gold, so we will have our own standards to measure whether some marketing methods of operators are reasonable or not, and whether the paid things are worth it or not. If we really feel that they are too much or insincere, Weibo is a good feedback and voice platform. I think large-scale voices will always attract the attention of the company, which is impossible for other platforms." (Interviewee B)

Therefore, in terms of the characteristics of virtual brand communities and the fit with the focus of social relations in this study, the super topic community and super topic community members are undoubtedly suitable subjects for the study. The super topic brand community also provides a good background for exploring the logical relationship from social relationship development to brand consumption.

3.2 Social Relationship Development within the Brand Community

Comparing the five interviewees, we can see that their social relations are developed in different ways, but the degree of development can be divided into strong relations and weak relations.

Interviewee A is highly active in the brand community, often participating in discussions through posting and commenting. The content of the post mostly recruits virtual

community members and virtual dormitory members in the game as the leader and initiator, so it plays a great cohesive significance and role, and the amount of praise and comments of the post is also high.

"When I post, I post to the club or dormitory, that is, the club recruits people or the dormitory is short of people. Usually, I still comment more, and interesting posts will comment." "My main role is to let more players come and play together in a group, which is a meaning of cohesion and brings everyone together." (Interviewee A)

Due to the need to transform the members recruited by posting within Super Topic into members of the in-game community, Interviewee A communicated with the recruited members one-on-one in the form of private messages.

"Super topic let my game friends become more. The game can only add 300 friends, I want to talk to the official blog to increase the number of friends." (Interviewee A)

In addition to recruiting game friends purposefully, Interviewee A will also make friends aimlessly in the community because of common interests or chat, and develop a few people into mutual WeChat and daily chatting friends. Close friends would communicate with each other in WeChat rather than in games. In other words, among the wide range of social relationships developed by Interviewee A, most of them are weak relationships and developed into game friends, mainly discussing game contents or teaming up. A few of them build strong relationships and develop into WeChat friends, who will be in close contact and even discuss daily life.

"If I think the posting is interesting, chat with each other for two sentences and then I will add. Find the game couple will also add WeChat, the post to find housemates will also." "My couple in the game is also a WeChat friend, she will share things about life or study with me." (Interviewee A)

Interviewee B is less likely to post and mostly participates in super talk community discussions in the form of comments. Because of his personal habits, members who communicate in Super Talk also do not follow each other in Weibo.

"Because I don't want to pay attention to many people, I usually don't follow each other. Unless the other person brings it up." "There are some members who will share things about their study life in Super Topic, when I see negative ones I will comfort and comment below." (Interviewee B)

However, Interviewee B participated in the WeChat group chat formed by the Super Topic members, and developed many people into WeChat friends in the small WeChat group of twenty people, so that they could communicate with each other on a daily basis.

"Super talk someone posted to create a WeChat group, the first is a small group of about twenty people can stick to play, another large group is the kind of exchange experience. In the small group inside I added a lot of WeChat friends. There is also in the Super Topic someone looking for teammates added, I seem to be not so preference for bound relationships, so then those relationships slowly faded." (Interviewee B)

Interviewee C is less active in the community, and mostly joins discussions in the form of likes and retweets. Interviewee C is more inclined to receive information than to post opinions and information through text. She generally develops social relationships only when she needs, such as acquiring game clothing offered by others and com-

municating with members who post group information. In the construction of community relationships, only private letter exchange and development of friends in the game, and will not become WeChat friends.

"If someone gives out clothes in the super voice, I will contact him to buy what I want to buy. Or I will contact those who I want to contact, such as the information of club recruitment." "Generally, it's just to become game friends. I'm not used to adding WeChat with people on the Internet." (Interviewee C)

In general, Interviewee A is used to posting information, which helps her build wider social relationships in the community, but most of them are still weak relationships, that is, they are built because of trading needs or gaming social needs, and their communication stops at Weibo and Magic Awakened game, and the content of communication is narrower, limited to gaming-related content. However, a few developed into strong relationships, based on common interests or developed from weak relationships, and mostly communicated on wechat platform, with a wide range of communication contents, including daily life.

Interviewee B participates in communication by speaking in groups, using WeChat groups created by product communities to develop strong relationships and communicate with each other on a daily basis.

Interviewee C is accustomed to receiving information, so he is less likely to actively build social relationships, and mostly builds weak relationships out of the need to play games.

3.3 Internal logic from Relationship Development to Brand Consumption

In the brand community, members often don't directly discuss the consumption behavior of the brand, but use vague language to indicate their consumption degree in the communication process, or expose the products they bought in the game, such as clothing and equipment. At this time, the suggestion of consumption will be brought into the discussion of the community on the game.

In this process, Interviewee A and C both said that the consumption discussion between weak relationships had a more or less impact on their purchase intention. Not only will their consumption level have psychological implications for respondents, driving their desire to buy; The exposed consumer products will also make respondents consider the possibility of purchase. Especially when many people expose the same product, the hint and imitation in the group will further promote the purchase behavior of the respondents, resulting in the phenomenon of word-of-mouth spread and follow the purchase.

"Generally, people don't take the initiative to tell the other party how much they have cost. They will only ask the other party 'do you have this', and then the other party will say 'no', and he will say 'when can this be entered', or the limited time activity can't be entered now, but if it can still be bought, I will consider the cost performance." "Someone bought clothing and sent it in the Super Topic, then everyone felt good-looking to buy, this dress will be very hot. In this situation I may buy it, but I found that many hot clothes my account wears not look good." (Interviewee A)

At the same time, Interviewee A said that the strong relationship he made in the hyper community would also recommend some game products and clothing to him one-on-one. In the face of strong recommendations from friends, respondents may not buy after considering cost performance as they do in community discussions, but directly listen to their friends' opinions based on trust.

In addition to passively accepting the opinions of friends, respondent A will also actively observe and imitate the purchase behavior of friends. After observing that a friend buys a product and the effect is good, she will also have the intention to buy it.

"If friends who have a good relationship recommend it, I will also buy it. If we trust each other, I will also buy it without much consider." "The direct sale pajamas last month are very beautiful, but one of my characters is a handsome black man. I don't think he can wear cute clothes. Later, the selling activity ended, but when I saw my roommate wearing that cute pink pajamas, I felt very good-looking and regretted missing it." (Interviewee A)

Although the purchase amount of Interviewee B is lower than that of A, in a few times of consumption, both of them are affected by strong relationships, and both are the results of observation and imitation. Under the influence of friends, Interviewee B's concept of game consumption even has changed and began to spend for games.

"Last year I always felt that there is no need to spend on this game, until it came out with a dress. The key is that one of my roommates bought it during the discount period, and another roommate bought it after exams without discount, so I thought it really looked good, and actually bought it at the original price, which is my first time consumption. Then last month a friend always sent me her double ponytail dyed hair, I myself also a bit moved, plus in the super topic a lot of people talk about it, obviously after the discount I bought again." (Interviewee B)

In addition to the direct stimulating effect of interactive communication within brand communities on consumption, social relationships may also increase the brand stickiness of community members through indirect ways such as cultivating a sense of belonging and trust, ultimately achieving the effect of promoting consumption.

In the virtual space built by the Internet, the relationships within the community help community members build a stronger sense of trust. The strength of the relationship between the subjects of information sharing has a certain impact on the audience's brand attitude by affecting the emotional attitude of consumers. Respondents B and C said that it is more difficult to separate from the game itself after having their own social networks in the community. The increase in the number of topics in the community and the increase in the frequency and intensity of community communication are more conducive to promoting the growth of members' sense of belonging to the super talking community. Especially when social behavior goes beyond the scope of the community itself and the topic of discussion involves individual emotions, members are more closely connected with the community, and emotions are more special and irreplaceable.

"If you play completely by yourself, the game itself may bring more fun. Game friends always chatting to contact feelings will add some emotional bonding, which will help in persistence. And it is also better to find them for any problems and difficulties encountered in the game." (Interviewee B)

" I know some gossips in the game. For example, a two big bloggers are couple in the game and then broke up, as well as the update next month and the change of the magic spell. it's interesting to see them talk about this, and I'll integrate myself." (Interviewee C)

When facing other games of the same type, the resistance of people around them to other games will also affect the respondents themselves, reflecting the strong positive intention and awareness of brand community members to protect brand reputation.

"People in the super topic community have different opinions, but they are particularly active, and those who consume large quantity of money in this game always look down on other games very consistently. In fact, I sometimes get such an idea driven by them, which is an unconscious maintenance." (Interviewee C)

In general, members of the virtual brand community may develop a large number of weak relationships based on demand in the community. The suggestion, discussion and dissemination of consumption between weak relationships make one or several products of the brand establish a reputation or popularity in the community, causing community members to follow and buy. At the same time, the maintenance of brands among weak relationships in the community creates a consumption environment for community members and drives them to produce exclusivity. Interaction with a large number of community members and integration into the community also make members feel belonging. Both of them increase the brand stickiness of users and indirectly promote consumption.

At the same time, some community members will also establish strong relationships based on trust and common interests. The communication between members with strong relationship is often carried out in the form of one-to-one. They will accept each other's recommendation of a product in the brand, and will also actively observe and imitate each other's purchase behavior. And under the effect of strong relationship, due to the effect of trust, community members tend to have higher purchase intention and are more likely to ignore the consideration of cost performance.

4 Conclusion

In order to study the behavioral development process of consumers from building relationships to brand consumption in virtual brand communities, this paper focuses on the strength of community member relationships, divides the relationships based on needs and loose connections into weak relationships, and classifies the relationships based on emotions and close connections into strong relationships. At the same time, this paper preliminarily analyzes the stimulating effect of these two relationships on brand consumption. In contrast, weak ties carry out consumption hints and word-of-mouth communication in the form of diffusion, creating a community environment with a sense of belonging for community members, while the role of strong ties is reflected in the one-to-one recommendation and internal imitation behavior of community members. It is obvious that the impact of strong ties on consumption is more direct and stronger. The two jointly promote the brand consumption of members of the virtual brand community.

This study attempt to make a detailed explanation of relational drivers in brand communities to enrich previous community research. However, the research itself still has many shortcomings and needs to be refined. In the selection of cases, due to the limitation of time and other factors, this study only selects six typical cases as the research objects, which is not sufficient to cover all the possibilities of the development of the relationship between members of the community. At the same time, in addition to the different degrees of relationship development, the six cases also differed in the way of establishing relationships, the scope of relationship development, and the social position of the respondents in the community. For example, compared with case C, case A has a broader range of relationship development and is in a structural hole position. This paper has not yet explored how these influencing factors affect the behavior of respondents differently, and it is hoped that future research on virtual brand communities can answer this question.

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